

Gay Camp as Social Satire in Ernesto Schoo's *Función de gala*

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Abstract: Ernesto Schoo's *Función de gala*, published in 1976, uses gay camp in both style and form to produce a powerful indictment of the bourgeois social norms and ideals of mainstream society at the turn of the last century in Argentina. By combining the essential elements of camp—incongruous juxtapositions, off-stage theatricality, and incisive humor—with a melodramatic plot full of fantasy and excess, the author succeeds in conducting an assault against the two most staunchly defended linchpins of the bourgeois value system: first, the belief that wealth is a sign of social status which confers prestige on the possessor and, second, that norms for gender and sexuality have always been and must continue to be "natural," stable, and unchangeable.

Key Words: Schoo (Ernesto), *Función de gala*, camp, homosexuality, Argentine novel, gender, sexuality in literature

[1]

Ernesto Schoo's first novel, *Función de gala*, written between 1973 and 1975 and published in 1976, is a rich and complex work of fiction that has not received the critical attention it clearly deserves.¹ Perhaps because of the unfortunate timing of its publication which coincided with the rise of the infamous military dictatorship of 1976, and perhaps because of its sexual content and critical tone, the novel has remained almost completely unexplored as a remarkable work of

¹I am grateful to the IUPUI Office for Professional Development, the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts, and the Indiana University Office for International Programs for their generous funding of research trips to Argentina in the Summer of 2000 and Fall of 2001 which made it possible for me to meet with the author and develop this study for publication. A note about the spelling of the author's name: on all of Schoo's published works up to the present, his name carries accent marks (Schóó), but the author mentioned to me that he wishes to go back to the original spelling (a phonetic adaptation of the English name, Shaw) and do away with the accents. The recent publication of his memoirs, *Cuadernos de la sombra*, honors his wishes and so shall I.

Argentine gay fiction.² The novel explores the decadent world of elegant Buenos Aires society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Perhaps one of the most entertaining and artistically significant qualities of the novel is that the fragmented and non-chronological plot is narrated in a voluptuously campy style which satirizes the values of polite bourgeois society in Buenos Aires at the turn of the twentieth century, providing a scathing critique of the rigid standards of behavior that have traditionally operated in that culture.

As in his later full-length fiction, *El placer desbocado* (1988) and *Ciudad sin noche* (1991), Schoo's first novel uses camp style and gay sensibility as an instrument to create an ingenious carnivalesque spectacle³ in which the bourgeois social norms and ideals of the mainstream dominant culture are inverted and ridiculed. By combining the essential elements of camp — incongruous juxtapositions, off-stage theatricality, and incisive humor— with a melodramatic plot full of fantasy and excess, *Función de gala* succeeds in conducting a powerful assault against the two most staunchly defended linchpins of the middle-class lifestyle: first, the belief that wealth is a sign of social status that confers prestige and importance on the possessor and, second, that norms for gender and sexuality have always been —and must continue to be— "natural," stable, and unchangeable. As I will discuss more fully below, the manner in which Schoo uses camp style to deconstruct bourgeois ideals of masculinity and femininity makes this novel an exemplary

² Foster wrote a rather ambivalent review of the novel shortly after its publication. This review and Sabino's brief overview of Schoo's works are the only references to this novel that I am aware of. Sabino's description, it must be noted, contains a major error insofar as he does not recognize that Juancito and Tony are the same character at different ages.

³David Bergman notes the intimate connection between camp and the carnivalesque in four major ways. First, both modes highlight political difference between the dominant and the subordinate culture; they both invert hierarchies of power; the "*grammatica jocosa*" style of both camp and the carnivalesque includes a "network of puns, innuendo and allusions arrayed with bawdy abandon;" and finally, Bakhtin's three basic forms of the carnivalesque —ritual spectacle, "comic verbal composition," and "various forms of abuse" (curses and the like)— are equivalent, according to Bergman, to the camp manifestations of the drag show, "queeny repartee," and the wicked "gay put-down" (*Gaiety* 111-113).

piece of Latin American gay fiction.⁴ But while the novel mocks other aspects of the bourgeois value system as well —its sanitized religiosity which rejects the underlying (homo)eroticism inherent in the adoration of religious personages, its unbridled admiration for the trappings of political power, and its search for validation and justification through "high-brow" art—, I will focus my analysis on the novel's two most powerful targets for critique: the socio-economic value system and the sex-gender system.

Función de gala presents a series of sequentially fragmented but interrelated narrative segments that document events in the lives of two central characters: a dramatic, eccentric, wealthy woman, Pupé, and her homosexual companion, Tony.⁵ Some of the short narrative sections entitled "El perseguidor," are narrated by a first person voice, a nephew who fantasizes about the extravagances of his aunt and Tony. The author also makes use of omniscient third person

⁴ Studies on the use of camp in other Latin American fiction are somewhat scarce. On the Cuban writer, Reinaldo Arenas, see Reati and Soto; on the Argentine Manuel Puig, see Bacarisse, Reati, and Wylie; and on the Mexican, Luis Zapata, see Palaversich and Westmoreland.

⁵ A brief summary of the plot may be useful. The reader learns that Aunt Pupé is from a distinguished and wealthy Buenos Aires family and despite a rather unhappy marriage to an unfaithful husband named Bernardo, the brother of an Argentine president, she has lived a colorful, adventurous, dramatic and decadent life. Her companion, Juan Antonio Muzzopappa (known throughout the novel as "Juancito" in sections describing his youth, and as "Tony" in sections narrating his adult life), is the illegitimate child of Josefa, a servant in the elegant home of the wealthy Sánchez Olaguer family, presided over by its matriarch, María Josefina. As an adult, Tony's status as a socially and economically marginalized figure is magnified by his obvious effeminacy and his sexual orientation. But because of his exceptional beauty and grace, he climbs the social ladder and enters the world of the rich and fashionable of Buenos Aires society. Once he meets Pupé at a gathering of the *modernista*, Classic-revival art circle called "Citerea," the two become inseparable and together they have a series of adventures both in Argentina and in Europe. In a sequence of narrative segments, they become royal favorites at the court of the outrageous Ludwig II of Bavaria. At court, they both serve the king: Pupé, with her dramatic personality, and Tony, with his youth and beauty, are employed to attract men for the king's (homo)sexual extravaganzas. But in spite of these accomplishments abroad, Tony's ultimate goal is to be accepted by the people of his own culture at a "función de gala" at Buenos Aires' Teatro Colón. At the end of the novel, as Pupé is dying, he realizes his dream. Tony dresses and prepares the dying Pupé as if she were a great work of art, like a mummy, and they arrive at the theater at what he had always hoped would be his moment of greatest social triumph.

