

## Vulnerable Bodies: Subverting Masculine Normativity in Leopoldo Torre Nilsson's *Boquitas pintadas*

Assen Kokalov

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**Abstract:** The article explores the multiple ways in which Leopoldo Torre Nilsson's film *Boquitas pintadas* (1974) deconstructs and subverts traditional masculinity. Using the critical approaches related to queer, gender, feminist, and film studies elaborated by R. W. Connell, Judith Butler, David William Foster, and Alexander Doty, among others, I explore the function of the male body in the construction of traditional masculinity within the context of rural 1930s Argentina portrayed in the film. The male body's health, visibility, and vulnerability play an important role in destabilizing masculine privilege and androcentric romance in Torre Nilsson's production. I consider the experiences of the male characters from a critical queer and gender perspective with the aim of challenging the concept of an "organic" and "natural" body. My argument is that the body of any man can be turned vulnerable and undesirable, depending on society's current needs and politics.

**About the Author:** Assen Kokalov (Ph.D., Arizona State University, 2011) is Assistant Professor of Spanish at Purdue University North Central. His research interests focus on contemporary Latin American literature and film and on the connections between the two art forms, with emphasis on issues of gender construction, sexual identity, and social fragmentation. He has published his research on Latin American literature, culture and film in several prestigious academic journals such as *Hispanic Journal*, *Revista de estudios hispánicos*, *Mester*, *La Torre*, and *Chasqui*, among others.

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Director Leopoldo Torre Nilsson enjoyed an intimate connection with Argentine cinema from a very early age: his father, Leopoldo Torres Ríos, and his uncle, Carlos Torres Ríos, were two of the most important filmmakers of their country during the first half of the twentieth century. Following in their footsteps, Torre Nilsson began his film career at fifteen when he was enlisted as an assistant director for two of his father's productions, *Los*

*pagarés de Mendieta* (1939) and *La luz de un fósforo* (1939). When he was barely twenty-four, Torre Nilsson directed his first short, *El muro* (1947), and three years later released a full feature titled *El crimen de Oribe* (1950). For the next thirty years, until his death, he produced, directed, and scripted a vast array of movies, some of which became hallmarks of Argentine cinema.

Most critics agree that Torre Nilsson's films reveal an intricate knowledge of his country's middle and upper classes and tirelessly subvert social norms, particularly in terms of gender and gender-based behavior (Amado, España, Esplugas, Maranghello). The plight of women, the gendering of the body, and the implicit rules that govern collective order are some of the most common issues his productions exposed and criticized throughout his more than three decades of filmmaking. When discussing Torre Nilsson's career, it is imperative to underscore the importance of his life and work partner, Beatriz Guido, whose novels and scripts conditioned most of his movies. Their creative relationship is aptly summarized by Claudio España, who claims that the esthetic mannerism developed by Torre Nilsson exists in perfect harmony with Guido's steadfast efficiency in demolishing the establishment through her literature (40).

Within such a context, it is not surprising that the collaboration between Torre Nilsson and another important Argentine writer whose works aim to destabilize social and gender conventions and rules, Manuel Puig, inevitably produced a work that exposes, parodies, and critiques social, class, racial, and gender power relations in a society obsessed with sexual desire and the culturally mandated need to repress it. Puig wrote his novel *Boquitas pintadas* (translated into English as *Heartbreak Tango*) in 1969; the homonymous film was released five years later with a script coauthored by Torre Nilsson and Puig.[1] The bulk of the movie's storyline takes place in the 1930s, an important historical period for the director. Gonzalo Aguilar points out that throughout his career, Torre Nilsson adapted several eminent Argentine novels that take place during that specific time period (*Boquitas pintadas*, Roberto Arlt's *Los siete locos* [1929], and Adolfo Bioy Casares' *Diario de la guerra del cerdo* [1969]) as well as several real-life events. The critic also draws attention to the fact that in his *Fin de fiesta* (1960), Torre Nilsson explicitly elaborates on his belief, reflected in all his movies portraying the 1930s, that the origins of the political violence that reverberated in Argentina until the end of his own life can be traced back to that very decade (Aguilar 24).

