

EMBODIMENTS OF EVIL

GENDER

AND

SEXUALITY

IN

LATIN

AMERICAN

HORROR

CINEMA

GUSTAVO SUBERO



Gender and Sexuality in Latin American Horror Cinema

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To my husband, Imi, for all his love and support during the making of this project (and the many 'horror' nightmares he had to put up with).

PREFACE

SANTA SANGRE AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN LATIN AMERICAN HORROR CINEMA

I had my first taste of Latin American horror cinema at the age of 16 when I, inadvertently, attended a screening of Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Santa Sangre* (1989) at the university's film club. I found the film both shocking and, at the same time, revelatory. Not only did it provide the sufficient gore fest expected from a horror film of this nature, it also challenged and questioned many of the ideas that I considered to be paramount in the construction of gender and sexual identity circulating in the Latin American popular cultural imaginary. Sexual practices, gender performativity, templates of socio-sexual behaviour, regional and national politics, religion, idiosyncratic aspects of society—Jodorowsky does not leave a stone unturned in this Oedipal and surreal nightmare. Unsurprisingly, Bill Gibron (2011) has commented for *PopMatters* that the film is 'like a diabolical combination of Dario Argento, José Mojica Marins, and Federico Fellini (with just a smidgen of David Lynch tossed in for fever dream measure), he [Jodorowsky] transports hot button issues like religion and regional politics into a potent optical stew of suggestion and symbolism'. Over the years, and while thinking about and planning the inception of this project, I could not get this film out of my head, as it seemed to encapsulate perfectly most of the issues surrounding sexual and gender identities, gendered bodies and socio-sexual paradigms that preoccupy my research and this book in general.

At a time when most cinematic horror texts had traditionally been regarded as vehicles to explore the cultural anxieties of patriarchal control, *Santa Sangre* challenged traditional ways of watching (and reading) the horror genre. As will be clear in the following pages, this book engages with the horror genre in ways that invite the reader, as well as the imaginary film audience, to question the fixity of gender identity and of traditional male and female socio-sexual roles. Of Jodorowsky's film, in much the same way as the rest of the films analysed in this book, it could be said, as Christian Metz has famously theorised in relation to film and psychoanalysis, that

the imaginary, opposed to the symbolic but constantly imbricated with it, designates the basic lure of the ego, the definite imprint of a stage *before* the Oedipus complex (which also continues after it), the durable mark of the mirror which alienates man in his own reflection and makes him the double of his double, the subterranean persistence of the exclusive relation to the mother, desire as a pure effect of lack and endless pursuit, the initial core of the unconscious (primal repression). (1982: 4, italics in original)

Thus the film shows the fissures existing within the system of gender identity and sexual orientation that circulates in the Latin American popular imaginary. These fissures were traditionally reinforced by popular cinema, as well as by those cinematic texts that came out of the New Latin American Cinema wave, whereby gender and sexuality had been regarded as fixed and immutable elements within the patriarchal system prevalent in such societies.

What *Santa Sangre* and most of the films analysed in this book demonstrate is that the horror genre becomes an excellent vehicle to channel alternative readings of gender and sexuality through the figure of the monster. The monster operates as the ultimate culturally and sexually ambiguous figure whose presence in the narrative may offer scenarios of female or queer empowerment. Through multiple scenarios in which the threat of castration is played out within the narrative (in ways that defy machismo within the patriarchal system), the process of acting out sexual anxieties is achieved through the victim's sympathetic look at the monster or identification with the monster itself. However, the main goal of this book is to move away from the masochistic/empathetic or sadistic/voyeuristic identification on the part of spectators (regarded by many theorists as an abstract group) and to engage more with the way in which horror cinema

in Latin America provides new avenues to map out the changes in the politics of gender and sexuality as experienced in popular culture. Therefore, my application of the psychoanalytical model, as an effective strategy to read these texts, seeks to challenge the representation of gender and sexuality whereby, as Richard Nowell suggests, these ‘were formulaic, excessively violent exploitation films that were fashioned to satisfy the misogynist fantasies of male visitors to grind-houses and fleapits’ (2010: 4). Thus I have chosen to be slightly unorthodox and in lieu of an introduction, I will provide an overview of key terminology and issues that will be explored in this book through a close analysis of the main themes and notions of gender and sexuality that can be found in *Santa Sangre* as a seminal film of the Latin American horror canon.