narration, as well as dialogue and artifacts (newspaper reports and the description of an imaginary film) which all display a level of fantasy, exaggeration, and humor that puts every detail into question with regard to its veracity.⁶

One of the most ludic elements in the novel, and one that plays a major role in my analysis of it, revolves around the complex notion of identity and persona. As the author states on the back cover of the edition, the novel “es como un infinito baile de mascararas, donde cada personaje se refleja en su propia proyección imaginaria: lo mismo que todos nosotros, se ve cómo querría ser. Simultáneamente hay otras proyecciones (un túnel de espejos duplicándose hasta el vértigo): nadie es lo que es, pero nadie es tampoco lo que cree ser.” Part of the pleasure of the text, then, is discovering the connections necessary to determine the identity of the characters, their relationships to one another, the chronology of the events, and whether those events are fact, fantasy or a mixture of both. The highly stylized and mischievous structure of the novel works to draw the reader's attention to the exaggerated artificiality of its content, thereby producing a stunning camp effect.

[II]

A phenomenon as complex and varied as camp is, of course, remains difficult to define with any precision.⁷ Based on the extensive body of published research into the nature of camp, several essential features, however, may be proposed. As both a distinctive representational mode

⁶ The author clarifies many of the events and much about the characters in his memoirs. His aunt Coco, the inspiration for Pupé, is described on pages 127-139.

⁷While it is clear that the concept of “camp” exists in Argentine gay culture, terminology remains difficult to pinpoint in Spanish. In a personal communication with the author, he notes that “...here in Argentina we use [“camp”] with the meaning it has in English. There is a Spanish word with approximately the same meaning, or very much like it, which is ‘cursi’. It means anything (a word, a phrase, an object of any kind, even a person) too ‘recherché’, too pretentiously contrived to look like the epitome of sensibility, too apparently exquisite, too show-off. But that word is hardly used anymore in Argentina and since the sixties we have been using ‘camp’” (“On the word ‘camp’”).

as well as a codified signal to mark the presence of homosexual culture,⁸ Newton theorizes that camp makes use of three fundamental and interconnected elements: *incongruity*, *theatricality*, and *humor*. The first element, incongruity, indicates what Newton and others have emphasized as the camp approach to reality, one that is predicated on the "perception or creation of incongruous juxtapositions" (46-47). Using a highly significant term, David Bergman notes that camp "inverts" the world and a person's response to it ("Camp" 132). Camp turns things upside down and with a hyperbolic minimizing or aggrandizing revision, it creates a fantastically artificial world of falsified appearances and contradictory identities. Unlike other satiric and parodic genres, at the heart of camp is the complex interplay of such inversions as exaggerated or atypical gender behaviors and "queer" identities —men are "womanly," women are "manly"—, an approach to what is serious with derisive "bitchy" humor or what is humorous with mock seriousness, and the conversion of what is ordinary or "natural" into something artificially glamorous or extraordinarily precious.

The result of camp's obsession for the aesthetic and the stylish gives rise to the second element, what Booth calls an "off-stage" theatricality which makes use of the exaggerated gestures, attitudes and performance techniques of the stage as a way to highlight the self-conscious artificiality of the camp world. As Jack Babuscio notes, "[c]amp aims to transform the ordinary into something more spectacular. In terms of style, it signifies performance rather than existence" (23). As I will show with regard to *Función de gala*, the stagey performance of a camp person's life duplicates an important element of theater: an "actor" takes on the invented identity of a character, emphasizing the appearance of being someone else and effectively masking his or her own selfhood (the sexual self, particularly) from public view. Voluntary multiplicity and fluidity of identity becomes a defining feature of camp theatricality.

The third basic element of camp is its humor. In campy terms, the humor is "catty" or "bitchy" —that is, biting and satirical, incisive and mocking. But the purpose and the result of

⁸ Maurice Westmoreland suggests that camp expression may be considered a homosexual *act* in itself, one which serves to provide "an outlet and a substitute for homosexual desire, a permitted act through which one may 'perform' homosexuality" (47).

such humor has given rise to a variety of interpretations. While Kiernan emphasizes the frivolous nature of camp humor, Bergman reminds us that camp "is funny, but it is not only amusing. It frequently has a serious point behind its surface of frivolity ("Camp" 133). Booth correctly underscores the ridiculing aspect of camp humor and, as a result, its critical function (42). It is this critical and satirical humor of camp, the strategy for "dealing with a hostile environment" (Babuscio 27), that surfaces so prominently in Schoo's *Función de gala*. As I will show, *Función de gala* demonstrates precisely how the camp novel, by means of its ironic content and glaring incongruities, its extravagant theatrical style, and its mordant critical humor, makes a very powerful political statement: in this case, a scathing indictment of the hypocritical and oppressive societal norms dictated by Argentine bourgeois culture.

[III]

Schoo's *Función de gala* takes place in the Buenos Aires of the turn of the last century —the perfect setting for a camp satire of Argentine bourgeois society. Due to an explosive increase in population and the resultant widening disparity of wealth and opportunity among socio-economic classes, the Argentine capital city of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided a prime location for the growth of marginalized communities —along with the cultural responses that these communities developed as a reaction to their marginalized status. According to theorists, one such response, the development of camp style, its attitude and its fundamental critical stance occurred precisely in conjunction with the rise of the urban middle-class bourgeoisie. Camp is, therefore, a modern phenomenon that traces its origins to the shift from an agrarian economy and society to the explosive growth of the commercial and industrial urban centers. Booth indicates, for example, that because of its "flashy, worldly and pleasure-seeking side," "its superficiality and its immediacy," and its "sheer unnaturalness" (45), the modern city is the perfect place for those who have already become accustomed to using appearance, style, wit, and adaptability to survive in a hostile environment, that is, those who live at the economic, social, and sexual margins of an oppressive mainstream society.