*Boquitas pintadas* revolves mainly around the lives of five women from a small village in the interior of Argentina who reminisce, via letters, about their youth back in the 1930s. Growing up in a close-knit community, they went to the same school despite belonging to disparate social classes. Their social differences are deftly used to depict the oppression from which women suffer as a result of patriarchal norms. In her study of the film, Claudia Esplugas argues that Torre Nilsson uses melodrama and parody to expose patriarchal power structures and their subjugation of women (n/p). The film does not stop at presenting traditional female oppression, however. It also portrays normative gender roles and androcentric romance while effectively subverting them in a series of acts that destabilize both femininity and masculinity, and the latter's most cherished values of power and dominance. My aim here is to examine the ways in which the film challenges and subverts traditional masculinity by engaging the male body—its health, visibility, and vulnerability—and by defying the traditional patriarchal expectation that men control all social and economic power.

The male body is one of the main symbols of masculinity within traditional Western society. George Mosse traces this idea back to the seventeenth century and to the works of Pierre Bayle and Gottfried Leibniz, who argue that body and soul form an essential unity. Their concept of a union between the two spurs the rebirth of the ideal of a male corporeal image based on the ancient Greek model, in which “real” men possess healthy, strong, and muscular bodies (Mosse 24-25). R. W. Connell also affirms that “true” masculinity is thought to originate within the male body, which is in charge of a set of actions that establish the privileged position of those men who are considered inherently masculine for being what is traditionally deemed “able-bodied.” In his further analysis on the subject, Connell focuses on the materiality of the body and on the different tasks and actions that it is able to perform or not. Due to its material nature and consequent vulnerability, the body also offers a way to subvert patriarchal masculinity and gender in general. For example, points out Connell, when performance cannot be sustained as a result of a physical disability, injury, or illness, what follows is the subversion or outright deconstruction of traditional gender norms (45-66). Within the general Latin American context, Lorraine Nencel affirms that men are afforded “the entire panoply of power” through the deep-rooted tradition of machismo, as long as they are “healthy” and heterosexual (many conventional epistemological systems conflate the two categories) (56-58). Similarly, Kristi Anne Stølen argues that man is “portrayed as the bearer of physical strength, rationality, and authority” within the region (167). In the particular Argentine context, the importance of bodily strength is considered crucial for the establishment and preservation of masculinity as well. Eduardo Archetti points back to the writings of some of the country’s most notable intellectuals, Lugones and Borges, who associate dominant models of masculinity with the courage and physical strength of figures typically linked to manliness, such as the gaucho and the urban *compadrito*. Furthermore, the critic emphasizes the “importance of physical-muscular power” as an “exemplary role” of paterfamilias’ masculinity (Archetti 51-52).

In *Boquitas pintadas*, the five main female characters recall their relationships with two men who embody traditional masculinity and whose early deaths arguably destabilize it. The first one is Juan Carlos, lover of three of the women (Nené, Mabel, and Elsa) and brother of another (Celia). The announcement of his premature demise in 1947 functions as a catalyst for the entire plot. Upon seeing his obituary in the newspaper, Nené, who is already married to another man, enters an early midlife crisis. She experiences a deep sensation of sadness bordering on depression and deals with it by sending a letter to her ex-lover’s mother. In her letter, she reminisces about the past and her intimate relationship with Juan Carlos. When he was her boyfriend, the two of them spent many nights in front of her house in a typical rural, middle-class courtship. What becomes clear from her initial letters is that Juan Carlos, despite being a handsome and successful young man from a relatively well-established family, suffered from one crucial physical flaw: he had tuberculosis, a disease still practically incurable in the 1930s.<sup>[2]</sup> One of the first indications of his ailment was a slight but persistent cough, which he tried to conceal while talking to Nené in front of her house. In a conspicuous manner he ignored the symptoms, following a set of behaviors prescribed by the patriarchal tradition of men not showing concern for their own physical health, as any admission of problems could be perceived as a possible weakness. Sylvia Chant confirms the fundamental role of this behavior by indicating that Latin American men “typically delay their visits to medical personnel until their conditions

are quite advanced” (“Gender and Health” 121). Hence, the first ones to become preoccupied with Juan Carlos’ cough were his sister and his mother, who swiftly blamed his girlfriend for keeping him out in the cold late at night.

