

## Intersubjective Perspectives on Intersexuality and Spectator Identification in Puenzo's *XXY*

*Intersexuality is underrepresented in film, yet in key sequences in XXY, perspectival patterns kindle attentiveness to intersex subjectivity by focalizing the experiences of a secondary, non-intersex identified character. What is gained by rendering intersexuality from the vantage point of one who has yet to experience it? This article argues that the film's visual and aural grammar queers intersexuality itself, undoing dichotomic borders between "intersex" and "non-intersex" by making intersexuality a relational rather than purely anatomical quality. This intersubjective rendering of intersexuality facilitates alternative pathways for audience identification with intersexuality, a topic yet unexplored in the film's robust body of criticism.*

Keywords: *intersexuality, intersubjectivity, XXY, disidentification, focalization*

*La intersexualidad rara vez es representada en el cine, sin embargo, en secuencias clave de XXY, los patrones de perspectiva abordan la subjetividad intersex a través de la focalización de las experiencias de un personaje secundario que no se identifica como tal. ¿Qué está en juego cuando se retrata la intersexualidad desde el punto de vista de alguien que no encarna esa experiencia? La gramática visual y sonora del filme desestabiliza la intersexualidad misma, desdibujando las fronteras dicotómicas entre "intersex" y "no intersex", haciendo de la intersexualidad una calidad relacional y no solamente anatómica. Esta representación intersubjetiva de la intersexualidad da paso a caminos alternativos para la identificación espectral con la intersexualidad, un tema aún inexplorado en la prolífica crítica sobre XXY.*

Palabras clave: *intersexualidad, intersubjetividad, XXY, desidentificación, focalización*

In many ways, *XXY* (Puenzo 2007) is a film about coming to terms with the social and anatomical consequences of puberty. The narrative follows a fifteen-year-old named Álex who lives with her family in a rural coastal town in Uruguay. Álex's parents, Kraken and Suli, moved their family away from Buenos Aires to protect the privacy of their child, who was born with a mixed set of male and female genitalia. Now worried about what changes Álex's maturing body might undergo, Suli invites an old friend and her husband – a renowned plastic surgeon – to visit and to advise on a treatment plan. This couple's teenage son, Álvaro, also makes the trip. As the days pass, Álex and Álvaro develop a sexually charged relationship, but their intercourse is interrupted by a parent. Their suspended intimacy leaves Álvaro feeling more aroused than ever (a true sexual awakening) and leaves Álex with undesired feelings of love. At first glance, the film appears to be a story about Álex, but upon further study, one realizes that it is actually Álvaro's experiences and perspectives that largely frame the filmic experience. This article sets out to explore what is at stake in framing intersex subjectivities through outside perspectives.

*XXY* debuted at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007, where it won several awards, including the Critics' Week Grand Prize. Later that year, the film also won the Goya Award for Best Ibero-American Film. *XXY* has garnered domestic and international attention from its first showing, and academic film criticism has responded in kind over the nearly twenty years since. Much of the existing criticism has analyzed *XXY*'s rejection of sexual dimorphism in favour of the portrayal of a plurality of sexes (Viera Cherro; Estrada-López; Zamostny). Several critics have employed Foucauldian approaches, be it through a biopolitical reading of the film (Monteiro and Nardi; Peidro) or through an analysis of its heterotopian, liminal spaces (Olivera). The bulk of critical research on *XXY*, however, focuses on a connection between the natural world and Álex's body. Margret Frohlich, for example, argues that "*XXY*'s representation of an idealized natural realm where liminality belongs, and need not be corrected, contests the reduction of certain types of variance to the abnormal and the unnatural within medical and juridical discourse" (164). Deborah Martin, Charlotte Gleghorn, Debra Castillo, and Moira Fradinger specifically focus on the film's marine metaphors and metonymies. Whereas Martin theorizes a "becoming-animal" as an instance of intersex children "growing sideways" (instead of growing up), Gleghorn analyzes the use of the marine myth to position Álex's body as other-worldly. For their part, Castillo and Fradinger each put forth an analysis that likens Álex's amphibious gender and sex to the dynamic essence of nature. A final predominant branch of criticism situates

*XXY* in the broader context of the Argentine film industry, including the shift to increasingly transnational production teams (Shaw), a queered response to neoliberal reforms (Blanco and Petrus), and shifting stylistic and thematic norms (Amícola; Andermann; Dufays).

My analysis recognizes the contributions of these earlier studies, even as I work to approach *XXY* through a distinct interpretive lens. More specifically, to account for the structure of gazes in the film, the present study relies on a sophisticated use of technical film analysis that is absent in much criticism to date. A careful analysis of the film's gaze patterns produces a new thesis about *XXY*: the film's visual and aural grammar queers intersexuality itself, undoing its dichotomic borders by making intersexuality a relational rather than purely anatomical quality. I describe the rendering of intersexuality in the film as "intersubjective," as a quality interwoven among the cast, rather than one siphoned into a single nodal character. The film's intersubjective intersexuality, I argue, facilitates alternative pathways for audience identification with intersexuality, a topic as of yet unexplored in the film's robust body of criticism. And yet, any scopical approach to spectator identification faces a fundamental challenge. As François Jost reminds us, "The seen and the known do not always go hand in hand" (73). If not by simply watching her, how does an audience come to know and identify with Álex? An analysis of the film *as audiovisual art* forges a more rigorous foundation from which to consider pathways of identity formation with her intersexuality and helps us see the film anew.

Intersexuality is clinically defined as "genital ambiguity in people born with a mixture of both male and female anatomy, or genitals that appear to differ from their chromosomal sex" (Fausto-Sterling 19). Like "male" and "female," "intersex" is a label that gives genitals "primary signifying status" (Kessler 90). It also happens to be a label applied by medical practitioners, which gives these practitioners primary interpretive status. Patients' bodies are exposed to medical staff in ways they are rarely made visible to acquaintances, family members, and even lovers. Intersex bodies undergo additional examinations, careful visual studies that leave them naked to the medical eye and its bias towards treatment protocols, including hormone therapy and surgery to align the body with male or female primary and secondary sex characteristics. In short, these bodies are often presumed preoperative by medical practitioners once identified as intersex.