As one of the responses of the marginalized homosexual community, camp places itself in direct and hostile opposition to the values and mores of dominant bourgeois society. Andrew Ross summarizes the issue by stating that camp people can be considered "a parody or negation of dominant bourgeois form: anti-industry, pro-idleness; anti-family, pro-bachelorhood; anti-respectability, pro-scandal; anti-masculine, pro-feminine; anti-sport, pro-frivolity; anti-decor, pro-exhibitionism; anti-progress, pro-decadence; anti-wealth, pro-fame" (146-147).

Consequently, camp's mocking opposition to traditional bourgeois values takes many different forms: an outrageous obsession with appearances that display outward signs of wealth, status, and prestige (jewels, noble titles, etc.); the melodramatic conversion of one's own life into an artificial theatrical (or cinematic) performance; the exaggerated fascination for the artifacts and décor of exotic, foreign, and ancient cultures (as distant in space or time from modern bourgeois culture as possible); and the rejection of traditional sexual and gender behaviors.

In *Función de gala*, a campy fascination with the external indicators of wealth and "class" is an ever-present feature. There are numerous lush and sensuous descriptions of clothing, jewelry, hair and make-up throughout the novel. Unlike the detailed novelistic descriptions of characters and settings in, for example, the realist, naturalist or regionalist novel, the camp narrator focuses lovingly on long inventories of elements which lay particular stress on extravagant style, excessive luxury, and theatrical impact. For example, Pupé's physical appearance is always described in the most luscious detail: "un sombrero con velo moteado, un zorro plateado en bandolera, un corsage de orquídeas, las perlas y la plaqueta; los párpados pesadamente azules, la boca color mandarina de Tangee" (24). Tony's expensive clothing is also a source of camp attention: Tony "admiró sus dos trajes nuevos: uno de gabardina color natural, para el entretiempo, y otro de casimir azul oscuro con imperceptibles rayas coloradas. Telas inglesas, naturalmente. Pero el de gabardina necesitaría esos zapatos de cocodrilo..." (31). And not only characters, but ambience is also presented to the reader with a camp fascination for sumptuous detail. The nephew narrator describes his Aunt Pupé's house and notes that

[m]i recuerdo más perdurable de esa casa, es el de un tapiz con tigres de Bengala, donde las fieras estaban de pie, con las fauces abiertas en el acto de rugir, los colmillos relucientes, las bocas de terciopelo colorado..., la piel suntuosa. Justamente, sobre el piso de mármol del vestíbulo se derramaba una piel de tigre, con la cabeza embalsamada. [...] En los rincones del vestíbulo ardía sahumerios, y japonesas de porcelana se asomaban, con melindres, al borde de las repisas. (14)

As with a character's clothing, the rich details of texture, color, and a vaguely decadent elegance in atmosphere all combine to produce an exaggerated focus on the sensational, the aesthetic, and the external—a focus that serves a decidedly satirical purpose.

In spite of what might appear to be merely a gratuitous cataloguing of luxurious elements, what Booth calls "undigested bits of information... of more curiosity value than relevance" (122), I find that in the case of *Función de gala*, at least, such itemization serves a very specific satirical purpose: the extraordinary descriptions of appearances in camp fiction serve to set the characters and their world apart from the mainstream, the average, the traditional, the "normal." And although the detailing of sumptuous richness and sensuality might seem to betray a misguided admiration of such lush material luxury, on closer inspection it becomes clear that the fascination displays an implicit ridicule of such ostentatious elegance. Unlike the bourgeois materialist who sees the acquisition of wealth and refinement as a serious objective which, he or she believes, will actually confer worth and value on the owner, camp personalities make use of rich *accoutrements* and decoration knowing full well that such things are merely props in an "imitation of life" drama. Camp décor, both personal and environmental, becomes a joke that ultimately pokes fun at the solemn bourgeois belief in the value and reality of what is, after all, just costume and artifice.

As the description of Pupé's home demonstrates, camp style often expresses its critique of modern bourgeois society through its delight in all things foreign, exotic, and antique. As Booth states, "[c]amp accepts alien styles in a playful way, so that they express a gleeful sense of alienation from the establishment. The Orient interpreted as a place of reckless splendor, of effeminate luxury and strange sexual indulgences, has been a major subject for camp

exploitation, its exotic styles seeming to offer a delightful alternative to the stodgy life-style of the bourgeoisie" (141). In *Función de gala*, the oriental and exotic are associated with Pupé from the very beginning of the novel. In the description of her photograph, the narrator notes that she has a "vago parentesco con una odalisca de serrallo, devoradora de entalcadas golosinas de Oriente" (12) and later mentions that "Pupé era excéntrica y viajaba a Oriente cuando todavía no estaba de moda. Su casa de Caballito abundaba en chucherías orientales" (14). The fascination for worlds far away from her own native land clearly suggests a desire to distance herself from the limited and limiting parochial attitudes of bourgeois Argentine society. Part of this distancing is due to the fact that, because of her "eccentricity," she is rejected by her family and culture —she is truly an exile from her own place and time. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator meditates on a series of pictures of his Aunt because he only knew her as a child and he yearns to imagine what her life must have been like. Her departure for Europe was the last time he saw her; he speaks to her image in the photograph and tells her, "[l]a familia decreta tu ostracismo. Has muerto para nosotros" (27).

Related to the camp interest in what is far away in space —the exotic— is the camp fascination for the antique, what is far away in time. Booth concludes that camp is a retrograde phenomenon, a "perversion" of the process of history because when camp effects styles and fashions from the past it "uses them to sidestep the onward march of history." The result is that the "historical is reduced to the ephemeral" (143-44). As marginalized creatures, camp people do not place their trust in a "progress" that serves an oppressive bourgeois dominant class to further its goals; camp rejects the Western notion of linear time and embraces the "incongruous juxtapositions" created by a curious intermingling of the modern with the ancient. The novel's fragmented, non-chronological structure, as well as its bizarre anachronisms, work to achieve a camp effect of a non-hierarchical simultaneity.