Santa Sangre tells the story of Fenix (Axel Jodorowsky), a young man confined in a mental institution who escapes in order to begin a life of murderous crime acting under his mother’s influence. Through a flashback sequence the audience learns how he was left heavily traumatised as a child (at a time when he and his family were circus performers), when he witnessed his father, in a fit of mad rage, severing Fenix’s mother’s arms and then killing himself. In the present time of the narrative, after escaping from the asylum, Fenix is reunited with his mother and then forced against his will to function, literally, as her own arms. And so the two begin a ram-paging campaign of murder and revenge.

The film criticises many aspects of the deculturation of Mexican culture, as well as the problems emerging in the US–Mexican border culture. Yet its clearest message (and plot device) is the revisiting and challenging of assumed socio-cultural templates of sexuality and gender as they operate in the Latin American milieu. Furthermore, for the impressionable 16-year-old teenager I was, it was the queering of the main male protagonist and the queering of culture at large that became particularly poignant throughout the film. *Santa Sangre* turned on its head notions of sex, sexual identity and gender (especially ideas of machismo, marianismo¹ and to a large extent queer desire) as they circulate in the mainstream of

¹According to Evelyn Stevens (1973), marianismo constitutes the organising tenet of female identity within the Latin American milieu. It is an ideology that regulates and drives all female behaviour in the Latin American social imaginary. It has its origin in the legacies of the Catholic Church whereby women are regarded as subservient and docile based on the assumption that their behaviour should emulate that of the Virgin Mary (see also Collier 1986). However, marianismo does not constitute an opposing force to machismo and instead runs parallel to it as a complementary element of macho ideology that helps sustain

Latin American culture. It is a film that, as Anton Bitel (2012) suggests in his review of the film for *Little White Lies*,

grabs viewers by their metaphorical balls with its sheer creative excess. Part circus carnival, part Oedipal nightmare, part gnostic allegory of self-discovery, part Buñuelian pantomime, part psychothriller, part satire on church hypocrisy and colonial predation, *Santa Sangre* is a magical realist poem written in blood and set to a Latin beat, full of bold colours and grand gestures.

In contrast to typical, classic horror narratives of the 1980s and 1990s (mainly those originating from the United States), in which the emphasis is on random serial killings of teenagers and young adults (in various states of undress or at different stages of the sex act), gruesome and graphic depictions of bodies being slashed open with phallic weaponry and a fixation with psychotic male killers, *Santa Sangre* breaks away from the motives and tropes of such slasher-and-splatter films by offering a story in which all the monstrous characters and the horrific situations emerge from a world of sexual abjection. In the classic horror narrative, abjection interferes with normativity. The abject monstrous subject (be it a monster or a living corpse) disrupts normative binaries and operates in an interstitial space between the living and the dead. Abjection embraces ambiguity at its core and, as Julia Kristeva has famously theorised,

we may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship. (1982: 9–10)

However, it could be argued that Jodorowsky does away with this division between the normative and the abject and creates a world in which all characters and situations operate at a seemingly border-free symbolic level. In other words, the film reifies the erasure of the border between those symbolic orders that separate the monstrous and the human, the natural and the supernatural, normal from deviant sexual desire, as well as nor-

the patriarchal values rooted in Latin American culture (a more in-depth analysis of marianismo will be provided in Chap. 1).

mal and abnormal gender roles. Classic horror narratives are built on the marked difference between normativity and abjection. By the same token, many a storyline centres on some sort of monster disrupting normativity by murdering or annihilating ‘normal’ people, and thus breaking the status quo of heteronormative society. However, *Santa Sangre* disrupts this narrative continuum, and the director achieves this by fetishising and othering all the characters in the film and eliminating any vestiges of normativity from the main story. Jodorowsky’s *Santa Sangre* presents a dystopian world in which social and sexual norms have been eroded as the regulatory forces that control and shape socio-sexual relations among individuals. Thus the film’s resolution will not ultimately involve a return to normativity because such regulatory forces, this version of reality, have never existed in the film.