The preservation of so-called "ambiguous" genitals challenges the semantics of sex and its pronouns. The question of which kind of pronoun to use for Álex – she, he, they – has divided critics, perhaps necessarily so, but focusing on pronoun use misses an important point. Noting the stressed

efforts of critics to gender Álex properly, Argentine intersex activist and scholar Mauro Cabral writes, “Debo confesar que esa preocupación me resulta tan conmovedora como ridícula,” since rather than a real person, Álex is a product of poetic license (108). I use feminine pronouns to refer to Álex, though following Cabral’s argument, I suppose any would serve just as well (or just as poorly). More important, I believe, is a focus on the film’s consistent insistence on the plurality of sexes in nature and on the flexibility of gender expression. I am wary of the binary logic reinforced in some of the film’s criticism, such as the assertion that, compared to Álex, Álvaro “es del género opuesto” (Peidro 79, 87). Even those who explicitly analyze the imposition of the gender binary as a *leitmotiv* in the film sometimes impose this same binary in their own writing, as Estrada-López does in a footnote that explains her choice to use “both” grammatical genders in Spanish when referencing Álex (424). Others make the same decision in their English-language criticism (Castillo; Frohlich). Nearly all, however, leave unquestioned the duality between “intersex” and “non-intersex,” as if they were mutually exclusive and sharply defined categories. If we are willing to queer the gender binary, should not the dichotomic division between “intersex” and “non-intersex” subjects also be queered? *XXY*, a film that, itself, makes no mention of the term “intersex,” offers critics a chance to *intersexualize* queer film studies by paying attention to the ways that intersexuality drifts from one nodal character to another.

The film’s creative liberties free intersexuality from diagnostic language, generating alternative conduits through which intersex individuals come to signify on screen.<sup>1</sup> How does *XXY*’s form facilitate an account of intersexuality that dismantles the classic pre-op presumption and its dichotomic, diagnostic gaze? One way is by visualizing and hearing intersexuality in such a way as to make it appear intersubjective. That is, thanks to the way this film is shot and edited, the subjectivity of intersexuality becomes more proximate, more accessible, and, in the end, more relatable to a desiring public. The primary result of this focalization process is what I call intersubjective intersexuality, a mode of relating that queers the biological difference between so-called “intersex” and “non-intersex” characters. Rather than re-instate dichotomies, this article affirms that intersexuality is defined in terms of social relationality as well as anatomy; thus, intersubjective intersexuality incorporates subjects normatively defined as intersex, the relation among intersex individuals and those sexed in other ways, and the practices that produce sexual difference.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if we take the liberty of verbifying the adjective intersex, we can with confidence claim that Puenzo “intersexes” or “intersexualizes” the cinematic

experience with such success that intersubjectivity, rather than biology, primarily defines intersexuality in *XXY*.<sup>3</sup>

In his pioneering piece on the intersubjective mode in queer Chicano narrative, Ernesto Javier Martínez makes the central claim that “crucial information is conveyed about the sociality of queerness when queer experience is narrated, not directly from a character within the story’s action (a *homodiegetic* approach), but from a narrative voice outside of the experienced events [(a *heterodiegetic* approach)]” (229). At the risk of oversimplification, we can roughly equate homodiegetic with first-person narration and heterodiegetic with third-person narration, which sometimes has a focalizer.<sup>4</sup> Queer intersubjectivity, argues Martínez, can be effectively revealed through a *heterodiegetic* literary mode that focalizes on non-queer identified characters. The heterodiegetic mode produces an intersubjective account of queerness, one in which even non-queer identified characters are incorporated into the sphere of queer sociality. I argue that, *mutatis mutandis*, a cognate mode in film can likewise reveal an intersex intersubjectivity. In fact, the intersubjective quality of film is even better suited to making visible and audible how non-intersex identified characters assess and take in intersexuality. For example, subjective and semi-subjective shots, or what Vivian Sobchack has called cinema’s “viewing view” (25), may convey crucial information about the sociality of intersexuality by orienting the audience’s perception of intersexuality through one or more external focalizers. In the case of *XXY*, Álvaro largely orients the filmic rendering of intersexuality in such a way that depicts both Álex and her intersexuality as less marginal. The non-intersex identified character is thus incorporated into the sphere of intersex sociality.

Jeffrey Zamostny studies the varying degrees of ethical attention (a term he borrows from Jane Stadler) paid to Álex’s intersex body. He argues that, in stark contrast to a static character like Ramiro, who hopes to re-insert Álex into the sexual binary via medical intervention, dynamic characters Kraken and Álvaro strive for an ethically attentive understanding of Álex’s intersexuality. The result of such ethical attention is ephemeral moments of mutual recognition between Álex and other dynamic characters, which he identifies as a status of intersubjectivity, following Jessica Benjamin’s psychoanalytic theorization of the term (Zamostny 201). She describes intersubjectivity as a perspective concerned with how we create a third position between the reversible complementarities of subject and object, such that the polarities that underlie them are held in tension (Benjamin xiv). Zamostny explains that *XXY* produces an awareness of the short- and long-term goals of intersex activism while at the same time subtly

exploring the fact that, even among characters sympathetic to Álex's difference, occasional disruptions in ethical attention towards intersexuality are inevitable.

Zamostny offers a rich analysis of the quality of Ramiro's, Kraken's, and Álvaro's attentions towards Álex, but most of his analysis hinges on the film's diegetic strategies of intersubjectivity.<sup>5</sup> I approach *XXY* with a keen interest in the film's visual and aural aesthetics, thereby probing the cinematic strategies of a specifically intersex intersubjectivity. The film's craft is not subtle, and its contrivances do not recede into the background; these are the dynamic elements that pull the spectator towards characters who respect Álex's difference and distance the spectator from others who would foreclose on Álex's autonomy. Zamostny and other critics also stop short of considering how these characters' attentions might affect the audience's perception of Álex. (Two exceptions include Shaw and Martin, more about which in the next paragraph.) What of the viewers? Intersubjective connections rendered on-screen are conveyed to audiences and thereby transform spectator subjectivity, rendering an intersubjective state in spectators as well. Spectators, like Álvaro, haltingly enter an intersubjective relation with intersexuality – one inscribed in the film's aesthetics and activated through the convergence of personal and cinematic experience. A keen focus on the film's aesthetics brings into focus how *XXY* makes room for spectators to negotiate intersexuality, to get close to it, and perhaps even to identify with it.