Soon enough, Juan Carlos’ condition starts to worsen and his social status deteriorates accordingly in a process wherein illness and subversion of masculinity converge, as indicated by Connell (45-66). For Juan Carlos to be allotted what Nencel calls “the entire panoply of power” within Latin American patriarchy, he needs to be perceived above all as a healthy man (56). When the village doctor receives his X-rays and medical test results, the entire town takes notice. Once it becomes clear that Juan Carlos is in fact infected, his situation becomes the main topic of conversation. Chant indicates that in 1930s Latin America, prior to what today is labeled “the epidemiological transition,” communicable respiratory illnesses were a leading cause of death (“Gender and Health” 99). There is no doubt, therefore, that the inhabitants of Vallejos are very much aware of the dangers presented by the contagiousness of the protagonist, who shortly thereafter is forced to leave town in a first step towards social marginalization. Initially, he is interned in a rather comfortable upper-class sanatorium near the mountains, where his health and state of mind start to improve. Thus, he is not immediately deprived of all of his masculine advantages. Nonetheless, there are several crucial moments during his stay in the sanatorium that imply that his status as a privileged man is being compromised due to his failing health and the social perceptions surrounding his ailment.

The first moment is directly related to the issue of the male body as a symbol of masculine prowess, and it takes place in a scene that shows Juan Carlos swimming naked in a deserted river nearby. The style of his solitary swim is highly reminiscent of Isabel Sarli’s notorious soft-porn productions from the same period. In some of her most widely-recognized scenes, the erotic star appears swimming naked in what she believes are solitary lakes and rivers with her breasts and legs clearly visible—not only to the camera and the audience, but also to the occasional peeping Tom who incarnates the male spectator and shares in the pleasure of the epitomic male gaze. In his study on the actress and her films, David W. Foster maintains that Sarli’s body can be seen as a symbol of masculine exploitation due to her complete lack of power in regard to all artistic decisions (those were made exclusively by her husband and director, Armando Bó) and to the uncritical exposure of her naked breasts in what the critic calls “muchos baños fílmicos” (“Las lolas de La Coca” n/p). Her films affirm these dynamics as her characters are typically at the control of male protagonists who use Sarli’s overly sensual and nude body (Ruétalo 207-08). In the case of *Boquitas pintadas*, the exposed body that occupies the gaze of the audience is male and its nakedness and sickness transform it into a vulnerable entity, a position reserved exclusively for the female body within traditional film and within traditional male/female structures of power throughout most of twentieth-century Argentina.

Another crucial moment that destabilizes Juan Carlos’ masculinity during his illness-imposed stay in the sanatorium is related to his unsuccessful efforts to attract and seduce women. These attempts are important because they strive to rebuild his sense of manliness and to prove that he still has what it takes to be an Argentine macho. The woman he finds most attractive and most valuable as a conquest is a young and beautiful fellow patient. After a few short and encouraging conversations, though, she suddenly disappears. Upon inquiring whether she has left, Juan Carlos is informed that she has passed away from the

disease they have in common. The fact that such a healthy-looking woman with a pleasant appearance could succumb so quickly to the illness they share emphasizes Juan Carlos' own mortality and the fact that tuberculosis does not discriminate on the basis of age, gender, or physical attractiveness. His body, that until now he has perceived as a solid defense against the ailment due to its youthfulness and virility, becomes a very real liability in his fight against the disease.

The final key element that surfaces during Juan Carlos' stay in the sanatorium has to do with his connections to the outside world, established through letters he writes to and receives from people he left behind. He is advised by some of the older and more seasoned patients that the more time he spends there, the less he will be remembered and the less correspondence he will receive. A significant number of those with whom he exchanges letters are women with whom he has been intimate. To them, he is first and foremost an attractive body. In fact, during a conversation between Mabel and Nené after his death, the former affirms that his most praised feature was his large penis. Thus, when Juan Carlos receives an ever-diminishing amount of mail, it becomes clear that women are assuming that his body can no longer perform its most important manly function—and is incapable of providing them pleasure. All of these developments that occur during his initial stay at the sanatorium prove the importance of a healthy body in the construction of a successful model of masculinity within traditional patriarchy. When Juan Carlos' health begins to decline, the foundations of his masculine privilege begin to crumble and the vulnerabilities of his body start to translate into direct hits on his manliness and on his position of power within society.

