

*Making intersexuality visible through the circulation of Lucia Puenzo's XXY**

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Hence, the strange, the incoherent, that which falls 'outside,' gives us a way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorizations as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently.
Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.149

I was especially interested in the dilemma of inevitable choice: not only having to choose between being a man or a woman, but also having to choose between that binary decision, or intersex as an identity and not as a place of mere passage.
Lucia Puenzo, *XXY Press-Kit*, p.3

Abstract: This article looks at how the film XXY (Lucía Puenzo, 2007) makes intersexuality visible and transmits to the public identities that question the binaries man-woman and homo-hetero by means of its circulation. By acknowledging the challenges of assessing the film's sociological impact without carrying out audience research, this is a study that analyses the importance of the film's form in normalising intersexuality as well as its effect in helping the film circulate across various film festivals. Since film exhibition and circulation are emerging academic fields, this research also needs to look at unconventional sources in order to argue that the film's circulation enables it to be discussed across multiple platforms and to different audiences. By considering the film's funding, this article argues that film festivals are platforms which allow films to obtain distribution agreements, and therefore increase their exhibition windows, and also have an important and often unacknowledged role in promoting progressive thinking into society. The article ends by examining how through fiction

discourses normally restricted to the academic and medical fields can be mediated to general audiences as exemplified by XXY. In addition, the film's availability under different genre categories makes it accessible to diverse audiences

Keywords: intersexuality, XXY, film festivals, film exhibition and circulation, film genre, medical discourse, Lucia Puenzo.

XXY de Lucía Puenzo: visibilizando la intersexualidad a través de la circulación cinematográfica

Resumen: Este artículo aborda el modo en el que a través de la divulgación de la película XXY (Lucía Puenzo, 2007) se visibiliza la intersexualidad y se transmiten identidades que cuestionan los binomios hombre-mujer y homo-hetero. Reconociendo el desafío que supone determinar el impacto que tiene la película sin realizar un sondeo de opiniones, se analiza también el papel del género cinematográfico a la hora de normalizar la intersexualidad y facilitar que XXY

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viaje a distintos festivales de cine. Dado que la exhibición cinematográfica es un campo académico emergente, esta investigación bebe de fuentes no convencionales con el fin de demostrar que la divulgación del filme posibilita que XXY genere debate a través de múltiples ventanas y hacia diferentes públicos. Asimismo, este artículo pretende mostrar que los festivales de cine no son solamente plataformas para la obtención de acuerdos de distribución y, por tanto, exhibición género cinematográfico, discurso médico, Lucia Puenzo.

Introduction

Despite efforts to change the terminology by many LGBTIQ activists, 'hermaphrodite' is still the most heard word to refer to intersex people. As often occurs, the cultural and ideological inscriptions in language are underplayed by the media and public discourse. But, as Charlotte E. Gleghorn notes, to see hermaphrodite and intersex as interchangeable not only implies being oblivious to the wide range of alternative configurations a body can have but also keeps intersex people in the realm of the myth, in the otherness (2011, p.152). What this tells us is that we still find it difficult to think beyond the binary, to envision that an intersex person does not have two sexes but one, and that this might be neither female nor male.

Our human need for categorizing reflects structures of power. Any attempt to either change the language of gender or include new categories that respond to people's various senses of being is seen under suspicion. The 'ambiguous' intersexed body forces us to question what is that makes our bodies normal or as Butler puts it "exposes and refutes the regulative strategies of sexual categorization" (2006, p.130). The intersexed body demands that we rethink the binary as the norm and calls for a third sex and gender category. But this is problematic not only because of our inability to break through this sexual dimorphism but also because as Gilbert Herdt notes in *Third Sex, Third Gender* if we are to talk about the multiplicity of bodies three categories could be

cinematográfica, sino que también se ocupan de promover ideas progresistas. El artículo termina examinando cómo la ficción es capaz de democratizar discursos que suelen estar restringidos a los ámbitos científico y académico, tal y como ejemplifica XXY; su disponibilidad bajo diferentes categorías genéricas hace que ésta pueda ser vista por diferentes públicos.