Having described the film's portrayal of gender and sexuality as “queer but not strange,” Deborah Shaw highlights how *XXY* makes queerness “vernacular” by foregrounding the intimate and the local in ways that can be appreciated by local and global cinema audiences alike (175-176).<sup>6</sup> She supports Deborah Martin's claim that the audience then “becomes part of the queer community surrounding Álex,” which Martin attributes to two key mechanisms in the film (Martin 39). First, by refusing to portray visual evidence of Álex's intersexuality, “the film constructs a spectator who is aware, an ‘insider’ who is given information as if s/he already knows.” Second, Álvaro's “desiring, yet insufficient gaze” towards Álex conveys an idealization of a nonnormative body (39-40).<sup>7</sup> Shaw points to a third catalyst for the audience's incorporation into the film's queer sphere; given the film's transnational funding mechanisms and keeping in mind its screenings at Cannes, Edinburgh, and Toronto, its initial audiences were primarily composed of international art cinema spectators, who, when compared to more mainstream audiences, tend to be more invested in protagonists with diverse sexual identities (171). Moreover, its broad circulation in the

international market of LGBT festivals meant that audiences were also likely predisposed to view Álex through the lens of allyship and other modes of identification. Shaw argues, “a paradigmatic other who falls outside of gender and sexual binaries is incorporated into the world of the viewer and thus ‘de-othered’” (176).

Although the present article takes some cues from both Shaw and Martin, I arrive at different conclusions. Shaw’s analysis, based mainly on the film’s narrative discourse, locates the film’s queerness almost exclusively in Álex. I argue that by focusing on the film’s scopic and aural registers, it becomes clear that the enunciation of intersexuality is distributed among a more extensive cast of characters, with Álvaro as an additional nodal point. Moreover, although both Martin and Shaw briefly consider an audience’s potential reception of Álex’s character, neither delves into the questions of identity pathways that interest the present article.<sup>8</sup> A fuller consideration of queered processes of identification, including the potential for spectators to disidentify with Álex, better explains how audiences may relate to Álex while still potentially considering her a strange “other.”

#### INTERSEXED PATHWAYS OF IDENTITY FORMATION

If identity is the construction and expression of self, then the act of “identifying with” is the alignment of one’s sense of self with some outside influence. In film studies, what is on screen either does or does not align with an audience member’s identity. In the case of misalignment, the audience member may either counteridentify with what is on screen (what’s known as rejection) or disidentify with it, which José Esteban Muñoz explains is “identity-in-difference” (5). Below, an elaboration on these identification frameworks satisfies one central question: How do the director’s choices encourage a greater degree of alignment with Álvaro, conventionally seen as a secondary character to Álex, and thereby simultaneously potentiate greater intersex identificatory possibilities for the audience? Orienting a film through a non-intersex identified character affords audiences alternative pathways of identic formation with an intersex protagonist by dint of the counteridentification spectators feel with characters who violate intersex autonomy, as well as the nuanced disidentification we experience in learning to desire Álex via the intersubjective relationship she shares with Álvaro.

As nearly every critic has been quick to point out, when Álex appears naked before the camera, her genital regions are always obscured (Gleghorn; Frohlich; Estrada-López; Martin; Shaw). For example, Estrada-

López posits, “Esta limitación visual posiciona al sujeto intersexual, Álex, en control de su cuerpo para decidir quiénes pueden tener acceso o no a él” (424). And yet, no academic critic has yet to engage with the fact that Álex’s chest is repeatedly displayed throughout the film. This omission misses an important opportunity to acknowledge the spectacle that is so often produced when nipples read as feminine appear on screen. Despite Álex’s claim to a flat chest – “No tengo nada” – the film subtly acknowledges its femininity. Vando covers Álex’s exposed chest after Álex has been assaulted on the beach (*XXY* 01:03:37), and before that, the father of Álex’s neighbor looks away as Álex changes into a dry shirt (*XXY* 00:41:29). The sensationalism caused by Puenzo’s choice to reveal certain parts of Álex’s body while hiding others is crucial to creating a space for erotic imagination. *XXY*’s visual rhetoric slices and sutures Álex’s body, threatening to preempt the possibility of seeing Álex as greater than the sum of her parts. And yet, the stillness of many long takes focused on Álex’s torso allows for the production of an imagined totality that entices with countercultural femininity in the nude.

In fact, desire, and desire *fulfilled*, are two essential elements in *XXY* that some in the intersex community have reportedly praised (Mayer 14). Cabral, the Argentine intersex activist and scholar cited earlier, has argued that the film promotes an “intersex poetic” that leaves space for erotic imagination, rather than relying on a biomedical or more “realistic” approach to intersex experiences. Describing representations of intersexuality within this latter and more limited formulation, he writes,

[La intersexualidad] no es, no puede ser, no debería ser algo con lo que alguien, uno, cualquiera, podría masturbarse. ... Sobre todo, la intersexualidad no puede ni debe ser, bajo ningún concepto, producida y puesta en circulación como una experiencia distinta a la narrada por la biomedicina. No puede haber una poética de la intersexualidad, a quién se le ocurre. No puede haber, menos que menos, una erótica. (Cabral 106)

Cabral is specifically responding to critics of the film who argue that director Puenzo has taken too many liberties in representing the intersex experience – for instance, titling the film with the chromosomal sequence for Klinefelter syndrome, which leads some to argue that the film is overly reductive and stereotypical from the start. Cabral advocates not for greater authenticity in portrayals of intersexuality on screen but for the right to imagine these characters more freely. What might they be thinking? What might turn them on?