Clearly, the desired outcome of this inclination to luxuriate in the past or the exotic is a way for the characters to remove themselves from a present situation that is unpleasant or even unbearable while at the same time, it creates an artificially hospitable environment. Foreign and

ancient locales become fantastic idealized places where misfits feel at home, comfortable, and welcome. As a result, camp people prefer to re-create, within the present, an artificial past in which marginalized people are believed to have been accepted and, in some cases, permitted to flourish —places such as classical Athens, renaissance Florence, and rococo Versailles. The camp fascination for other places and times which makes the sexual and social outcast feel more at home is explicitly expressed when Pupé and Tony go to the court of Bavaria where King Ludwig II's minister points out, indicating the King's courtiers, "[t]odos ellos, como si buscaran otra cosa, algo que no está en nuestra época, una forma de vivir, de amar, que pertenece a un pasado anterior al cristianismo, cuando la compasión no era obligatoria, y la culpa tampoco" (52).

Stepping out of chronological time, Tony and Pupé's adventures with Ludwig exemplify the issue of camp anachronism perfectly. Ludwig, for example, died in 1886, but his chamberlain, however, mentions to him that he must see a new opera by Giancarlo Menotti (born in 1911). Furthermore, based on the suggested time frame of most of the narration, Pupé could not be more than a child in 1886 and Tony could not even have been born. It becomes clear that the entire series of narrations on Tony and Pupé in Bavaria not only display a ludic effect with time, but also reinforce the camp foundation of the novel by including not so subtle coded references to such camp icons as Ludwig and his flamboyant castles (Linderhof, Neuschwanstein, and Herrenchiemsee), grand opera and its melodramatic theatricality (especially Wagner), and even an allusion to Jean Cocteau's film *La Belle et la Bête* ("[l]os brazos musculosos que brotaban de las paredes y sostenían los candelabros, han desaparecido" [55]).

The first-person narrator elaborates other exaggerated camp fantasies involving his Aunt Pupé, in which she appears radiant and glorious, larger-than-life in some theatrical extravaganza that takes place outside of the stuffy Buenos Aires environment. One of the narrator's fantasies involves Pupé's arrival in Paris where "[a]l pie de la escalinata la espera Luis XIV sentado en un trono cuyas volutas se confunden con los rizos de la peluca" (15). Pupé trips as she comes down the stairs, and she sails across the footlights, landing on the lap of an old man, who dies contented. Another fantasy puts her in the perfectly artificial and exotic setting of Rider

Hagard's novel, *She*, where her handmaidens "frotan a tía Pupé con polvo de oro hasta dejarla reluciente y centelleante, la cubren con una túnica de lino blanco, le ciñen dificultosamente a la cintura una sierpe de oro con dos cabezas que se encuentran sobre el ombligo, la sientan en un trono de hojas de palmera, le tapan la cabeza con un velo" (26). Pupé, in effect, has been converted into a completely fake personage, whose extravagant appearance is described for both the sensual pleasure of the luxuriousness, but also with a slightly mocking tone (the implication that she is too plump for the belt to fit around her waist). The end of the fantasy adds an additional layer of falsehood, when instead of crying out "Kalikrates," Pupé calls out the name of her companion, Tony, and an "assistant director" tells Pupé she is not following "the script." The camp distancing of Pupé from her bourgeois reality is magnified by multiple coatings of artificiality.

And just like the narrator, Juancito (Tony), too, dreams of the splendors of the remote and distant: at school, on humid days, the tile walls collect condensation and the patterns of the stains left by the drops, like a Rorschach test, inspire Juancito to visualize "tapices en un salón de Versalles—el nombre de lugar que más le gustaba repetirse a sí mismo, silenciosamente, como una letanía—; pinturas en una casa pompeyana...; cortejos venecianos de Carnaval...; la carroza del rey de Inglaterra en marcha hacia la abadía para ser coronado; una función de gala en el Colón" (22).

The need to escape from modern bourgeois society to a time and place that allows marginalized figures to thrive is even more powerful in the episodes surrounding the art group known as "Citerea," organized by Pupé's sister-in-law, María Cleofé. Unlike other groups, groups which define as well as confirm status quo cultural norms by means of a serious dedication to mainstream intellectual and artistic values—Elena Sansivena de Elizalde's "Los Amigos del Arte" and Victoria Ocampo's *Sur* circle are mentioned as "rival" groups—, Citerea stands in stark opposition to those values seen as oppressive. The stated purpose of Citerea emphasizes "la necesidad de algunos espíritus selectos de apartarse de la vulgaridad, la sordidez y el apresuramiento de esta época" (76). Rather than promoting the development of modern art,

Citerea is designed to be a haven for people who are trying to escape from the ugliness of the present by pretending to exist in an idealized past. In other words, Citerea is a splendid narrative device for bringing together all the basic features of a camp critique of the bourgeois Argentine culture of the period; it is a retreat for misfits who wish to live in an artificially artistic world—a camp locale for camp people which mocks the bourgeois ideals of maintaining respectable appearances, the upholding of family prerogatives, the privileges of patriarchy, the practicality of serious professional development and economic progress, and the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality.

The exotic splendor of Citerea provides an implicit critique of modern middle-class values by creating an environment that is fundamentally impractical, decadent, and feminine: "[m]esas colmadas de dulces, bebidas y frutas; lámparas que ardían serenamente en el crepúsculo de los espesos cortinados; sonos de flautas, caramillos y violas da gamba, brotados de un templete de madera, de forma gótica; macizos y guirnaldas de flores entre candelabros de plata con velas perfumadas..." (104). The peculiarly artificial and theatrical atmosphere is further exaggerated by the members' use of pastoral "nombres de égloga (estaba prohibido utilizar los nombres comunes, cotidianos...)" (76). María Cleofé, for example, is renamed "Cloe," Pupé becomes "Araminta," and Tony is "Filinto." The use of false names and false identities, of course, is characteristic of camp style: not only does it remove the characters from a bourgeois here-and-now in which they do not fit, but it also aestheticizes their identities so that they are exaggeratedly beautiful, precious, and appealing.⁹