Palabras claves: intersexualidad, XXY, festivales de cine, distribución y exhibición cinematográfica, seen as restrictive as two. He then argues that a third category disrupts the conflictive relationship that a dyad creates (1994, p.19).

Since 2003 Australians can choose between male, female and X on official forms and in 2012 Argentina passed the Gender Identity Law which allows trans-people to be registered with the name and sex of their choice. This year, the Oxford English Dictionary added the word cisgender¹, thus acknowledging that the 'other' is not the only one who needs to be defined. Governments and institutions are gradually reflecting this paradigm shift in society in legislations and policies. However, this notion of a third sex and gender is still not as widely discussed in the public realm as it is in the medical and academic fields.

XXY (Lucia Puenzo, 2007) follows Alex, a 15-year-old intersex who lives with h/er parents in a remote house on the beach. H/er "condition" is kept secret until Alex tells h/er best friend. Meanwhile, Alex decides to stop taking the medication that inhibits h/er² masculinisation. For this reason, h/er mother decides to invite an old friend, her husband, a renowned surgeon, and their son to spend a few days with them. Despite its conventional narrative this is a groundbreaking film, it tackles intersexuality, a subject which is virtually invisible in society. The film hints at the reason of this: intersex new-borns have been traditionally registered as female or male and also undergo after-birth surgeries to remove their 'ambiguity', consequently reducing quite substantially the numbers of intersex people. *XXY*

¹ Term used to design a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds to his or her sex at birth (OED Online, 2006, n.p.).

² As Butler does in *Gender Trouble* I will use h/er as the possessive pronoun to refer to Alex throughout my essay.

does not attempt to speak for all the experiences of intersex people but it makes intersexuality visible and demands freedom of choice for those who identify as intersex.

Throughout this essay I will explore how this film contributes to making intersexuality visible in society. To do so I will look beyond the filmic text towards questions of circulation and reception to understand how questions of gender and identity are played out in wider public discourse. Firstly, I will analyse the role of film genre in marketing a film and, therefore, reaching the audience. Secondly, I will investigate how through film exhibition and circulation ideas arrive to the public. And, lastly, I will formulate the challenges of studying the impact of *XXY* in audiences.

Film genre and audience

XXY has been widely discussed in academia, its themes and symbols read through the theories of Butler, Foucault and others. The film also received great reviews, some reflecting ideas from film theorists, others criticizing the film's excessive symbolism³ while others pointing at the film's achievement in posing questions to the spectators⁴. Film criticism validates or disputes a film but it ultimately generates conversation around a text. These discussions carried out by either academics or journalists take place in specialised environments where people who have not encountered gender theories or are not cinephiles have limited access. To measure the impact of a film in a general audience is a difficult task but, perhaps, it is important to start by asking how the audience transforms the filmic text. Janet Harbord explains that marketing is one way of doing this. Since marketing addresses audiences it therefore impacts on the text to achieve this. Marketing also induces intertextuality around the film, through merchandise and different types of exhibition channels the filmic text is constantly transformed. Through these processes, "film emerges as a type of hypertext, narratively

³ "[The film's] only drawbacks are some clumsy symbolism and a slight tendency to be overly schematic" (Holland, 2007, p.26)

⁴ "Is the need to be sexually registered more important than accepting a life of ambiguity?" (Dale, 2008, n.p.)

linked in sequence yet offering tangential paths, alleyways and flights of passage that will suture back into the main narrative at any point" (2002, p.79). Film genre then emerges to give a solid centre to the hyper-text and to produce the marketing of a film as well.