*XXY*'s portrayal of the mutual attraction between Álex and Álvaro thwarts scalpel-sculpted ideals and eschews the diagnostic gaze of medical practitioners. Instead, the film's diegesis – rather than its cinematography – attests to other gazes. There are four scenes in which Álex's genitals are revealed to other characters, though not to us: the sex scene with Álvaro, the shower scene with her neighboring friend, the sexual assault perpetrated by three teenage boys, and the final goodbye with Álvaro (Gleghorn 164). In each of these instances, the verbal and gestural reactions of the other characters give shape to the material existence and desirability of Álex's atypical genitalia. Of the four, only the assault scene negatively portrays that desire, and it provokes a painful reckoning with the precarity of trying to keep her condition secret. Somewhat contrary to Estrada-López's assertion, Álex does *not* always decide who has access to her body. The traumatic scene occupies an important place in the identificatory processes enacted by the film's diegesis and discourse, for it provokes an oppositional misalignment with spectators' own sense of self. Consequently, the film restricts spectators' identificatory sites with those who would desire to see Álex as an object of exotic intrigue. We reject, or counteridentify, with this form of eroticized diagnostics.

Through many of the same mechanisms, the diegesis also inhibits identification with medical practitioners like Ramiro, who view surgical alterations on intersex individuals as medically advisable corrections, by presenting counternarratives. After Kraken witnesses Álex penetrating Álvaro, he seeks guidance from another father named Juan, who is intersex.<sup>9</sup> Juan shares the trauma he experienced as an infant when his gender-ambiguous genitals were altered to make his body look more feminine: “¿Vos sabés cuáles son mis primeros recuerdos? Inspecciones médicas. Yo creía que había nacido tan horrible que me tenían que operar cinco veces antes de cumplir un año. Eso es lo que llaman la ‘normalización.’ Esas no son operaciones, esas son unas castraciones” (*XXY* 00:50:48).<sup>10</sup> By giving voice to Juan's denunciation, the film challenges the assumption that each intersex infant can and should immediately be assigned a sex, and that each infant can and should be raised accordingly. Álex, too, has always been considered a candidate for normalization surgery. Juan's experience, however, makes clear that the knife that cuts doesn't always reveal an *hembra*. In the film's only sequence featuring Kraken and Ramiro talking openly and alone about Álex, Kraken describes to the plastic surgeon the circumstances in the days leading up to and immediately after Álex's birth: “Lo sospechaban antes de que naciera. Querían autorización para filmar el parto, declararlo de interés médico, informar el consejo ético, en fin... Dijimos que no a todo” (*XXY*

01:09:09). Kraken goes on to say, “Era perfecta. Desde el primer momento que la vi, perfecta.” This defense and affirmation of intersex autonomy resonates throughout the film’s diegesis, which distills a fifteen-year struggle to recognize health where medical standards of care indicate intervention. Indeed, the film provides consistent sites of counter-identification with anyone who would foreclose on Álex’s autonomy.

The truth is that *XXY* also resists facile pathways to audience identification with Álex. Though some critics have endeavored to relate Álex’s body to the film’s many monster motifs,<sup>11</sup> one could argue that she is monstrous not because of her anatomy but because of her personality. Álex is a fairly unsympathetic character, prone to bouts of anger, hysterics, and impudence. Although it’s impossible to predict with whom any given spectator will identify, especially given the potential diversity of an audience, a quick survey of film critics in popular and academic publishing venues reveals uneven affinities towards Álex. Cath Clarke writes that Álex is “at times coy, at others confrontational, sometimes downright sexually aggressive” (n.p.). Tina Escaja finds Álex’s attitude “descarada, extrema, incluso cínica y cruel” (240). Richard James labels her “wild and angry” (39). Roz Kaveney puts it most sharply, opining that Álex has “a quietly predatory and cruel side. ... Álex is not the standard poster child of problem-oriented melodrama” (17). Even Anne Tamar-Mattis, a sympathetic reviewer who self-identifies as an “advocate for children with intersex conditions” describes Álex as “a bit overdramatic and annoying when she gets upset” (72). Despite Álex’s volatility, spectators are ultimately able to approximate Álex’s insubordinate subjectivity via the multiple queer gazes in the film, including Álex’s own. Importantly, Álvaro’s outsider perspective reroutes identic pathways to Álex through his character, which allows spectators of all genders, sexes, and sexual orientations to identify with Álex more easily without eliding her marked difference.

As Estrada-López has observed, the social unintelligibility of the Álex’s intersex identity is a reoccurring element of the film (426), but the intersubjectivity between Álex and Álvaro is key to elucidating her intersexuality. In his now classic *Point of View in the Cinema*, Edward Branigan posits that it is through the structure of signification (through discourse) that cinematic subjectivities are formed. If, as Branigan argues, subjectivity is what is achieved through the perceiving and the telling of a story, then we can use subjectivity as a kind of conceptual catch-all for the many ways that a film might orient a story through a focalizer. For our purposes, we can understand subjectivity as how the self is situated in narrative and cinematographic relations of power; it is that which

corresponds to a character's ability to perceive and to direct our perception. Intersubjectivity is the composite ability of two or more characters to perceive and to direct our attention, which, in turn, produces a particular perceptual orientation towards a film's portrayal of these characters. Intersubjectivity is created through formal structures of signification, such as shot composition and camera movements, that anchor one character's subjectivity to another's.

As a point of clarification, intersubjectivity is distinct from the processes of identification, which can occur between two on-screen characters or between characters and spectators, as when the cinematic apparatus aligns audience perspectives and emotional states with those of the story world. Identification is a form of a subject-object relationship, in which one person (the separate self – subject) recognizes and internalizes some aspect of another person (the internalized other – object). Identification sacrifices the autonomy of the other person as another "separate self." Jessica Benjamin succinctly explains from a psychoanalytic perspective how intersubjectivity differs from identification: "The intersubjective relationship [is one] in which one goes beyond identification to appreciate the other subject as being outside the self" (xiii). An intersubjective experience between two characters happens when one comes to understand the other as an autonomous subject, rather than an object with whom to identify. In a more phenomenological sense, intersubjectivity can also occur between the audience and one or more characters, as when the audience comes to understand the circumstances of the story world vis-à-vis a character's unique experience of said circumstances. Conjugating intersubjectivity with processes of audience identification requires a consideration of both psychoanalytic and phenomenological frameworks, particularly when those pathways of identification in *XXY* are so inflected towards the vector of Álvaro's desire for Álex.