Furthermore, those areas of society regulating normativity—that is, law and religion—are also presented as abject territories within the narrative. The monstrous abject body is represented as a body without a soul and, as such, it represents the antithesis of the spiritual, while it contravenes the religious symbolic. The body of Fenix’s mother Concha (Blanca Guerra) hyperbolically epitomises abjection not only due to the character’s monstrous feminine condition, but also by the fact that it is othered through her limbless state. The flashback sequence clearly points to the way in which ‘becoming abject’ is at the core of the narrative, as it will be the root of Fenix’s Oedipal complex and the root of his own queer male identity. After parading across town to promote the arrival of the circus, the action moves to life inside the tent and how the Tattooed Woman (Thelma Tixou) is forcing her daughter Alma (Faviola Elenka Tapia) to walk across a flaming rope. The daughter’s mime-painted face is framed in a close-up showing fear and anguish. This image operates in stark contrast to the mother, framed in long and medium long shots of her exuberantly gowned body, as she screams and yells at her daughter; meanwhile, a young Fenix watches this unfold from a hideaway. The scene is interrupted by the appearance of Fenix’s father, Orgo (Guy Stockwell). The moment the Tattooed Woman sees him, she proceeds to disrobe; a long shot of her body shows her wearing nothing but a very suggestive bikini, her scintillating and curvaceous body covered entirely in tattoos. The two begin to flirt rather obscenely and then Orgo asks her to stand against a wall, as he starts to throw knives at her. Every time a knife lands near her body she takes the opportunity to caress or lick the blade seductively, highlighted by

close-ups and extreme close-ups, in what is obviously part of their process of courtship.

Fenix watches in a mixture of dismay and envy at the macho power emanating from his father and the way he manages to seduce a woman whose identity clearly falls outside prescribed marianismo. The Tattooed Woman's anti-mariana identity is hyperbolically depicted on her own body, as her tattoos of snakes and other exotic animals make a clear reference to the Garden of Eden. Her brightly coloured green tattoos depict wild plants and flowers and wild animals, and the snake and apple clearly represent her as a sexual temptress. Her tattooed body operates as a visually economic sign of abjection since, as Kristeva has already theorised, 'abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it' (1982: 4). The tattoos operate at the level of the symbolic, as markers of a type of femininity that is transgressive and that operates outside prescribed normativity. Her voluptuous body, her voluminous red and curly hair, are explicit signs of a subversive ownership of desire that departs from any mariana identity.

The Tattooed Woman's body breaches and undermines cultural constructions of femininity by externalising the sexualisation of her own identity in ways that oppose the ideals of virginity and purity that are promoted through mariana identity. Via her tattoos the film essentially commodifies her body (and identity) as she breaks the symbolic challenge by an overt and direct form of domination. Furthermore, her tattooed body is inscribed in phallic dominance because she becomes objectified by the mere act of being inked. The penetration and permanence of the ink in her body carry an allegorical and material immediacy that is unachievable in other forms of identity manifestations. Arguably, her tattoos posit her as a degraded, criminal and marginal subject when compared to the normative femininity embodied through Concha's body. This is achieved in the film by the contrasting and challenging of opposing versions of femininity as understood in popular culture.