The other important male character in the film is Juan Carlos' buddy Pancho. He belongs to a lower social class, but Juan Carlos, before he goes to the sanatorium, takes him under his wing to teach him how to seduce women from within his own class. The first target of such training is La Raba (the fifth main female character), who is selected by Juan Carlos because of her connection to his wealthy lover, Mabel. La Raba is about to become a servant in Mabel's house and Juan Carlos wants La Raba to spy on her. Under the expert tutelage of his friend, Pancho is successful in his pursuit of La Raba, whom he abandons once she becomes pregnant. It is important to underline that the class difference between the two pairs, Juan Carlos-Mabel and Pancho-La Raba, is clearly emphasized by their racial dissimilarities as well: the actors who portray the latter couple are visibly darker-skinned than the former.

A paradigmatic change in Pancho's situation takes place when Juan Carlos has to leave the village. At this point, he finds himself in a position in which he can try to replace his mentor and to occupy, at least partially—due to his darker skin and consequent inferior social status—some of the privileges left vacant by the other man's departure. His perfectly healthy body allows him to assume a certain position of masculine privilege in a power vacuum created by the disappearance of his friend. The first step he takes to solidify his position is to enter the police academy in Buenos Aires. Upon his eventual return to the village, he swiftly becomes a noncommissioned officer. The uniform that comes with the rank affords him a level of social recognition and transforms him into a man who embodies state-sanctioned power.

An important feature of "real" heterosexual men within traditional Latin American macho culture is their role as penetrators. As Annick Prieur points out, "Value is given to the male who penetrates women or other males, and never lets himself be penetrated. His

defence of his own bodily boundaries and his attack on other men's bodies may mirror and symbolize the social competition among men" (83). In a similar fashion, Claudio Lomnitz-Adler argues that "[t]he value or aesthetics of 'closedness' is a kind of idiom of power where 'penetration' stands for domination and 'impenetrability' stands for power" (259). In *Boquitas pintadas*, Pancho follows this set of prescriptions by sexually penetrating and impregnating La Raba. To be able to even better occupy the position left vacant by Juan Carlos, he chooses to penetrate another woman: one of his mentor's lovers, Mabel. In a highly suggestive scene, he finds himself standing on the stone fence surrounding Mabel's house fixing an antenna while proudly displaying his police uniform. The young woman is in the garden, pruning flowers, when she asks him to pick some figs from a tall tree next to the fence. In a brief sequence of scenes, the audience is allowed access not only to the words of the two characters, but also to their inner thoughts. They are strongly attracted to each other and give clear indications to that effect. Pancho asks if and when he can visit Mabel and she informs him that her parents go to bed early, suggesting that he come to her room that night. At the same time, the scene offers an initial subversion of Pancho's masculinity and the couple's androcentric romance. Mabel's thoughts illustrate the way she objectifies his body sexually, a behavior typically reserved for males. She thinks of him as "un negro grande" with big hands who represents the primal and savage sexuality she craves. His portrayal as a lower-class, darker-skinned, sexualized being is highlighted as he is presented as the forbidden fruit that prevalent social structures at the time do not allow Mabel access to.

Later that night, they have intercourse that presumably includes the sexual penetration of the female body. This establishes Pancho's position as a penetrator and, as Priour points out, vests him with masculine privilege from a patriarchal point of view. Once the act is concluded, the woman becomes conscious of the advantage she has afforded Pancho and orders him to leave her room. He complies only after roughing her up and indicating that now that he has penetrated her, he can choose to stay or leave at his own will. The next sequence of scenes reveals the subversive character of Torre Nilsson's film in regard to Pancho's masculinity. Once he leaves Mabel's bedroom, the young woman hears a piercing scream which signals her lover's violent demise: he has been stabbed to death by La Raba, who still works as a servant in the house. His body has been physically penetrated with a big kitchen knife, as the mother of his child takes revenge on him for seducing and abandoning her, as well as for cheating on her with her employer. He is unable to defend his bodily boundaries, penetrated by a woman in an act that ends up costing him his life. Ultimately, then, he fails to occupy the space left open by Juan Carlos' departure and joins the other man in an early death. His unsuccessful bid to reincarnate traditional masculinity by penetrating several women and donning a police uniform reveals the vulnerability of patriarchal definitions of masculinity and emphasizes the role of *Boquitas pintadas* in explicitly deconstructing gender relations. The final blow to his role as a penetrator is the fact that La Raba is not charged with murder. Following Mabel's advice, she claims that she killed him in self-defense when he was trying to rape her. In front of society she is the one capable of defending her own body against a forceful penetration while transforming the penetrator into a mortally penetrated/wounded man.