#### DISIDENTIFICATION AND INTERSEXUALITY

As pride parades remind us, public exposure is not only the politic of representation and coalition building but also a means to stoking desire. Puenzo simultaneously works to create on-screen intersex representation while also crafting an intersex subject who is both desiring and desirable (Fradinger 369). Thanks to Álvaro's succinctly developed character arc and the camera and editing techniques that align audience perception with his in several key scenes, Puenzo ushers audience members into his curious and ultimately desirous position towards Álex. To be sure, Álvaro's own growing

desire for Álex (and hers for him) is an objectifying undertow of their otherwise intersubjective relationship. Álvaro offers, at best, an imperfect attentiveness to intersexuality, as well as to Álex's desiring and desirability, but asymmetry in a subject-subject relation is an inherent part of any intersubjective relation. Husserl specialist Dan Zahavi argues, "Without asymmetry there would be no intersubjectivity, but merely an undifferentiated collectivity" (114). Intersubjectivity, identification, and objectification are distinct and sometimes divergent processes; however, they are not always inconsonant. In *XXY* these processes ebb and flow as the film sweeps various sites of identity and related subjectivities across the current of its own tides. Álvaro is both subject and object, a focalizer and a focal point. As we inhabit his perspective, the film gives the audience variegated access to each of these processes – to intersubjectivity, identification, and objectification – without pathologizing or fetishizing intersexuality.

These intersubjective connections between so-called "non-intersex" and "intersex" characters allow for alternative identic processes. Identification by a majoritarian audience with an on-screen minoritized "other" has sometimes been considered a "win" in terms of humanizing marginalized subjects in film. *XXY*, for instance, has been praised by many for daring to make an intersex character more relatable, but such identificatory processes still maintain that subject-object paradigm. Moreover, queer theorists have long been skeptical of traditional ways of understanding the processes of identification in film, for these approaches often presume heteronormative spectators who see themselves in the presumably heteronormative characters on screen. Perhaps most prominent among queer theorists working on alternative processes of identity formation was José Esteban Muñoz, whose critical work on queer of color scholarship in performativity studies theorized "disidentification," the process of identifying otherwise. Disidentification is a theory of identity formation informed by psychoanalysis and queer of color critique that characterizes how a minority subject relates to performances enacted for the dominant, majority public sphere. In Muñoz's own words, "disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). Rather than fully identify (through assimilation) or fully counteridentify (through opposition) with cultural productions that restrict identificatory sites for the minority subject, one might envision an alternative sphere in which the

hegemonic ideal is still partially desired, but with difference.<sup>12</sup> But what happens when what the spectator finds on screen is a queering of desire and of the coming-of-age story itself? Can a spectator from the dominate public sphere also disidentify, say, with Álex and Álvaro?

Even in spectators not already predisposed to desiring them, the intersubjective relationship between Álvaro and Álex catalyzes spectator disidentification with both. Muñoz states, “To disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject” (12). Álex is mercurial, “monstrous,” and aggressive – far from a romanticized representative of intersexuality. As a fictional character, Álex is afforded the nuance, depth, and rarity that makes every person authentically human; however, Puenzo resists reifying Álex as the impenetrable intersex person by providing multiple perspectives (including Álex’s own), by giving her a voice to foreground what she thinks, and by allowing her to change over the course of the film. Moreover, when this minoritized subject is seen and *desired* from a queered vantage point, which Álvaro provides, Puenzo gives spectators a frame of reference that challenges binary notions of biological sex essentialism and unfurls the relationship between gender and embodied desire. Spectators, in turn, inhabit Álvaro’s fictive viewing position and shift towards a reception of a story that defies heteronormative viewing practices.

Disidentification is about internalizing or identifying someone else’s self or status as part of one’s own, albeit with difference. Thanks to robust perspectival alignment with Álvaro, any spectator, too, can see part of themselves in Álex, just as Álvaro does. With and from this identity-in-difference (to use Muñoz’s phrase), even a majoritarian spectator may be able to enact a self that results from partial affinity with the film’s predominately queer sphere. If allowed a moment of speculation, I suspect that the newly enacted self could produce a reconstituted social relation: an intersubjective relationship that helps even normative audiences experience Álex’s desirability without sweeping her into a fully knowable or essentialized subjectivity. Below, I consider the devices of cinematography and editing that enable this potential shift.

#### FOCALIZATION AS INTERSUBJECTIVE MODE

Focalization describes how a film orients the audience’s experience through one or more characters, called focalizers. Director Puenzo relies on specific focalizers to attend to intersexuality from multiple perspectives. A comprehensive analysis of film perspective involves not only the study of a

direct perceptual quality but also of other markers of subjectivity such as attitudes and relationships towards the thing or person being portrayed. Focalization techniques in film frequently invoke ocularization – in which we see what a character sees from his or her point in space – via point-of-view (or POV) shots, over-the-shoulder shots, specific lighting, and manipulation of length and scale of shot. Another prominent focalization technique is auricularization, which is the rendering of auditory information to align the audience’s aural experience or “sound perspective” with that of a character (Bordwell). Auricularization permits us to hear what a character hears from their point in space. If focalization is about access to perceptual knowledge, then ocularization and auricularization are the narratological devices used to communicate that knowledge to the audience (Kuhn).

In *XXY*, auricularization is an often-overlooked focalizing feature in a scene that helps cement the bond between Álvaro and Álex. The scene in question takes place outdoors, near a group of vendors hawking a variety of goods. We hear a distant drumbeat from an outdoor performer and the ambient sounds of a seaside market. The camera follows the two teenagers as they approach some of the vendor stands. After Álex unexpectedly makes Álvaro pay for a necklace, he keeps his distance and puts on blue headphones.<sup>13</sup> The audience can hear traces of his music, as if we are just within earshot of a pair of cheap headphones with the volume turned up too loud. Álex takes them from Álvaro and tells him, “¿Sabés lo bueno de escuchar música en la calle? Parece que todos escuchan lo mismo que vos” (*XXY* 00:23:15). When Álex places the headphones over her own ears, the volume rises on the diegetic music, and she starts to dance in sync with its rhythm (Figure 1). The volume stays steady even as she removes the headphones and returns them to Álvaro. Álex continues to dance to the beat, even though she no longer hears the music that Álvaro and the audience do. This auditory exchange – between the two, but also between the pair and the audience – marks one of the nodal points in the evolution of their relationship. It’s one of the first times we can see the two actually smiling at one another and hints at the intimacy to come. The amplified and shared music changes the film’s mood and orients our filmic experience through a sonic intersubjective relationship. Notably, the upbeat music trails into the next sequence, which shows the two scrambling up to an empty house where Álex will present him a gift of an ID tag that’s genealogically related to the one she wears. As proof of his affection for her during their final farewell, Álvaro will show Álex this same ID tag.<sup>14</sup> Thus, this early scene featuring auricularization is the beginning of an evolutionary arc in which we watch their mutual attraction grow.