While the flirting continues between Orgo and his mistress, the narrative cuts to Concha, who is trying to impede the local authorities from pulling down the building in which her church congregates. After she fails to stop the destruction of the church, she returns to the circus to find the Tattooed Woman practising fellatio on one of Orgo's knives. In an attack of rage and jealousy, Concha quickly takes a knife out of Orgo's hand and threatens the woman with it. The contrast between the two female

characters, and the types of femininities they purport, could not be more startling: Concha is dressed in what appears to be a red, long-sleeved religious gown that covers her entire body, while the other woman is practically semi-naked. Concha comes to represent an exaggerated version of *marianismo* characterised by, as Evelyn Stevens notes, a ‘cult of feminine spiritual superiority, which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men’ (1973: 91). However, such characteristics must be played down in order to appease men and to guarantee peace and harmony within the household and society at large.

This is clearly evident in this sequence of the film when, after threatening the Tattooed Woman, Concha points the knife at Orgo. Despite the imminent danger, he looks at her defiantly, framed by a low-angle close-up, as he knows that she will not carry out her threat. The film then switches to an over-the-shoulder take, with the camera placed behind Orgo, in which only Concha’s eyes can be seen as she then submits to Orgo’s embrace and power of seduction. A medium shot then shows her temporarily submitting to him and, as he walks away from her while slowly and seductively undressing, she cannot resist his macho magnetism and ends up jumping on him and allowing him to carry her on his back. Concha’s submission to her husband’s macho attitude and his *machismo* reinforces the findings of Miguel A. de la Torre, who argues that ‘*marianismo* encourages domination, aggressiveness, and a “cult of virility” that reinforces a *machista* culture detrimental to all women’ (2009: 348). Thus this sequence suggests that regardless of the type of femininity that female subjects embrace, they have no control over their own socio-sexual persona as they submit to the hypermasculine whims and desires of the macho.

Despite the beginning of the flashback sequence operating as part of a pro-*machista* discourse by depicting Orgo as a hypermacho figure within the narrative, Jodorowsky wastes no time in also disavowing the notion of *machismo* by highlighting the failures of macho identity and the social and cultural shortcomings encountered by those who embrace this type of masculinity. Orgo clearly regards *machismo* as the driving force for his male anxieties and the way to externalise his own male identity; or, as David Sequeira suggests, ‘the concept of “*machismo*” encompasses this ideal, in which men are viewed as virile, aggressive, and authoritarian’ (2009: 7). The character is clearly depicted as a caricature of hypermasculinity, as he wanders around the circus dressed in his expanded tamer outfit, which barely contains his fat belly and shows a deep V-neck that reifies his status as an ‘*hombre de pelo en pecho*’. It is no coincidence that the director

depicts this embodiment of machismo through a rather grotesque body in order to highlight the incongruences and contradictions of this retrograde template of masculinity. Orgo clearly objectifies women around him and regards them as disposable items whose jobs are the provision of nurture and/or sexual favours. He is the type of macho subject who, as Stevens points out, shows 'exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male interpersonal relationships and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships' (1973: 90).

However, the film also suggests from the very beginning of the story that the artificiality of masculinity and the constructedness of machismo are a template for male sexuality. For instance, Orgo is repeatedly shown heavily drunk in ways that suggest that his machismo, as a sexual fabrication rather than a natural manifestation of his felt sexual identity, needs to be fuelled by alcohol in order to be fully achieved or embodied. In other words, drunkenness plays an important role in the assumption and manifestation of macho behaviour and corroborates the idea that, as John M. Ingham suggests, it 'may also promote reproduction to the degree that it lowers sexual inhibitions and emboldens husbands to make sexual demands of their wives, despite the customary restrictions on sexual behaviour' (1986: 68). Perhaps it is the rather melancholic depiction of machismo that Orgo's character portrays that leads audiences to believe that machismo is the configuration of generic practices that adhere to the principles of patriarchy, guaranteeing the power of men and the subordination of women.