While the members don their "masks" as stylish nymphs and shepherds at Citerea, the meetings frequently mask a different type of activity, one that is ironically incongruous with its ostensibly noble and artistic purpose: recreational sex, both hetero and homo. As the narrator notes, the name "Citerea" refers to Aphrodite's "isla del amor" (75) but he hastens to add that it never entered María Cleofé's mind that there would be "la menor impropiedad sexual" (76)—at

⁹ A similar effect is produced in Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*, when Molina and his friends call each other by names of glamorous female movie stars.

least not when she originally created the group. However, like a strip-tease number, the narrator begins to reveal more and more of the sexual nature of the group and goes on to suggest that the atmosphere of the meetings is "vaguely erotic." He adds that one of the purposes of the circle is to "[s]uscitar una afinidad" among the "espíritus selectos" and to "acercarlos y congregarlos en el culto común de la belleza y la sociabilidad, tejer entre ellos delicadas relaciones de amistad, intercambio intelectual y asistencia mutua" (76). As the reader discovers later, however, the elegant phrasing of the group's announced purpose is comically juxtaposed with the existence of María Cleofé's "gruta": "un vasto sofá tapizado en terciopelo granate y con abundantes almohadones, casi oculto entre pesadas cortinas de damasco. La luz de las velas llegaba con dificultad: era el quicio de confidencias, el rincón íntimo donde la ninfa recibía a los elegidos entre los elegidos, los que gozaban de su deferencia especial" (77-78). In the end, the reader gets the "money-shot" of the strip-tease when the narrator finally reveals the extravagantly ironic disjunction between the refined and elegant atmosphere of the gathering and the physical activity taking place by describing the activity in an exaggeratedly precious manner:

La tibia noche de primavera asciende sobre Citerea. Los árboles se impregnan del polvo plateado que baña la atmósfera. Al pie de la muelle colina florida, aguarda, con las velas desplegadas, la galera de oro. Los amercillos empuñan los remos y tejen guirnaldas, una diosa desnuda se halla al timón. Las guirnaldas de flores, trenzadas en el cielo vaporoso de octubre, flotan sobre los enamorados que, en parejas, lentamente abandonan la colina, en busca de la cercana isla del placer. En la sombra morada y verde del bosque, la estatua de Príapo alza, entre flores, su maciza virilidad. (107-08)

Later on, in the continuing play of camp masking and unmasking, disguising and revealing, the author completely removes the artificial, artistic façade of Citerea when Tony's lover tells him what goes on at Citerea in more direct terms:

—¡María Cleofé es tan tilinga! Nunca se le debe de haber ocurrido pensar en qué terminan los viajes a Citerea.
—¿En qué terminan? —preguntó Tony.

—En algo que finamente se dice orgía, y en buen romance, cama redonda.
¿O en qué te creés que se pasaban el día esos nobles disfrazados de pastorcitos?
—¿En qué?
—Cojiendo pastorcitas, o a otros pastorcitos, según. (122)

The abundant erotic activity of Citerea suggests that its members reject the type of hypocritical bourgeois conventions surrounding sex that characterized the Argentine norms of the period. Clearly, the free expression of hetero- and homo-sexuality, which opposes such mainstream values as "family," "respectability," and "modesty," implies a wicked disregard for—and critique of—the dominant culture's repressive and restrictive codes of conduct. While the campy display of sexual license presents a parody of bourgeois moral and social values, the parody of gender and sexuality systems essential to camp strikes even deeper at the heart of patriarchal Western culture by toying with what is considered "natural" and "normal."

[IV]

Camp parody is nowhere more transgressive than in its ridicule, inversion, and reconfiguration of Western gender and sexual norms. As with camp's parody of the bourgeois obsession with appearances, the parody of gender and sexual norms contains a very potent socio-political message. Booth deftly signals that camp "performance" uses sexual stereotypes, the "building bricks of patriarchal morality," to show just how arbitrary these traditional codes are. The easily produced cross-sexual camp performance ("drag") is the perfect demonstration that gender and sexual norms can be instantly undermined and inverted (58-59). This is precisely where camp aims its most stinging blows and why it makes social moralists so uncomfortable: camp creates deep emotional and intellectual disturbances in societies which, in order to maintain the power prerogatives of patriarchy, are required to enforce a rigid, uniform, and tightly controlled binary system of gender and sexual norms—by defining the system as "natural"¹⁰ and, therefore, obligatory.

¹⁰Studies are plentiful that deconstruct the notion of "the natural" with respect to sexuality and gender. For one of the most insightful essays, see Ward.

Camp consistently toys with sexual and gender stereotypes by means of a parody which employs extremes of simplification and exaggeration. The subtleties and complexities of sex-gender elements are lost, giving way to a performance of, frequently, the most negative archetypal attributes. Camp's "stylized effeminacy," especially when performed by males, takes what is traditionally determined as "feminine behavior" to its most disagreeable extreme: the feminine in men is artificial, deceitful, gold-digging, treacherous, envious, vengeful, spiteful, gossipy, backbiting, vain, and "bitchy."¹¹ As a result, there seems to be no question that camp's gender parody may be viewed as a powerful critical attack on the patriarchal system of misogynistic gender stereotypes.¹²

In *Función de gala*, homosexual characters such as Juancito-Tony illustrate perfectly the blurring of gender lines that lies at the center of camp incongruity, theatricality and humor. From earliest childhood, Juancito/Tony is obsessed with the sumptuous external display of the femininity of women who possess some measure of socio-economic and cultural power. In a particularly revealing description, the narrator notes that Juancito was a gifted "artistic" child and that he followed the advice of Leonardo da Vinci to "observar atentamente las manchas de

¹¹The transference of negative feminine stereotypes to homosexuals goes back, at least, to the late nineteenth-century sexologists who postulated that male homosexuals were "female spirits" trapped in male bodies. As Bao and Sebreli point out, turn-of-the-century Argentine criminologists and hygienists were very explicit in their application of such attributes to homosexuals in Buenos Aires, quoting Eusebio Gómez who wrote in 1908 that "[a] rasgo que acabamos de indicar en los invertidos, la venalidad, ó más bien dicho, el parasitismo, únese su carácter caprichoso, sus envidias, la ruindad de todos sus procederés, su deseo de venganza, y sus rencores ilimitados. Tarnowski dice que reúnen en sí todos los defectos de las mujeres sin tener ninguna de sus cualidades, careciendo, además de las condiciones que hacen amable el carácter viril" (qtd. in Bao 198-99 and Sebreli 288-89).