Figure 1. Auricularization as intersubjective form

Of course, not all sequences in the film feature a subjective or semi-subjective perspective, aural or otherwise, and even when present, Álvaro is not always the focalizer. In a few scenes Álvaro and Álex exchange gazes in the same frame, making it difficult to determine whose gaze governs the shot. Some scenes featuring Álex are framed by others, including her parents, a friend living nearby, and Ramiro, just to name a few. Although an analysis of these other vantage points is beyond the scope of this piece, the mixture of perspectives distributes the sites of intersex enunciation and reception in a social domain far broader than her relatively isolated domestic sphere might initially imply. Moreover, the diversity and sometimes incompatibility of perspectives precludes the possibility of spectators feeling like they ever come to fully know Álex, a limitation congruous with broader calls for the right to privacy and bodily autonomy for intersex individuals.

A shot-by-shot analysis of one, four-minute sequence from *XXY* illustrates well how focalization foregrounds the construction of intersubjective intersexuality (*XXY* 00:03:45–00:07:28). The sequence begins just over three minutes into the film with an establishing shot of the harbor, where a ferry from Buenos Aires has arrived with Álvaro and his parents. A cut from this open-air, maritime atmosphere to the dim, shadowy lighting of the ferry's internal parking bay establishes a somber atmosphere. Álvaro walks toward the camera, in the direction of the family car, and

opens the door. He is wearing the blue headphones that become a staple of his wardrobe. Ramiro, his father, is sitting in the driver's seat with a bookmarked reference book propped up against the steering wheel. He turns to look at the camera, which now occupies the position where his son is sitting. Ramiro looks at Álvaro – at us – with apparent indifference, says nothing, and looks away. The camera cuts to Álvaro, whose eyes travel downwards. He catches a glimpse of the files in his father's lap, and the camera fittingly takes on the subjective perspective of a curious glance from the backseat. A photo of Alex is among the many notes and forms, though Ramiro quickly slides it of our/Álvaro's sight and closes the book. It is *Orígenes del sexo*, by none other than Alex's father, Néstor Kraken. Just before the scene ends, an extradiegetic, instrumental song fades in and mixes with the ferry's horn blasts and the songs of coastal birds. The slow, foreboding music composed by Andrés Goldstein and Daniel Tarrab quickly becomes a *leitmotiv* of the film's score. This gloomy, early scene – the very first in which Álvaro appears – consistently focalizes his perspective and gradually accustoms the viewer to accessing visual information from his vantage point.

The next scene returns to a wide shot of the harbor, where Suli awaits their arrival (XXY 00:04:09). On the left side of the next shot (Figure 2), we see the exaggerated smile of Álvaro's mother, sitting in the passenger seat, juxtaposed with Álvaro's concerned expression on the right side of the same frame. The now audibly eerie music aligns the audience's perception of the situation with Álvaro's rather than his mother's, despite her prominence in the shot's foreground. Aural identification with Álvaro's perception now couples with the visual cues previously established by the POV sequences in the ferry's parking bay. Remarkably, this same shot will repeat at the end of the film as the *porteños* depart Uruguay, at which point Álvaro's mother will share his consternation. Once the visitors meet up with Suli, the adults begin a clipped dialogue, with the eerie music and their footsteps filling the aural space. They are alarmed that Suli has yet to discuss with her husband the possibility of Alex pursuing further medical treatment. Although Álvaro is not privy to this conversation, the extradiegetic music reminds us of Álvaro's wary expression and provides continuity between previous shots focalized on him and this one, where he is nowhere to see or be seen. The ominous tone continues to re-percuss markers of Álvaro's subjectivity.



Figure 2. Extradiegetic music echoes Álvaro's expression, not his mother's.

A wide-angle shot with an extensive depth of field reveals a long, paved road cutting through miles of undeveloped coastline. After a brief ellipsis, a medium shot shows Álvaro closing the gate to private property, presumably after having opened it to allow their cars to pass through. According to a weathered sign that reads in red, capital letters "PROHIBIDO PASAR," they have crossed a forbidden threshold (*XXY* 00:05:32). The symbolism of that sign is perhaps too easy to overstate, but for the purposes of this study on focalization and intersubjective intersexuality, it bears pointing out the all too clear meaning of this "no trespassing" sign: this is a private space, one that Álvaro lets us into.

The next shot focalizes Álvaro's view of the home from back within the car, the camera taking on the shaky perspective of someone in a moving vehicle. That is, through Álvaro's eyes, we see Alex's home for the first time. The house is nestled behind a multitude of broken trees, one of the film's many images of mutilation (Estrada-López 433). The extradiegetic music comes to a dramatic crescendo before stopping abruptly, just as we cut to an extreme close-up of Alex's profile, illuminated by Puenzo's characteristically cool, lateral lighting (*XXY* 05:05:45). She is perched underneath the steps to the front porch of the family home, a position Margaret Frohlich rightly characterizes as liminal: "(S)he occupies a queer position in relation to the domestic space of the family home, in close proximity to, but not fully a part of, the traditional family paradigm" (163). Now from Alex's queered vantage point, a tightly framed, eye-level shot shows the *porteños'* car arriving and parking. After Álvaro has made his way up the porch steps, a low-angled shot, narrowly framed by the floorboards

of the deck, shows only Álvaro's face, which looks back (and down) in a subjective shot of Álex's tightly framed eyes (Figure 3). Indeed, Álvaro is the only one to have noticed her there. The ensuing shot-reverse-shot sequence formally fulfills a syntactic function of narrative proximity while also effecting a semantic function of intersubjectivity (*XXY* 00:06:17), ultimately conveying what Ernesto Javier Martínez has referred to in other works as the "muted sociality of queerness" (229). In the absence of other relational possibilities, this silent exchange depicts the first moments of their mutual interest in one another.