The film rapidly dispels the seemingly unproblematic nature of machismo as an intrinsic manifestation of Latin American masculinity. This is evidenced within the story when, later in the film and as Concha performs her own circus act (doing acrobatics while hanging from her hair), she sees Orgo flirting once again with the Tattooed Woman. Through a point-of-view shot from a very high angle—taking Concha's viewpoint from the top of the circus tent—she witnesses the two lovers as they dance, kiss and make their way out of the main tent. Realising what is happening, Concha screams to be brought down. This scene becomes all the more poignant as it is framed through an extreme long shot with a very low angle of Concha hanging from the top of the tent. The camera work conveys in the character a sense of female hysteria, while it also reduces her to a caricature of womanliness. Once Concha has been brought back to the floor, she grabs Fenix by the arms, drags him all the way to their caravan and locks him in. She then goes after the lovers, to the place where the two are about to have sex.

Once she gets there, she grabs a bottle of acid from a cabinet outside the room and sneaks in as Orgo is about to penetrate his lover. Orgo's macho masculinity is stressed by the camera work through a crane-up, behind-the-head shot of him that comes to a stop above his head (although the very top of his head is still in view) and then switches to a long shot and tilted high angle of the Tattooed Woman with her legs wide open, both pulled all the way to her sides, as she offers herself for the taking. The camera moves to a medium shot from behind her and shows Orgo ripping off her bikini and about to penetrate her. However, in a rather Samsonian turn of events, Concha approaches from behind him and tries to hit him, yet in the process she ends up ripping off his wig, stressed through a medium close shot that takes her point of narrative view. Concha then throws acid all over her husband's genitals before lurching herself against her female rival. As the two women begin to fight, Orgo forcibly grabs Concha, shown in a tracking long shot, and takes her all the way to his Wheel of Death while she laughs hysterically. He places her against it, puts her arms on the sides, stressed at this point by medium close-ups, grabs a knife in each hand and severs her arms.

Orgo's actions clearly support the notion that 'machismo or masculinity is also said to be displayed not only by the man's sexuality, especially extramarital, and other activities that indicate phallic preoccupation, but by his control over the affairs of his family, especially his wife' (Sequeira 2009: 8). He is presented as a man who embodies all the negative aspects of machismo and who has no regard for anyone but himself. He seduces, dominates and coerces to the same degree and also feels sufficiently empowered to exercise physical violence over those who attempt to rebel against him. Concha's ultimate punishment is to have her arms cut off; in this manner, she becomes the ultimate castrated figure because she now embodies the lack (a point that will be discussed later).

Jodorowsky's version of machismo underscores a rather problematic correlation between the penis and the phallus at the hand of the macho subject. This is evidenced by the fact that Orgo's fate becomes a testament that in the popular imaginary, macho phallic investment can only be achieved through the handling and possession of the penis. Orgo's character could be said to operate as the 'representation of the power that seems to be available to men in social and political terms in a male-dominated culture' (Halberstam 1998: 355). However, this power will be short-lived, since the burning of his penis with acid will function as the mechanism whereby his phallic investment is disavowed within the nar-

rative. Although he ultimately punishes Concha for attempting to rebel against his machista domination, he quickly realises that his deformed and burnt penis can no longer generate social power and thus feels that he has lost phallic empowerment. As he stumbles from the place where he dismembered his wife, the camera shows him in a long shot while he walks past the young Alma, in clear pain and covering his bleeding penis with his hand. As he continues to walk the camera pans right and zooms into a medium shot while the song *La barca de Oro* can be heard in the background. The camera then swivels about 90° to end in a low-angle close-up of Orgo as he uses the knife to slit his own throat. The young Fenix witnesses the whole episode and screams from inside the caravan. At the level of the symbolic, Orgo's death could be said to operate as an explicit strategy for the visual dismantling of macho identity. Thus having the penis—that is, performing heterosexual masculinity in the form of extra-marital sex, as well as exercising excesses of power and oppression (in the microcosm of the circus) through violence—can no longer be regarded as the ultimate form of phallic empowerment.