Another important function of the male body within traditional discourse is its invisibility. Rosalind Coward affirms that Western society and culture have worked hard to convert the collective body of men into a "dark continent" (227) while Peter Lehman

argues that the invisibility of men's bodies serves the needs of a civilization that cherishes male privilege (5). Furthermore, Lehman insists that the only way to decentralize masculinity is by turning the lights on and exposing the body that symbolizes it. The critic asserts that the biggest danger is to ignore men's bodies "since that is what patriarchy wants us to do and has, in fact, been quite successful in bringing about" (Lehman 5-6). The critic focuses his attention mainly on the penis, which has been conspicuously absent from film throughout history. Shot during a period of a strict censorship, *Boquitas pintadas* does not expose any of the characters' genitalia, yet it is successful in exposing the male body with all its weaknesses and defects in order to demystify it and to challenge the patterns of traditional masculinity.

Even though in 1970s Argentina it was completely unthinkable for a film to reveal a naked penis on film, the audience is still able to observe much of the semi-naked bodies of Juan Carlos and Pancho. In a scene mentioned earlier, the former appears swimming naked in a river near the medical facility where he is being treated. He strips in front of the camera and jumps in the warm waters. The camera shows him splashing happily around and on a few occasions catches quick glimpses of his bare buttocks. A more intriguing scene that reveals the man's body takes place earlier on, when he is still intimate with Mabel. He comes to her room in the middle of the night and, prior to intercourse, appears sitting on the bed while his lover is hugging him from behind. The undressing of the man in this scene is initiated by his partner, who undoes his belt and exposes his crotch (still covered by underwear) to the audience. Soon, his body is completely nude and even though all that can be seen is his naked upper torso, the material shape of his male body is made very visible. Pancho's body is equally exposed. After coitus with Mabel, he lies naked in bed, holding a cigarette in one hand. His other hand is resting up behind his head and his leg closer to the camera is folded up, cutting off the view of his penis but revealing his naked chest and abdomen down to his dark pubic hair. The position of his body is extremely revealing and presents his vulnerability at a moment when Mabel orders him to leave. The exposure of the two men's naked bodies reinforces the subversive character of the film and is instrumental in destabilizing the traditional norms of masculine representations by exposing the so-called "dark continent" and turning it visible.

While the first half of the film exposes and objectifies Juan Carlos' body, the second half presents it as ever more fragile and increasingly ostracized. One day, he is informed by the director of the sanatorium that his family is no longer able to cover his costs and he needs to leave immediately. His social marginalization only deepens upon his return to Vallejos. Nené, the last woman who still sends him letters, refuses to kiss him and her father bans him from seeing her. The older man understands that Juan Carlos has become a severe liability to his daughter's future, since she still has time to find a respectable and a healthy husband—unlike Juan Carlos—as long as she is not infected. Next, the former playboy loses his job because his employer believes that he will be unable to return to work without an unacceptably long sick leave, if at all. Seeing Mabel is out of the question as well. At this point the only person outside his family who is still willing to spend time with him is Elsa, the elderly widow with whom he had an affair prior to his internment. This sudden, yet not unexpected, shift in fortune transforms Juan Carlos from a desired and thriving young male into an outcast viewed with suspicion and avoided by the rest of mainstream, "healthy" society. He is rejected by Vallejos' inhabitants and has to abandon the town, retreating into a small pension that Elsa purchases near the mountains to accommodate his

medical condition and their continuing, clandestine love affair. This last development is important, considering the central role that economic autonomy plays in reinforcing male privilege, and I will return to it later.