Figure 3. A quiet exchange of glances.

As Álvaro is ushered into the house, a now highly recognizable POV sequence launches with a shot of Álvaro looking around, followed by a slow pan across a set of framed photographs. The same photo he saw in Ramiro's files sits framed next to a few others of Álex. Our perspective of the house remains limited and aligned with Álvaro's. Next, we see a shot or two of other areas of the house, with the camera remaining tight on Álvaro all the while. A close-up shot of Álvaro's hand pushing open a squeaky door is a visual echo of Álex's outstretched hand in a photo just a few shots prior (Figures 4 and 5). Individually, these shots communicate reaching out; processed together, they are reciprocated actions foreshadowing the intimacy to come (*XXY* 00:06:37, 00:06:48).<sup>35</sup>



Figures 4 and 5. Sutured shots of reaching out.

Indeed, the door Álvaro opens leads right into Álex's bedroom, a space that functions as a proxy for Álex's body (Castillo 164). A close-up shot frames his face as he steps into the room and scans it, the camera again following his approximate line of sight. The camera momentarily pauses on a shot of three dolls: the first features added appendages to mimic breasts and a penis; the second sits in a jar, like a specimen of anatomical study; the third has shorn blond hair with the letters A-L-E-X written in white across its chest (*XXY* 00:06:54). These none-too-subtle visual referents to genderqueer bodies set up Álex's bedroom as a place of gender and sexual ambiguity, of alternative anatomies. The scene's analytic editing – a style which divides the dramatic space into various shots, leaving the spectator to imagine the totality of the space – limits spectator acclimation to the set while making Álvaro a privileged witness to one of the most suggestive profilmic spaces in all of *XXY*.<sup>16</sup>

In the last scene of the sequence, Álvaro enters an adjacent room, stands in front of a dimly lit mirror, and looks down to ponder a picture placed in the bottom right corner (Figure 6).<sup>17</sup> A cut-in of the picture shows a naked, young girl with her back to the camera (*XXY* 00:07:04). In one quick and seamless movement, the camera tilts from this image of Álex up to Álvaro's reflection, another element of the film's form that enacts both a syntactic and semantic cohesion between the two. (This nude photo of Álex foreshadows a later sequence in which Álvaro watches her as she stands naked before a mirror, her back to Álvaro/the camera. Whereas we see Álvaro's reflection in this earlier scene, in the later scene Álex's reflection fills the frame. I interpret both as instances of coming to know oneself in relation to intersexuality.) Álvaro's eyes and hands take hold of one of Álex's many pill containers, and Suli explains that it is a homeopathic remedy for people who fear getting hurt. The explanation causes him alarm, as if he, too, harbors this concern. The sequence ends there, with a conspicuous cut back

to Álex, still crouched under the floorboards of the front porch. This transition from feared harm to hiding hammers home what will become the film's main through line: the fraught emergence of a once isolated child into the sociality of her community.



Figure 6. Reframing intersexuality via Álvaro's reflection.

As a detailed analysis of this early sequence demonstrates, the film's formal features such as extradiegetic sound, camera movements, and analytic editing lay the foundation for perspectival patterns that filter the audience's perception through Álvaro's. If disidentification is "identifying with a difference," and if Alvaro is the conduit through whom the spectator disidentifies with Álex, these formal features increase the likelihood that the spectator identifies with Alvaro's point of view rather than, say, his homophobic father's. And for those spectators already predisposed to see Álex as a relatable human (rather than as a curiosity), the camerawork and focalization techniques reinforce an empathetic viewing practice. My focus here has been on the act of "looking" as a gesture that both consumes visual information (as in, "Why are you looking *at me?*") and communicates a particular kind of perception (as in, "Why are you looking at me *like that?*"). There is a lot at stake in the quantity and quality of the attention that the focalizing character funnels toward the intersex subject, for their gaze and sonic perspective frame how the audience, too, perceives the intersex subject. It is difficult to overstate the damage already done to underrepresented, minoritized subjects when their stories have been appropriated and misrepresented in film and other media, and the call for counternarratives *from the perspectives of these constituencies* should and

has resonated loudly. Thus, one could say that Puenzo has taken some risks by not privileging Álex's perspective over that of other focalizing characters in the film. For the study of focalization strategies to be a viable means of recognizing intersex subjectivities, the audiovisual components of subjective sequences must recognize the fellow subjectivity of the intersex character rather than objectify them further. At the core of what Jane Stadler calls "the ethical importance of attention" is engaging with another's subjectivity in such a way as to make it visible and sharable with the audience (206). This sort of "attentive engagement" allows for a confederation of character subjectivities that coalesce on screen, even though they never completely or perfectly align (212). My analysis of intersubjective intersexuality highlights moments in which these brief connections emerge, but just as Álvaro never comes to know Álex fully, nor does the spectator. The assumption that intersexuality is somehow unintelligible is clearly interphobic, but so too is expecting one of cinema's only intersex protagonists to be served in perfectly bite-sized portions to the film consumer. The film does not (nor could) enclose intersexuality; instead, *XXY* particularizes it in the case of one sometimes hard-to-reach character and mediates her experience of intersexuality through multiple intersubjective encounters.