The film disavows phallic power as an attribute of machismo that can and must be passed down through generations and that, although seemingly innate, must be activated while its loss is also vehemently feared. This can be noticed in the sequence after the death of the circus's elephant, when, following the funerary procession to get rid of the body, the young Fenix cries inconsolably by his father's side and is quickly told to 'Stop crying like a little girl. I'll give you something that'll make you a man.' The scene moves to Orgo taking the boy to a house, where he proceeds to undress the boy, sit him down and tie him to a chair. The camera switches to a medium close-up of Fenix's bare chest as his father stencils an eagle on it and then uses his own knife, accentuated by an extreme close-up of the blade coming out of an ink jar, to tattoo the boy's chest. The camera moves to a close-up of Fenix's face as he contorts and cries in pain. Once the tattoo is complete, Orgo takes the boy to a standing mirror and tells him 'There, now you're a man. Just like me', pointing to the very same tattoo on his own chest.

By tattooing the young Fenix, Orgo tries to perpetuate macho ideology in a historical continuum that will see this rite of passage as the entrance to both manhood and adulthood. The tattoo becomes a symbol that indicates power and dominance: a power signified by the eagle, an image that operates in the cultural imaginary as a signifier and embodiment of phallic power. Orgo utilises the tattoo as an instrument through which he can

simultaneously express, recreate and pass on an aspect of his own self, in other words his machismo, through a body technology. This idea chimes with the thinking of Karin Beeler, who argues that ‘the tattoo symbolizes a rite of passage, a way of marking a particular event in the narrative of life, an expression of defiance or resistance to authority’ (2005: 1). However, this notion is quickly disavowed as the director sets out to challenge patriarchal structures of male domination and, especially, machismo as an ideal and fixed template of male behaviour. Despite Orgo’s desire to encrypt Fenix with phallic symbolism so as to guarantee his alliance to macho ideology, the narrative very quickly portrays the adult Fenix in ways that would only fit within a queer macho identity. In fact, the adult Fenix will show an ironic sensibility that contradicts and challenges the hypermasculinist imagery that was inherited from his father as part of his own queer macho identity, and by doing so negates the oppressive masculinist nature of such signs. Or, as Richard Mohr argues in relation to gay art,

the masculine is eroticized, but not in a way that affirms the oppressive features of traditional masculine roles. The various roles’ iconographies undermine each other. In pinning these uniformly gendered but clashing images of himself, the fellow [gay macho] cannot plausibly be taken to assume the privileges of any—not even one—of the roles to which his adopted postures allude. (1992: 197)

Fenix’s queering occurs not only at the symbolic level, it also becomes part of the narrative itself, since the post-flashback storyline will revolve around the murders and monstrous acts he will commit when acting and operating as if he were Concha’s replacement limbs. In this light, the film clearly portrays Fenix in a very similar fashion to the monsters popularised by the type of horror cinema made on the fringes of Hollywood in the mid-twentieth century, such as George Waggner’s *The Wolf Man* (1941), Phil Tucker’s *Robot Monster* (1953), Terence Fisher’s *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), Joseph Green’s *The Brain That Wouldn’t Die* (1962) and, most famously, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), among others. Similarly to those monsters, Fenix’s horrific impulses seem to be driven—and diegetically justified—by sexual traumas and sexually deviant desires in ways that suggest that the uncontrollable and sexually dissatisfied id operates as the root of monstrosity. Fenix’s monstrous id emerges from his inability to break with his own mirror stage as he is torn, as a child, between the hypermacho father and the ultra-mariana mother, who both see and treat

him as an extension of their own psychosexual personas. Therefore, Fenix does not experience his body as a unified totality but as fragmented, with parts that are disjointed and operate at the vestiges of seemingly contradictory sexual cultural practices. The film makes it clear that Fenix never abandons the first phase of the mirror stage and, therefore, can only create meaning from the world around him through the way in which his own parents have experienced it. The conflated ideologies behind the cultural symbolism of the tattoo on his chest in stark contrast with the feminisation of his arms (as he uses them to, quite literally, ‘mobilise’ his mother’s identity) form the basis for the confusion between self and Other that characterises him throughout the narrative.