The ailment, vulnerability, and visibility of the main male character's body—as well as its resulting marginalization—can be examined from a queer perspective as well, especially bearing in mind that the film is based on one of Puig's works and he was also one of its screenwriters. The novelist's use and criticism of medical and scientific discourses—which have been employed by heteronormative institutions to oppress and exclude the "other," particularly those whose sexuality and eroticism do not fit well-established social norms—are crucial in some of his other works, above all in his most famous, *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976). That novel contains a series of footnotes that seemingly strive to explain, from a medical and psychoanalytical point of view, the causes and consequences of non-heterosexual desire. In his detailed paratextual study of the notes in question, Daniel Balderston points out that Puig invents some of the pseudoscientific sources he quotes while twisting others with the explicit purpose of subverting, denouncing, and rebuking the use of antiquated scientific arguments that aim to disparage and condemn the queer subject (227-30). Considering Juan Carlos' illness—and its effects on his body, sexuality, and social status—as a queer element, one that undermines the paradigms of traditional masculinity, we can see how his demise fits into the mold of a well-established trend in queer criticism to search for unorthodox gender and bodily representations.

Julia Erhart traces this tendency back to Ruby Rich's 1981 study on *Maedchen in Uniform* (1931), where Rich does not scan the film for images of openly queer practices as we understand them today, but rather for historical representations of gender and sexuality, such as, in the particular case of *Maedchen*, spinsterhood, independent women, and bachelorhood (Erhart 166). The critic goes on to affirm that "queer" has the capacity to explore not only practices that involve non-heterosexual erotic acts, but also "non-homosexual imagery that [falls] outside of hegemonic representation, such as representations of s/m sexuality, intergenerational sex, or interspecies sex" (Erhart 174). In her study, Erhart also turns her attention to Alexander Doty's seminal book *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993) and agrees with his radical reevaluation of "queer," which he recognizes as a fluid category that can insert itself not only into the content or the message of a given cultural production, but also into the perception of such a production by the audience. For example, an audience can construct as queer a film, an actor/actress, or a TV show not originally intended to be viewed as such by its producers or creators (Erhart 175).<sup>[3]</sup>

Within similar epistemological paradigms, it is feasible to consider Juan Carlos' ailment as an event that strikes at the foundation of his marked heterosexuality and queers the film in general. His condition as a man suffering from tuberculosis places him in a marginalized position and forces his exclusion from the rest of society. It is important to underscore that the purpose of this analysis is not to liken queer subjectivity in an uncritical fashion to any type of physical or mental disease. On the contrary, the aim is to demonstrate that the film functions as a successful subversion of patriarchy and repressive scientific and medical discourse precisely because it exposes the way in which personal degradation and exclusion are frequently created by indiscriminate applications of arbitrary (and sometimes erroneous) health-related diagnoses, and the mass panic that these are capable of creating among a poorly-educated public.<sup>[4]</sup> What happens to Juan

Carlos in the film is a prime example of the effects of this type of hysteria, which creates a sort of “border-crossing,” following Nicola Rehling’s definition of the term. In his study on white heterosexual masculinity on screen, Rehling claims that identity is always a “multifaceted affair” and, as a result, “crossing over from one identity category to another affects the other identities that a given body inhabits (however incompletely), and always impacts on normative white masculinity, which discursively positions itself as the universal structuring norm and locus of origins” (138). In the case of *Boquitas pintadas*, the shift from healthy to unhealthy identity changes all the other facets of the male protagonist’s identity and positions his masculinity into a space of severe crisis. There is no doubt that his ostracism is similar to the one experienced during the historic period in question by openly homosexual subjects, who were also considered sick, dangerous for the well-being of society, and even contagious.[5]

In Gayle Salamon’s reading of the transgendered body, the critic engages with Judith Butler’s and Elizabeth Gorsz’s writings and convincingly concludes that there is no such a thing as a “natural” body, only one that has already been cultured with the express intent to present it as “organic” or “natural.” Additionally, continues the scholar, “sexual difference, which is often located at this same level of the natural or biological, is similarly constructed and just as dependent on cultural mediation” (Salamon 148). In the first part of *Boquitas pintadas*, Juan Carlos’ body is portrayed as “organic” or “natural,” and it seems to possess all the characteristics required from a young man who is in control of his own destiny and sexuality. His body is inscribed with male-dominant privilege and represents the power that white heterosexual men “biologically” have access to. He has a well-paying job, a girlfriend, two additional female lovers, and male friends who look up to him for advice. Once his body starts to experience the consequences of tuberculosis, however, it is clear that the power vested in it is not the result of some natural predisposition but of social conventions, and thereby dissipates quickly when the body no longer satisfies societal expectations. The sickness that transforms Juan Carlos into a pariah also exposes the fact that the materiality of the body and its place in society are not connected to any natural characteristics; rather, they depend on the fashion in which they are conditioned and perceived by the rest of society.