XXY's relationship with genre is worth analysing. The film has been generally classified as a drama and the film's director Lucia Puenzo has repeatedly declared in interviews that this is ultimately a love story between two teenagers⁵. Taking into account that the film revolves around an intersex protagonist to describe the film as a 'love story' is another mechanism to normalise intersexuality and non-heteronormative sexual relationships. What Puenzo does is described as a strategy of "smaller production units with less secure access to exhibition [presenting] films in terms of genre to clarify its meaning" (Harbord, 2002, p.80). By labelling the film as a 'drama' or a 'love story' the film attracts a much varied audience than if it was narrowed down to LGBTIQ drama. The film's multivalent text is also reflected in its circulation around festivals; it was selected in both major festivals (Cannes, Toronto) and LGBTIQ festivals (Outfest, Frameline) among others.

This use of a film genre indicates a "more sophisticated knowledge of audiences, reflected in the multiple strategies of marketing a film at diverse audience strains" (Harbord, 2002, p.82) and also helps to instigate dialogues on intersexuality in the public sphere. This is also achieved by considering a wider definition of genre: fiction. Films that deal with this type of subject-matter are usually documentaries where factual evidence and testimonies give authentication to the film. However, documentaries are not as much seen as fiction features do and their exhibition windows are also fewer. Thus, even if a documentary is often produced to raise awareness on a certain topic unless it is made specifically for the TV its genre does not attract a general audience. To create a fiction with intersexuality at its centre does not only increase the film's circulation but

⁵ "My interest when I wrote this film was, above all, the relationship between Alex (the teenager) and Alvaro (her love interest)". (*XXY* Press-Kit, 2007, 3)

also gives visibility to intersex people, raise social awareness and potentially changes the way we look at gender and identity in society. Puenzo's relationship with fiction goes beyond filmmaking as she is a renowned writer and was included in *Granta's* Best Young Spanish-Language Novelists in 2010 (*Granta* 113). In the film's press kit Puenzo states:

When I began to write *XXY* I was surprised to see there are almost no stories on this subject, there's a strange cultural silence over it. If the subject is explored, it's in the language of testimony, of medical diagnosis, but with almost no fictions, as if the subject would be a taboo for any kind of poetry and fiction around it, as it was in ancient times (Press-Kit, 2007, p.3).

XXY is based on a short story called "Cinismo" by Sergio Bizzio which is situated in the realm of the myth with a protagonist that is a traditional hermaphrodite. Puenzo's reworking of the myth uses symbols and motifs, such as the monster, "to make social comment on the abuses committed against these invisible bodies" (Gleghorn, 2011, p.168). The narrative also makes use of the natural world where hermaphroditism and sex ambiguity are ubiquitous to challenge the entrenched assumption of the natural two sexes as, according to Butler, sex is as a constructed category as gender (2006, p.9).

But to understand *XXY's* circulation around the world we need to look at genre beyond the binary fiction documentary. The film can be seen as part of the so-called film festival genre which, again, resonates Janet Harbord's ideas around genre and marketing. In *South American Cinematic Culture: Policy, Production, Distribution and Exhibition* Miriam Ross explains that using film festival as a genre helps the global distribution of South American films since "marketing can put forward a certain genre of 'quality' that links films with diverse themes, character types and styles" (2010, pp.138-139). The film's presence at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007 where it won the Critics' Week Grand Prize and Golden Rail Award unleashed an incredible amount of press attention as well as invitations to other film festivals where it

kept picking up awards. *XXY* not only travelled from one festival to another but was extensively exhibited in cinemas in Argentina in June 2007 and Europe in 2008. The film was also pre-selected to represent Argentina in the Academy Awards. *XXY's* worldwide presence is very encouraging since a film of this nature normally passes unnoticed. This achievement has much to do with the role film festivals play in promoting nonconforming thinking.

Interceding intersexuality through film festivals

Even if it is not difficult to see why film festivals substantially increase a film's visibility, it is harder to pin down how a film's circulation in film festivals and other circuits can potentially influence public opinion on certain topics. By directing our attention to those places where the film was exhibited we can grasp the mechanisms that make films visible and accessible to audiences.