Fenix is, arguably, presented as a masquerading monstrous feminine, following Barbara Creed (1993a), because his monstrosity is defined and emphasised by the importance of his mother’s sexual identity in the construction of his monstrosity. As Creed rightly asserts,

the presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity. However, this presence does challenge the view that the male spectator is almost always situated in an active, sadistic position and the female spectator in a passive, masochistic one. (1993a: 7)

First, it is possible to suggest that Fenix embodies a type of meta-transvestism—which ultimately turns into a meta-transsexualism by the end of the film—because he does not, diegetically, cross-dress as a result of a gender dysphoria or some form of sexual exploration, but because he feels that he is being forced to do so by his domineering mother. Thus the film advances the notion that cross-dressing and transvestism problematically reinscribe traditional gender roles. At the same time, it hyperbolically questions the character’s heterosexuality through his fixation with either hyper-masculine-looking (muscled) or queer female subjects. Fenix as a queer monster shows the fluidity of sexual and gender systems in contemporary culture, whereby cultural templates of gender and sexuality are no longer regarded as rigid and infallible in the popular imaginary. Jodowrosky speaks to the audience about machismo and marianismo as forms of cultural castration because they both polarise gender and sexual systems. These sexual templates force sexual subjects to abide by a set of behaviours that are culturally regarded as supposedly natural, while they castigate any deviation from the fixity of sexual and gender parameters. Thus the horror movie

becomes the best vehicle for the director to address, as Harry M. Benshoff argues, ‘any and all sexuality—not just queer sexuality—[...] as some sort of secret and monstrous thing that lurks in the night, having been forced there in the first place by a repressive social heritage’ (1997: 165).

The monstrously symbiotic relationship between Fenix and Concha also permits the audience to venture into a terrain in which a new type of monstrous feminine operates: one in which the monstrous feminine both represents the lack (by means of figuring as a castrated subject in Freudian terms) and is also depicted as the castrator. As a result, it could be suggested that Concha represents a ‘castrated femme castratrice’, because her monstrosity, depicted through her missing limbs, reflects her adherence to the dominant symbolic order even when she tries to subvert such an order by killing those people she regards as deviant or a threat to her own self-perceived natural order. However, by becoming an armless monster, Concha—and Fenix by default—becomes entrapped within a castration complex: her body never leaves the psychosexual arena in which the child’s body morphs from being symbolically castrated to the moment of sexual reconciliation through the abandonment of the Oedipus complex. In other words, Concha’s body forces Fenix to remain trapped in a psychosexual childhood stage, whereby his conscious mind never fully corrects the fact that the female body is not the residual leftover of castration. By having to act through Concha’s mutilated body, Fenix remains within the castration anxiety, as he loses masculine power and autonomy and is symbolically emasculated by his mother. By depicting the characters within a narrative continuum of symbiosis and rejection within the socio-sexual spectrum, Jodorowsky cleverly criticises both machismo and marianismo as cultural templates for socio-sexual behaviour through a protagonist trapped in a culturally undetermined, socio-sexual limbo. Fenix is unable to overcome his Oedipal identity as a result of his inability to reconcile himself to the acquisition of a super-ego, strongly influenced by his cultural heritage, that is destined to the reproduction of the patriarchal order. Instead, he has not only accepted symbolic castration, he has also become the instrument through which female castration is disavowed, and by doing so he obliterates the meaning of machismo as a cultural template within the social and popular imaginary.

Arguably, the horrific nature of the film derives not only from the murders committed by the mother–son monstrous figure, but also from the fact that it evidences the fissures and contradictions of gender and sexuality in Latin America. The film is very radical in its treatment of machismo and