*XXY* emphasizes that the meaning of intersexuality is contingent on the links between people, even when individuals are still unaware of the connections that bind them together. The pairing of Álex with her new mate, Álvaro, portrays intersexuality as more than mere anatomy; it is also the cause of fleeting modes of intimacy and mutual forms of recognition. The intersubjective relation between characters is one of both seeing and being seen, and in film it offers spectators insight into other perspectives (Stadler 222). The epistemology of intersubjectivity is often contrasted with more solipsistic constructions of meaning. Here, however, I began by studying one individual's experience (Álvaro's) to analyze the intersubjectivity between two individuals; hence, we arrive at a construction of meaning – of intersexuality – that is filtered primarily through the experiences of one (non-intersex identified) subject. Such orientation through Álvaro creates an intersubjective, or shared, expression *and* perception of intersexuality. As a result, Álvaro helps frame and interpolate Álex's intersexuality in a way that makes intersexuality relational rather than isolated. Furthermore, the consistent recourse to subjective and semi-subjective camera perspectives attributed to Álvaro distributes the burden of representing a queered and intersexed desire.

Upon reflection, it is quite fitting that Álvaro is the one who opens and closes the gates to the family's private Uruguayan compound at the beginning and again at the end of the film, because the intimacy he shares with Álex opens the door for both of their sexual awakenings. Their intimacy serves as the catalyst for re-writing Álex's body narrative from one of "pre-op" body to one of defiantly perfect and pleasurable "as is." No corrective surgery needed. Puenzo's decision to forego a climatic surgical scene and subsequent transformative denouement potentiates a different sort of climax (Viera Cherro 357). Formally, Álvaro's character is a prism through which the audience sees Álex's intersexuality, contemplates her desirability, and allows her to penetrate – both figuratively and literally.

By the end, we see Álex as the ultimate gestalt: someone who forms a specific whole incapable of perception simply in terms of her parts, especially those kept always outside of the frame. In their final goodbye, Álex offers Álvaro a first and last look at her genitalia. The camera fixates on Álvaro's hesitation, ultimately capturing only the vertical movement of his eyes (*XXY* 01:22:50). What matters most is *how* rather than *if* Álvaro looks, for the concerned, hesitant expression on his face communicates a respectful reticence and tender willingness to see. This small gesture is an apt one for synthesizing Puenzo's invitation to participate in the perceptual construction of intersexuality. We see and disidentify by proxy.

*Vanderbilt University*

#### NOTES

- 1 My analysis of another Argentine film featuring an intersex protagonist, *El último verano de la Boyita* (Solomonoff 2009), similarly examines how formal cinematic techniques disrupt clinical perspectives, though through juvenile and specifically rural ways of coming to recognize intersexuality. Solomonoff's naturalist camerawork creates a perspectival normalcy that protects privacy, whereas Puenzo's more stylized focalization makes intersexuality relational through shared subjectivity (A. Castillo).
- 2 Saidiya Hartman's theorization of "blackness" as relational has informed my framing of intersexuality here (56). Like blackness, intersexuality is an embodied, sociocultural experience.
- 3 My argument about an intersexualized cinematic experience draws inspiration from Jack Halberstam's work on "the transgender look," which "opens the door to a nonfetishistic mode of seeing the transgender body – a mode that

- looks with, rather than at, the transgender body” and is “a result of intimate bonds and queer, interactive modes of recognition” (92).
- 4 Despite valid observations regarding the limitations of the term “third-person,” I use it as a rough placeholder to differentiate between the relative levels of a narrator’s presence or absence in the narrative. For an extensive study of levels of narration, see Nieragden.
- 5 Zamostny makes references to “visual motives” and “perspectives adopted by the camera” but without analyzing these thoroughly. An analysis of sound is also beyond the scope of his work.
- 6 “Vernacular queerness” is a term coined by Brett Farmer in the context of queer Thai cinema, and he adapted the phrase from Miriam Hansen’s “vernacular modernism.” If vernacular modernism is the capacity of film to show audiences what the modern looks and feels like, vernacular queerness is “a translation of the abstract discourses of sexual modernity into accessible and legible form” (Farmer 85).
- 7 These compelling arguments, however, are only briefly developed in Martin’s piece, whose focus is the film’s recourse to animality as a means of going beyond the human in the portrayal of alternative developmental narratives. As such, here she makes only the briefest references to the audiovisual components of *XXY*, which I will take up and at times dispute.
- 8 Shaw’s conclusions pertain more to the realm of affect response than to the domain of identification, per se. She argues that the film produces a queer gaze that encourages empathy, but not pity, for Álex.
- 9 Critics have variously labeled Juan trans and intersex. Frohlich provides a nuanced justification of the latter: “When Kraken asks Juan if he had always known that he was not a woman, Juan does not reply strongly in the affirmative ... Instead, he says that he still asks himself what his life would have been like if he had not been operated on as a child, returning to his preoperative intersex body when prompted to reflect on his identity” (165).
- 10 The first word pronounced in the film, “hembra,” emerges from Kraken’s mouth as he and an assistant use a knife to remove a sea turtle’s shell during an autopsy (*XXY* 00:03:34).
- 11 See Monteiro and Nardi, and Gleghorn.
- 12 Muñoz’s now classic example is a young James Baldwin cross-identifying with the white movie star Bette Davis’s “freakish beauty,” which Baldwin describes in *The Devil Finds Work* (18).
- 13 Álex’s refusal to pay is a compelling example of what Rosalind Galt identifies as “default cinema” in Argentine film, “in which the radical refusal to pay intersects with the queer refusal to signify” (62).
- 14 For further analysis of the tag, see Frohlich (167–68) and Olivera (210–11).

- 15 Martin references the same picture depicting Álex's outstretched hand to argue that Álvaro's privileged investigative gaze is "insufficient," distanced from power (39); however, when one considers editing technique in addition to the qualities of the film's *mise-en-scène*, the suturing of the two frames together reveals a different set of semantics.
- 16 Later in the film, Álvaro will re-enter this room and bear witness to Álex's ambiguously sexed, self-expression through art. The cinematography, editing, *mise-en-scène*, and sound of the second sequence duplicate the patterns of the first. Zamostny points to Álvaro's second exploration as evidence of a change in Álvaro's objectives: "to comprehend her feelings" rather "to determine what is 'wrong' with Álex" (200). I find this claim unsubstantiated by the film's aesthetic patterns, which remain unchanged, and further undermined by the consistency of Álvaro's gentle curiosity in Álex from their very first encounter.
- 17 Estrada-López (424-28), Castillo (163-64, 167), and Olivera provide incisive analyses of the mirror motif in *XXY*, though not in the context of intersubjectivity.

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