When Juan Carlos becomes the marginalized “other” and is banished from his community due to his illness and the way such illness is viewed by his fellow townspeople, he ends up sharing a similar destiny with any openly queer subject in 1930s Argentina. At that time, any deviation from strict heterosexuality was considered a disease, and the homosexual body was deemed easily identifiable and inscribed with pathology. In his historical analysis of homosexuality’s criminalization in modern Argentina, Jorge Salessi draws attention to the first “scientific” observation of a homosexual, which was done by Francisco de Veyga, a founding father of the country’s Medical Forensics. In 1902, de Veyga describes the subject of his study as an easily recognizable “invert” due to his effeminacy and “rectal hyperesthesia.” In addition, the young man in question, N. N., is diagnosed with tuberculosis—a disease intrinsically linked to sexual inversion in the study (Salessi 156-60). Thus, the prevailing scientific discourse in the first half of the twentieth century, established by the likes of de Veyga, portrayed the homosexual body as inherently marked by disease while explicitly suggesting that privileged, heterosexual masculinity inhabits a naturally healthy vessel. The transformation of Juan Carlos’ body throughout the film subverts the notion that the heterosexual body is essentially healthy and gives a strong

indication that any body, regardless of its “natural” features, can eventually be marked as undesirable by society and shunned as a source of transgression under the right circumstances. Juan Carlos’ death shows his body to be as vulnerable as any queer one from that time period and demonstrates that it possesses no “biological” characteristics to protect it; the materiality of all bodies is constructed and deconstructed by society depending on its current needs and politics. This way, *Boquitas pintadas* succeeds in proving the permeability of dominant heterosexual masculinity and undermining its claims to organic supremacy and permanence: any human can be queered, marginalized, or rejected under certain conditions.

Discourse about traditional gender roles and masculinity within Latin America is also grounded in the male body’s ability to produce economic value and power. In her study on different class and ethnic groups in early 1970s rural Argentina, Stølen affirms that among the dominant classes, “sexual division of roles [grants] men control over the most crucial material and institutional resources of the community, and limits women’s opportunities for influence, movement, and action” (173). The critic finds this type of attitude among rural, light-skinned upper and middle classes very similar to the one to which Juan Carlos, Mabel, and Nené belong. Regarding the more general Latin American context, Marit Melhuus argues that men are traditionally seen as economic support for the family and their chief responsibility is to maintain it. The value placed on this social expectation is so high that when a man is “unable to provide for his family, or is dependent on a wife for an income, [he] is called a ‘mantenido’, literally a maintained man, which is regarded as very unusual” (243). Initially, Juan Carlos is portrayed as a man who fulfills the patriarchal requirement to produce economic value: he holds a steady job that allows him a privileged position within the village’s social order. In addition, he has a girlfriend, Nené, whom he is inclined to marry at some point in the future and to support financially. A wedding between the two would be a natural development within the context of their native Vallejos, as both pertain to the same social class and their union would serve to procreate and perpetuate the traditional economy of heteronormativity within their environment. Nené is very conscious of her position as a future wife and mother. She defends her virginity relentlessly, preserving it for her wedding night and rejecting all attempts made by Juan Carlos to consummate their relationship before such a time. To satisfy the excess of sexual energy that as a Latin American macho man he is expected to possess and exercise,<sup>[6]</sup> Juan Carlos has sexual relationships with two other women, Mabel and Elsa.