¹²The charge that camp colludes with patriarchal misogyny and contributes to the negative image of women has been a source of debate among theorists. Booth emphasizes that camp men are both highly misanthropic (self-loathing) as well as misogynistic (woman-hating) and attempts to prove his point by means of a rather unfortunate pseudo-psychological "analysis" of the causes and effects of the camp mentality. Most contemporary theorists, however, conclude that camp, rather than reinforcing negative stereotypes, works to destabilize them through ridicule and satire. See Babuscio (28) and Ross (71-72).

humedad en las paredes, para sacar de ellas imágenes fantásticas."¹³ He also enjoyed drawing "los retratos de las mujeres más fascinadoras de su época" and on Sunday mornings "se dedicaba con ahinco a copiar, en una hoja de papel canson, una imagen de la reina de España que hacía publicidad a una crema de belleza y que salió en una revista" while his mother, Josefa, "conmovida, lacrimosa, lo miraba querellarse, horas y horas, con los arabescos de la diadema real" (22). Juancito's interest in the Spanish queen is based on his fascination for the amplified elegance and beauty of her feminine appearance: his desire is to *copy* the image of the queen on a jar of beauty cream (a feminized substance, *por excelencia*) and what he focuses on most is not her physical femaleness, but rather the outward symbol of her status as the most important female in the land, the crown, which underscores her role as the example of perfect femininity.

Having "copied" the queen of Spain on paper, when Juancito becomes "Tony" as an adult, he continues to copy the femininity of the image that appeared on the jar of beauty cream by cultivating for himself the external beauty that the cream is supposed to bestow. Tony's "feminine" (and, therefore, "decadent") beauty regimen —sleeping at least twelve hours every day, washing his face in cold water to shrink the pores, brushing his nails gently so that he does not take off the polish, wearing a net for several hours to train his unruly hair (30-31)— highlights not only how arbitrary are the notions of what is appropriate behavior for males and females, but also how artificial are the notions of "beauty." The critique of Argentine and Western society, however, is based on the fact that whether or not Tony may enjoy such a ritual, he is, ultimately, forced into it. Tony's beauty, like the highly prized beauty of women, serves to provide him with a survival mechanism: although he is marginalized because of his socio-economic status (the bastard son of a poor maid and an Italian bricklayer) and his gender-sexuality identity (effeminate homosexual male), his reputation as "beautiful" and "charming" will

¹³The code word "artistic," when applied to a certain "type" of boy —like Juancito— and the reference to Leonardo, whose non-traditional sexuality was well known, make use of camp's playful mode of always describing things in more charming or appealing terms, thereby avoiding the more unpleasant or ugly words that might disturb the creation of an artificially exquisite atmosphere.

earn him *entrée* into certain "sophisticated" circles in the mainstream society of the ruling élite. Indeed, Tony's sex-appeal and attractiveness to both men and women ("algunas mujeres y algunos hombres lo encontraban seductor" [30]) make it possible for him to utilize the only "assets" he possesses to improve his social standing. Exploiting his own sexuality and beauty, Tony first becomes the lover of a decadent member of the Argentine oligarchy, Lolo Irrazábal de la Cuesta Agrelo y Fenollosa; then the lover of King Ludwig II of Bavaria. As a reward for his "services" to the king, Tony earns a knighthood, a royal stamp of approval that he can use in Buenos Aires bourgeois society to mingle with the most prominent people of the era. In the end, he becomes the "companion" of Pupé, whose wealth and social connections ("era una mujer de mundo, con apellidos que sonaban bien, estaba socialmente ubicada —instalada, se repetía él..." [32]) take him as far in Argentine society as he can go.

Although Tony's beauty helps him climb the ladder of the Argentine élite, his non-traditional gender and sexual identity, however, are considered extremely dangerous in mainstream bourgeois society. In one of the most voluptuously campy sections of the novel, the narrator describes just how catastrophic the effects of Tony's radical non-conformity can be. The section, entitled "La danza de Tony," begins when he arrives home and, dancing in his silk kimono while holding a bouquet of flowers, asks: "'Pupecita, ¿tiene un búcaro para poner estas flores?' (36). As if the eyes of all Argentina suddenly were aimed at him, the narrator describes the horrified reactions to that "dance," unleashing a stinging critique of bourgeois narrow-mindedness and homophobia:

[a]l oír la palabra búcaro, honestos comerciantes vascos o navarros, asturianos o gallegos, se alzan indignados de sus tumbas. Gordos y rubicundos, a punto de estallar dentro de sus pecheras demasiado almidonadas y de los cuellos duros demasiados ceñidos: los dedos cortos y gruesos, hechos a sopesar monedas y cucuruchos colmados de azúcar o de harina de maíz, se crispan, y se les erizan los ríspidos vellos de las falanges. "Maricón, manflorón, pulastrón", claman las antiguas voces hispánicas, heridas en el quinto forro de sus honestos testículos torunos. (36)

As the narrator continues the tongue-in-cheek diatribe against Tony's effeminacy, the reader discovers that Tony's dance produces truly unexpected and far-reaching effects. Religious statues begin to weep bitter tears and sweat drops of blood, the episcopate calls on the Argentine president to involve him in a fight against such "pornography," civic groups such as the "Asociación de Madres de Caballito" and "El Club Tradición, Patria y Propiedad" decry this indecency, and the universal forces of nature display portents of calamity: a comet with a "cola de sangre" appears, it rains frogs, and a calf is born with three heads (36-37). With the exaggerated theatricality and biting humor that are so characteristic of camp, the narrator's critique of Argentine society pinpoints the axes of power which define, defend and enforce rigid gender and sexuality norms: Argentina's conservative Spanish cultural heritage; the economic control of the middle and upper classes; the moral authority of the Argentine Roman Catholic Church, especially in conjunction with the forces of the State; social and community organizations made up of the Argentine bourgeoisie; and the very powerful belief, which in this case is linked to Biblical-style vengeance and superstitious folktale, that "Nature" itself is violated by femininity in men and that such violations are capable of producing chaos on the cosmic level.

