

### **13. Boys Interrupted: Sex between Men in post-Franco Spanish Cinema.**

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The history of male same-sex desire in Spanish cinema has been widely documented in a plethora of articles, PhD theses and books published in the last twenty five years or so, starting with Smith in 1992, and culminating most recently with dedicated monographs by Melero Salvador (2010), Perriam (2013) and Berzosa (2014). As these studies convincingly argue, we have come a long way from what Alfeo Álvarez, writing in the year 2000, called ‘veiled representations’ during the Francoist period. Indeed, authors including Llamas (1995) have talked about a certain over-exposure of gay men and especially gay male bodies in Spanish films since the 1990s. This new visibility, however, has not necessarily brought about sexual fulfilment for gay male characters on screen. While male nudity has become commonplace in recent Spanish cinema (although full frontals are still somewhat taboo),<sup>1</sup> actual sex scenes between men are still relatively rare, obliquely represented or extremely short, often interrupted halfway through. Interruptions, of sorts, are by definition part of what differentiates erotic cinema from pornography. As Tanya Krzywinska has argued, films aimed at broad audiences have to find ways ‘of suggesting sex without actually showing it’ (2006: 29). Some of these ‘ways’, as she goes on to explain, include ellipses, cutaways, or visual barriers (27-31). One of the main points that Linda Williams makes in *Screening Sex* is precisely about the double meaning of the verb ‘to screen’ ‘as both revelation and concealing’ (2008: 3), a tension that is productively explored throughout her book. The remit of this book is to study Spanish *erotic* cinema, not pornography. In that sense, it is perhaps to be expected that in the films that I am about to discuss sex between men will not be represented in overtly explicit ways. It is worth noting that when discussing the ‘concealment’ of sex both Krzywinska and Williams are

referring mostly to either family-friendly mainstream films or films produced under certain censorship or commercial boundaries. The films that I will discuss in this chapter were all released after the abolition of censorship in post-Franco Spain and, especially the more recent ones, are aimed at GLBT or GLBT-friendly audiences. It is the persistence of abrupt, awkward, and sometimes violent disruptions of erotic scenes involving sex between men that concerns me here, especially when these occur in sharp contrast with heterosexual sex scenes.<sup>2</sup>

Many Spanish films of the last two decades still present sex between men as illicit or in some ways off-limits. As Melero Salvador has noted, while gay sex gained visibility in specialised magazines during the Spanish transition, it was almost invisible in the cinema of the period. His discussion of Manuel Iglesia's *Jóvenes viciosas/Horny Girls* (1980) perfectly sums it up: 'sex scenes involving the girls where everywhere, while those involving the gay guy were over before even starting' (2011: 133-34). Even openly gay male directors like Eloy de la Iglesia or Ventura Pons have tended to stage gay male sex scenes in contexts associated with prostitution, or based on the traditional Greek Model with considerable age and class differences between the two men involved.<sup>3</sup> These modes of representation reveal a recurring pattern that could lead some audiences to perceive sex between men as criminal and risky, sometimes leading to illness and even death – patterns that were memorably critiqued by Vito Russo (1987) in his ground-breaking study about 'homosexuality in the movies' over three decades ago (the book was first published in 1981). By frequently cutting short erotic scenes between men, these films are not only ironically decreasing the visibility of a social minority characterised precisely for its sexuality, but also frustrating the visual/sensual pleasure for those spectators who may identify with the characters involved in the sex act. This creates a sense of frustration that could be interpreted as 'queer failure' in psychoanalytical and capitalist modes of thinking that read same-sex relationships as unauthentic, unreal, unsuccessful – as Halberstam summarises (2011: 94-96). As Edelman argues, the disassociation of gay sex from

reproduction leads to its perception as incompatible with the idea of futurity symbolised in the figure of the child (2004: 11-13), and therefore incomplete within the paradigm of heterofuturity, a concept symbolically contained in the frequent recurrence of unfinished business in the film examples that I am about to discuss.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter will focus in particular on well-known commercial feature films produced in the last two decades, but will also make reference to pioneering examples found in the early work of Eloy de la Iglesia and Pedro Almodóvar – directors whose more recent work will also be considered. To start I will examine technical effects used to curtail erotic scenes between men, either through editing, props, sets or lighting effects, to then focus on more literal interruptions by female and male characters that enter the scene preventing the sex act from culminating on screen – or, sometimes, from starting altogether. I will then reflect on possible reasons why this happens so frequently, to finally discuss some examples in which queer spectators may be able to re-imagine this apparently un-representable act as (at least somewhat) satisfying.