The nature of his affairs provides an additional opening for the subversion of androcentric romance, traditional masculinity, and man’s role as the main producer of economic value: Mabel and Elsa are from a higher socioeconomic class than their common lover, who ends up using them, with different degrees of success, to improve his own fortune. Every time he is in bed with Mabel, he asks her to persuade her fiancé to hire him as an administrator in one of his ranches. Due to his illness and the ultimate dissolution of Mabel’s engagement—a result of the failed business partnership between her father and her future husband—Juan Carlos does not reap any economic benefit from his affair with the young heiress. His relationship with the elderly widow, however, turns out to be more profitable. Once his family is unable to pay for his stay at the sanatorium, Elsa sells her house in Vallejos and purchases a modest boarding house in the mountains where she supports him until his death. As a result of this arrangement, Juan Carlos becomes the type

of “mantenido” man to which Melhuus refers in his study. The social stigma of his position is made clear in the film, and once his mother becomes aware of it, she sends his sister Celia to demand that the widow do everything in her power to conceal her relationship with Juan Carlos and the fact that she is his financial support. In both of these relationships, the young man essentially assumes the role of a gigolo who maintains purely sex-based liaisons in exchange for lucrative benefits. The class difference between him and the two women—and the fact that he depends on one of them financially—means that he is unable to fulfill his function as producer of economic value.

Juan Carlos’ situation produces clear fissures in traditionally male-centered, romantic interactions, as patriarchal epistemology shows that in heterosexual relationships, men must control all sources of power, including money and economic standing. Chant explores a number of studies which conclude that in the second half of the twentieth century, market-driven economic changes within Latin America undermined men’s ability to fulfill their duty as “economic providers” for their immediate kin, which in turn led to a crisis of conventional “masculine identity” (“Gender, Families, and Households” 165). *Boquitas pintadas* portrays this dynamic through the class and pecuniary characteristics of Juan Carlos’ affairs, and places traditional Latin American masculinity once again in a space of instability. It is important to remember that even though most of the story in the film takes place in the 1930s and 1940s, the script was written in the 1970s, when many free-market economic policies were introduced throughout Latin America, including Argentina. It was the beginning of a period of transition when men and women started transgressing “norms and values in their everyday practices,” a time when they “emerged out of their new realities [...] in the process of rewriting their scripts, while weaving new social relations” (González de la Rocha xx). *Boquitas pintadas* illustrates this rewriting of patriarchal scripts by placing economic power and the responsibility for financial support in the hands of Elsa when she decides to “maintain” her younger lover. The nature of the transgression that their relationship signifies is made obvious not only by their ostracism by Juan Carlos’ family, but also by its tragic end when the young man dies despite living in a healthy, clean-air environment.

*Boquitas pintadas* is an extraordinary example of a subversive cultural production created during a period of strict censorship. The film destabilizes traditional masculinity by engaging the male body, by undressing it and exposing its deficiencies, and by portraying it as fragile, diseased, and socially and economically defunct. The two main male characters experience a series of life-changing events that deprive them of their traditionally privileged positions within patriarchal society. They are unable to defend their own bodily limits against circumstances that defy the power with which masculinity has been typically endowed. Their early deaths signal a new social landscape that emerged as a result of violent political and economic shifts in twentieth-century Latin America. The events portrayed in the film also challenge the heterosexual masculine body and open fissures within its supposed naturalness. This process allows for new queer possibilities that reveal the unstable character of any construction of power. Torre Nilsson’s production seizes the opportunity to employ an effectively deconstructive discourse on gender, and to create a space that disrupts heteronormative masculinity and one of its most cherished symbols, the male body.

[1] Even though this study makes several references to the literary text from which Torre Nilsson's film is adapted, the analysis centers on the film adaptation as a wholly autonomous work. A number of adaptation studies critics such as Robert Stam have clearly established the independence of cinematographic adaptation, which needs to be examined as an independent object of cultural research. For more details, see Stam's "Beyond Fidelity" (2000).

[2] The first significantly successful cure for tuberculosis, the antibiotic streptomycin, did not become readily available until 1946.

[3] A good example of such a dynamic in Doty's book is his analysis of *The Jack Benny Program* and its host, Jack Benny, whom the scholar identifies as "America's favorite feminine straight man" (63).

[4] Ironically enough, upon his death in 1990, Manuel Puig himself was the victim of such panic. Many insinuated that his demise was the result of another epidemic, AIDS, which produced a substantial amount of hysteria among the middle classes. It was later confirmed that he was not HIV positive.

[5] For more details on homosexuality and the treatment of homosexuals in Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century, consult Osvaldo Bazán's *Historia de la homosexualidad en la Argentina: De la conquista de América al siglo XXI* (2004) and Jorge Salessi's *Médicos, maleantes y maricas* (1995).

[6] For more details on this last point, consult Foster, *Queer Issues* 24.

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