[V]

Camp theatricality, the approach to life as if it were a "performance," is an extension of the camp obsession with appearances, the need for escape from the dreary impositions of stuffy bourgeois convention, and the knowledge that sexual and gender norms are constructed, like a stage character's costume and make-up. The falsification and the stylization of both character and ambience as well as the use of roles and masks which permits a person to adopt an alternative identity make theatricality the perfect mode for the camp parody of mainstream societal norms.

In *Función de gala*, one section of the novel stands out for its sheer melodramatic theatricality as it brings together the different elements of camp style and its critiques of Argentine culture and society. In the middle of the novel the reader encounters a prose summary of a "film"

entitled, "Corazón de Tango," a fantasized cinematic version of the events of Juancito-Tony's young life prior to meeting Pupé.¹⁴ The film's campy focus on appearances and what Babuscio calls the camp "evocation of mood as a stylistic device" (22), recalls the highly melodramatic Argentine tango films of the 1920s and 1930s. The tone of the film, a mixture of broad sentimentality, flag-waving patriotism, moralizing religiosity and popular musical theater, heightens the camp fantasy of a marginalized man who ultimately finds vindication and attains the status of hero. Beginning with doña María Josefina's humiliating and cruel expulsion of Juancito (called "Juan" in the film) from the Sánchez Olaguer home after he is discovered having sex with her son, Francisquito Sánchez Olaguer, the narration of the film emphasizes the traditional melodramatic situation in which the misadventures of the common, humble people are utilized as an overt critique of the hypocrisy and abuses of the rich and powerful: "El frío corazón de esa gente de sociedad se puso en evidencia cuando Josefa murió y, a los pocos días, le informaron a Juancito que ya no seguiría viviendo allí. [...] La señora de Sánchez Olaguer, su antigua protectora, que tantas demostraciones de afecto (ahora se veía que habían sido falsas) le prodigó en la infancia, le hizo una penosa escena de reproches, al despedirlo" (79-80).

In full melodramatic camp style, the film continues to explore the fantasy of the warm-hearted but humble common people victimized by the coldly manipulative and arrogant rich. Juan, for example, finds comfort and protection among the "common" people in a working-class neighborhood of Buenos Aires: "la Boca, cuna de gente buena y laboriosa donde (pese a que también hay cafetines en los que rudos marineros olvidan sus nostalgias con el alcohol y las mujeres fáciles) abundan los honrados trabajadores que desafían las aguas embravecidas con sus

¹⁴The camp fascination for film stars and cinematic expression is examined by Ross. He concludes that "the camp fascination with Hollywood... was part of a survivalist culture which found, in certain fantasmatic elements of film culture, a way of imaginatively communicating its common conquest of everyday oppression. In the gay camp subculture, glamorous images culled from straight Hollywoodiana were appropriated and used to express a different relation to the experience of alienation and exclusion in a world socially polarized by fixed sexual labels. Here, a tailored fantasy, which never 'fits' the real, is worn in order to suggest an imaginary control over circumstances" (157-58).

barquichuelos, para llevar el pan penosamente conseguido a la mesa familiar" (82). The exaggerated cruelty of the rich is juxtaposed with the idealized honor of the poor, but Juan, because of his status as a gender and sexual deviant, is a marginalized outsider to both groups and does not belong either to the one or the other.¹⁵ In order to earn the admiration and acceptance of his own people, both high-born and low, Juan will need to achieve the kind of greatness that, transcending the abomination of his gender and sexual deviance, will cause the culture to embrace him: he must become a "national hero."

Unlike the traditional heterosexist "hero's journey," Juan's process towards hero status is a campy revenge fantasy which mischievously attacks mainstream social norms. In the film, after the dreadful scene with doña María Josefina in which she exiles him from the home he grew up in, Juan is found unconscious on the street by María, an innocent but poor girl. She takes Juan in and, with her blind mother, together they nurse him back to health. In the same *conventillo* lives Antonio, "un fornido peón de carnicería, puro como un niño, que instantáneamente se hizo amigo de Juan" (83). At one of the houses where María works, lives Renato, a handsome, but unscrupulous young man from a wealthy family, who seduces María. Later on, Renato swindles all the money from doña María Josefina de Sánchez Olaguer, leaving her destitute. Juan, in contrast, because of his "nobleza de alma," takes pity on doña María Josefina: "Juan le ofrece su protección, que ella acepta, conmovida, y se entrevista con Renato. Este se ríe de sus pretensiones, se burla de la virtud de los pobres y finalmente amenaza a Juan con un revólver" (84). In self defense, Juan accidentally kills Renato and is imprisoned. At the end of the film, of course, all wrongs are righted: Francisquito Sánchez Olaguer, now a brilliant lawyer in the United States, returns to Argentina and successfully defends Juan in court and at the end,

¹⁵Bergman notes that "[a]lthough a sense of otherness affects us all, the otherness that affects the homosexual—or effects his sense of homosexuality—is more profound. For while otherness is an unavoidable part of any self's awareness of its own subjectivity and its difference to other persons around it, the homosexual suffers a categorical, perhaps even ontological, otherness since he is made to feel his 'unlikeness' to the heterosexual acts and persons who gave him being" (*Gaiety* 30). The intensity of the rejection suffered by those whose gender and sexual orientation is strongly at odds with the majority culture often produces an "absence of identity" (*Gaiety* 45) which is quite obvious in the character of Juancito/Tony.

doña "María Josefina es nuevamente rica, pero se ha redimido porque, al vivir junto a los pobres, ha logrado entenderlos" (84). And although she invites Juan to live with her again, "Juan, en cambio, prefiere una existencia humilde y sencilla: se quedará en el conventillo con Antonio, y juntos labrarán el porvenir de la patria" (85). The final scene of the film thus provides the ultimate irony and revenge fantasy, both personal and political: "los dos amigos, fraternalmente abrazados, que se internan en la gran ciudad que despierta y los recibe alborozada. De varones como ellos será el porvenir: Dios, una vez más, no ha defraudado a los suyos" (85). The reader discovers later in the novel that Antonio and Juan are lovers and it is in the hands of "men like them" that the sacred future of Argentina is enthusiastically placed.¹⁶