An analysis of the complex interactions of film festivals offers some explanation of how cultural meanings are created, mediated and transferred to the public. Film festivals, particularly major festivals like Cannes and Toronto, add cultural and economic value to films which then obtain more distribution agreements. It is also important to note that Lucia Puenzo received a grant from Cinefondation, a Cannes film festival residence programme which helps filmmakers complete their screenplays. *XXY* was also financed by state funds and private companies making the film a co-production between Argentina, Spain and France (Shaw, 2013, p.167). These funding bodies are determinant of a film's visibility. For example, the film's funding from the Spanish Ministry of Culture made it travel around the world through Cervantes Institutes as part of various programmes such as "Queer Lisboa" in Lisbon, "Argentinian cinema" in Tunisia, "Films made by women: New Perspectives" in Vienna, "Southwest. Gay and Lesbian Film Festival" in Albuquerque or retrospectives around the actor Ricardo Darin in New York and Munich (Cervantes Institutes).

The film's exhibition platforms are not reduced to film festivals, cultural institutions and cinemas.

XXY can currently be streamed from popular on-demand websites such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and iTunes as well as its distribution companies' websites such as Peccadillo (UK) and Film Movement (USA). The film is also available on YouTube and other channels of uncertain legality which also include a great amount of comment from Internet users. These internet sites provide audiences with democratic forums to share and discuss their views on the film, particularly in Latin American countries where films do not find the same type of distribution processes as in European or North American markets. Even though these platforms' impact cannot be easily measured and they are not included as authorised ways to evaluate audiences, they give people the opportunity to understand film collectively and horizontally (Ross, 2010, p.15).

All these distribution networks also "[facilitate the film's] availability for classroom use and therefore influences the agenda of film studies" (Zhang as cited by Stringer, 2001, p.135). The film was screened as part of a series of Research seminars at the University of Leeds in December 2014 which explored "the representation of intersexuality in Lucía Puenzo's *XXY* within the context of Latin American cinema and medicalized accounts of sexual identity" (Research Seminars, 2014). This takes us back to films being discussed by a group of experts, here, academia, but in other occasions, film critics.

Film festivals bring about a lot of press coverage which has a direct impact on the film's marketability. The film, already been given meaning by its selection in film festivals, is given more cultural value when a professional audience watches and reviews it. But journalism is not only a way to give credential to a film and increase its distribution chances, it is also "[t]he main mediating function of festivals to the general public" (Harbord, 2002, p.68). It is the media coverage of a film that helps *XXY*'s ideas enter public discourse at different times and in different places. This staggered exhibition process facilitates that conversations around intersexuality keep taking place in society. When

XXY was released in Spain in 2008, Puenzo said in an interview that throughout the production of the film, she counted on the support and help of intersex organisations (Garcia, 2008, para.6). Two years after, the film was aired on the Spanish National TV (RTVE) within a broadcast that exhibits and promotes Spanish and Latin American cinema and aims to be a meeting point between film professionals and the audience. After the film, the programme host, the director and the film's protagonist Ines Efron conversed about intersexuality and the difficulty of knowing the numbers of intersex people given the stigmatisation they suffer from a society unable to question the female-male binary. Puenzo also talked about the language employed by doctors, how the surgery suffered by intersex people is called normalisation and the ideology behind this word: intersex individuals might be given time but eventually will have to decide their sex assignment when, actually, there might be none to adopt. (RTVE, 2010). In a 2012 newspaper article on intersexuality, the film *XXY* is acknowledged as having taken a first step to lay on the table a still much unknown topic (Portalatin, 2012, para.1).

XXY exemplifies that film festivals are contact zones that allow South American films to interact with foreign production but also "[r]emain committed to a range of activities and purposes; in addition to marketing and evaluating film are the components of training, education and a commitment to cultural diversity" (Harbord, 2002, p.73). That a film with intersexuality in its centre received funding from film festivals and governments reflects the awareness of these to support narratives that challenge heteronormative discourses and their commitment to present them to the public.