The camp theatricality of the film and its parody of Argentine cultural norms becomes even more pronounced as the narrator later describes in the novel how the "real-life" events that lay behind the cinematic ones "really" occurred. With dark, mordant humor, the narrator focuses sharply on the fluidity, artificiality, and inconsistency of all the characters' identities. María Josefina, for example, described early in the novel as "muy distinguida, muy fina" (16), "que... parecía en especial una reina de veras, con corona y todo" (17), a woman who doted on Juancito despite his humble origins, later on in the novel is noted for her vicious, hypocritical rejection of Juancito/Tony when he is discovered having sex with her son, Francisquito: "[a]ltiva, dura, María Josefina —vestido negro cerrado hasta el cuello, con mangas de encaje negro; collar de perlas, plaqueta y zapatos abotinados— se queda como una estatua, la estatua del desdén y la impiedad, en el vasto hall, al pie de la escalera de mármol, junto a la armadura" (81). Other characters appear to be one thing, and turn out to be something quite unexpected. Antonio Mancuso, the gentle but very "masculine" young man who befriends Juancito in La Boca, later turns out to be a jealous homosexual with a violent temper. The simple and innocent María who lives with her blind mother, doña Clotilde, and who "takes in sewing" to earn a living, ends up

¹⁶ Considering the harsh crackdown on homosexuals that the military government began when it came to power only months before the publication of the novel, and their ideology that labeled homosexuals as inherently "subversive" enemies of the state, Schoo's final scene is eerily ironic.

tricking Juancito into making her pregnant as a way to coerce Antonio into marrying her, while all along everyone knows that she is one of the neighborhood prostitutes. And of course, Juan Antonio Muzzopappa, known both as Juancito and Tony, changes his names as well as his identity throughout the entire novel. For example, in a move that makes a mockery of the Argentine bourgeois belief in the status conferred by important surnames, Tony's upper-class lover, Lolo, decides to help Tony change his name: "¿Te imaginás la rabia que les va a dar a los Sánchez Olaguer? ¡Esta no se la imagina Francisquito! Desde hoy te vas a llamar Tony Sánchez Olaguer" (117).

But more than merely a sentimental revenge fantasy or a heavy-handed critique of the rich combined with an admiration for the supposed innate goodness of the poor, the film narration in the novel reveals the serious purpose underlying this campy melodrama: ultimately what Juan seeks and fervently desires most is the approval and acceptance of those people he adores and has been socially conditioned to admire and emulate. As the narrator notes from the beginning of the novel, Juancito is a boy who wants to be loved and wants full admission into a society that keeps him marginalized due to his sexuality and socio-economic status. He is an outsider who can never be what mainstream society holds up as an example for others, a hero.

Juancito's desire for love and acceptance is clearly illustrated when he has his first sexual experiences with other boys at school. Unlike the others who do it merely for sexual pleasure, Juan craves affection: "Juancito... quedó dolorido de cuerpo y alma. Todos sus intentos de adornar la relación con un beso, una caricia que no fuera sólo genital, una palabra afectuosa, eran rechazados brutalmente" (38). Similarly, the joyous reception that he and Antonio receive from the people of Buenos Aires at the end of the film emphasizes the fervent desire on his part to be fully admitted into the welcoming arms of a society that consistently denies him membership and brands him "illegitimate" socially, economically, and sexually.

But with Tony's appearance at the end of the novel at the Teatro Colón, the legitimizing *función de gala* that he had longed for all of his life, he ultimately finds some measure of the acceptance and admiration. In a supremely ironic moment of empowerment, Tony presides over

a ceremony, rich with religious overtones, in the highest temple of Argentine culture, the Teatro Colón.¹⁷ At that moment, he realizes that "la obra de arte que es su vida, la vida que él eligió, no la que otros le habían elegido" (148) is worthy in itself because it is consciously and individually created, not imposed.¹⁸ He has survived every challenge and surpassed every obstacle that social forces have employed to keep him on the margins of society. The validation he sought for so long comes from within when he finally understands that his identity as a being that harmoniously unites the feminine and the masculine is sacred and prophetic:

Tony asciende a los cielos pintados del Colón, oye hosannas y aleluyas, escucha las ovaciones, las agradece. Dulcemente desciende, planeando, hacia sus admiradores extasiados, se posa en tierra con la gracia de un bailarín, se refleja otra vez en el espejo y, abriendo con ambas manos la corola blanca y negra de su capa —*dondiego de noche, dama de noche*—, hace una reverencia ante el espejo, se hace una reverencia a sí mismo, se adora, duplicándose. ¿No viene ungido de los cielos, no es acaso el hijo predilecto por quien todas las cosas han sido creadas? (149; emphasis added)

In the end, Schoo's novel, *Función de gala*, can be considered a sharply parodic indictment of bourgeois mainstream Argentine society. By means of camp style, a mode of expression characteristic of one of that society's most marginalized subcultures, the novel makes use of incongruous juxtapositions, stylized theatricality, and dark humor to ridicule and criticize bourgeois convention, hypocrisy, and oppression. With its voluptuous and sensuous descriptions of ultra-stylized appearances, its obsession for the foreign, the exotic, and the ancient, and its self-

¹⁷In addition to its status as a temple of culture, the Teatro Colón has also enjoyed the status as one of the great places for men to find sexual encounters in its bathrooms. As Rapisardi and Modarelli indicate, "El Teatro Colón era otra de las variantes para los levantes, las invitaciones a los *parties* y, también, para los encuentros sexuales. Sus baños, en los entreactos, o en el curso de una representación soporífera, se transformaban en exquisitas bacanes" (88).

¹⁸The same point is made by Beaver who asserts that "[c]amp is the desire of the subject never to let itself be defined as object by others but to reach for a protective transcendence, which, however, exposes more than it protects. Camp is a withdrawal into inverted commas, a flaunting by *self*-definition, a leap-frog of distancing. The delights of camp come from the call to interpretation that it issues" (106).

conscious masquerade of shifting identities, camp succeeds in parodying the norms of a society that will not accept those who do not conform to its stringent restrictions on status, class, gender, and sexuality.

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