Audience responses

XXY is an interesting example when it comes to study audience reception. Its film festival label attracts cinephile audiences and its symbolic text draws the attention of academics. But the film can be appreciated by audiences who are not familiar with gender theories since the

film follows a conventional narrative, “[with] melodramatic structures, an emphasis on the emotional world of the characters, a clear thesis, and an easy to read meaning” (Shaw, 2013, p.175). Audiences from anywhere in the world can relate to the characters and be enraged by the injustices that the protagonist suffers. XXY is considered an example of vernacular queerness where “[a]bstract discourses of sexual modernity [are translated] into accessible and legible form” (Farmer as cited by Shaw, 2013, p.176). Its poetic form and reluctance to be framed within activist discourses makes the spectator engage with the narrative in a deeper and long-lasting way.

The film generates debate in and out of the academic world. Some intersex organisations and geneticists have criticized the film for the inaccuracy of its title. But its audience awards at several LGBTIQ film festivals, among them Frameline in San Francisco, a city well-known for its LGBTIQ activism, not only support the argument that the film was well received among LGBTIQ audiences but also gave XXY credibility in its portrayal of an intersex individual. Mauro Cabral, an Argentine intersex activist, commented that the criticism the film received in terms of its medical inaccuracy reflects the general belief that our society needs to be “correctly” informed about intersexuality, that is, in scientific terms. Cabral says that XXY challenges this since intersexuality is presented as a different experience, not narrated in clinical way but through a poetical approach (Cabral, 2008, para.5). This is also expressed by Puenzo: “I didn’t want my film to become a medical case, a clinical case, almost a documentary. Even if the script had been supervised by doctors and geneticists, it was important to make them understand I was not looking for any medical realism” (Press-Kit, 2007, p.3).

XXY connects with global audiences because its storyline is not exclusive of Argentina or Uruguay where the action takes place. It also enables the audience to interact with the story through empathetic strategies but these, as

Deborah Shaw argues, do not allow us to take pity on Alex (2013, p.177). S/he is a defiant, fully-fledged character, who embodies the daily fight of the intersex individual. In this sense, the film can be considered an example of cosmopolitan cinema since it “challenges the assumption that suffering is unspeakable or unrepresentable [sic] by defying the silence and denial that are often associated with human rights abuses” (Rovisco, 2012, p.9).

Even if the film was positively received around the world, XXY has proved challenging to research in terms of audience response. By looking at XXY’s box office numbers we could infer that the film was more popular in certain countries than in others (BoxOfficeMojo, 2015). Film reviews do not reflect audience impressions since journalists normally attend press screenings which are restricted to the public. Interviews with Puenzo give us an insight of how XXY was received in different countries but these statements cannot be considered entirely trustworthy since they are personal opinions. Unless we carry out a focus group, attend every screening and interview the audience or read every comment on internet forums we cannot know how XXY was generally received. What we can do is to explore the film’s written reception and circulation to see if the film “draws attention to the goals of intersex activism and [contests] excessively optimistic visions of social progress” (Zamostny, 2012, p.193).

Conclusion

Despite the attention received since it was first shown in Cannes, XXY is not particularly popular, even among cinephiles. The reasons for this could be many: the festival and academic focus, the film’s nationality, the film’s subject matter. But by looking at the film’s funding and circulation we can observe that this film reflects shifting attitudes towards gender and identity in society which are also shared by the governments and funding bodies which supported the film financially. Intersex activists continue pushing to

get the rights to control their bodies and decide their identity. *XXY* emerges from this environment, in a country like Argentina which has unceasingly worked to ensure LGBTIQ rights. The film is not an activist call to arms but it shows intersexuality in an unprecedented way: not as exclusive content for clinical texts and as a narrative appealing for global audiences. In this sense the film contributes to the intersex activist cause as it provides a respectful representation of intersexuality and helps us reconsider our ideas around gender and identity. *XXY*'s accessibility across various exhibition windows and under different genre categories makes this text available to different types of audience. This facilitates that the film keeps being watched by many people and, hence, promoting the visibility of intersexuality in society and encouraging discussions around third sex and gender. By exploring the film's circulation and exhibition we can observe the complex interactions that take place between the filmic text and the audience and affirm that film festivals help propelling non-heteronormative ideas onto society.

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