### **A Brief Encounters<sup>5</sup>**

Eloy de la Iglesia's *El diputado/Confessions of a Congressman* (1978) is often discussed as one of the earliest films to represent sex between men on the screen – as indeed Faulkner does elsewhere in this collection.<sup>6</sup> Although not explicit by today's standards, the film's portrayal of sex is remarkable for its directness. As Ballesteros (2001: 95-98), Martínez-Expósito (2015: 171), Mira (2004: 504), and Melero Salvador (2004, 2010: 235-250 and 2011) have shown, the film uses the clandestine sexual relationship between the congressman (José Sacristán) and the much younger Juanito (José Luis Alonso) – a kid of humble origins – *didactically* as part of its political and gay-activist agenda. The relationship between the congressman and Juanito also illustrates a number tropes of homosexual relationships on the Spanish screen typical of the

transition period, some of which still apply today: age difference, class difference, ambiguous sexuality of at least one of the characters, secrecy and a sense of illicitness that ultimately leads to a tragic ending. Although, as Melero (2011) has convincingly argued, this film will always be remembered as ground-breaking for its focus on homosexuality and its refusal to avoid physical contact between the two men on the screen (including a kiss shown on close up), the central erotic scene between the congressman and Juanito also encapsulates the kind of filming techniques that preclude the visual pleasure of queer spectators. The two men lie in bed in the moments prior to the sex act that we have to assume will follow off-screen. Remarkably, the soundtrack that dominates these brief moments of coy foreplay is typical of the erotic scenes of the *destape* films discussed in other chapters of this collection. The diegetic laughter mixed with non-diegetic music emphasise the relaxed atmosphere of this moment, suggesting, some might argue, a remarkable matter-of-factness about this unusual episode of intimacy between two men on the screen, but also, as William has explained, a musical interlude to make the sexually explicit content more palatable for audiences who were not yet used to the sounds of sex on the screen (2008: 82-84). Yet, this sense of harmony timidly implied by the soundtrack is negated in the wardrobe and camerawork, which seem to suggest the opposite. The congressman remains fully clothed and positioned on top, temporary reaffirming the power imbalance while assuming the position of the voyeuristic camera, which, in a series of overhead shots, focuses on the half-nude body of the blond adolescent youth. The lighting, overwhelmingly focused on Juanito, emphasises his objectification and also his fair skin, which adds an extra visual layer to the juxtaposition with the older man whose body, as Martínez-Expósito notes with regards to openly gay (usually mature) characters in the films of de la Iglesia, remains 'invisible' (2015: 171). In the build-up to the sex act, the body language further disrupts the power balance. The congressman (and, by extension, the camera – through point-of-view shots) practically worships the young man's body with kisses. Juanito eventually

reverts the power balance by literally holding the congressman's head in his hands, moving it from side to side at his will and ultimately directing it to his (unseen) penis. This rebalancing of power is underscored by the POV shots, now switched to Juanito's perspective. A fade to black is used to omit the actual sex act just as the older man is about to perform fellatio on the boy, cutting directly to the congressman opening the curtains the next morning.

Another famous erotic scene between men of the transition period is the one almost immediately following the first encounter between Rizza (Imanol Arias) and Sadec (Antonio Banderas) in one of Almodóvar's earliest films, *Laberinto de pasiones/Labyrinths of Passion* (1982). Perhaps surprisingly, sex is similarly absent here. As in *El diputado*, here the scenes leading up to the sex act build up considerable homoerotic tension. The mise en scène at Sadec's apartment further sexualises the scene: the room is decorated with posters of naked male pin-ups and a mirror that reflects the men's bodies as they embrace (and, we are led to assume, while they have sex off-screen). Yet, the sex act is, once again, omitted. A sudden cut takes us to the bathroom where Rizza washes his (off-screen) genitals, thus confirming that he has just ejaculated.

Sex between men in Almodóvar's later *La ley del deseo/Law of Desire* (1987) is much more explicit and this is one of the reasons why the film is often heralded as ground-breaking for its representation of gay male relationships (see, for example, Fouz-Hernández and Perriam 2000: 97). The oft-commented opening sequence includes a scene of simulated masturbation in a pornographic film-within-the-film followed by a brief scene where Antonio (Antonio Banderas), one of the spectators at the cinema, starts masturbating in the theatre's bathroom. The depiction of solitary pleasure within the first few minutes of the film has been praised for ensuring 'maximal identification between both screen/spectator pleasure and activity', especially at a time when the panic associated with the HIV and AIDS crisis was at a peak in the western world, leading to an increase of both male masturbation films and the practice itself

(Jackson 1995: 175). Yet, the emphasis on the constructedness of the first scene (the presence of a crew member at the end, the shots of the dubbing actors and the cutting room), and the fact that Antonio's masturbation scene is barely initiated on the screen potentially works against both processes of identification and pleasure celebrated by Jackson. Later on in the film, the first sex scene between Pablo (Eusebio Poncela) and Antonio is encouraging in that it not only shows the two men embracing, kissing, naked in bed – and mostly in close-up shots, drawing the spectators closer into the action – but also getting ready for full-on anal intercourse. Interestingly, as Mira has noted, those scenes were enough to make some critics of the conservative Spanish press particularly uncomfortable, suggesting that Almodóvar was seeking to implicate spectators into the homosexual lifestyle depicted on the screen (Mira 2004: 559-560). However, Antonio's inexperience (highlighted by a painful facial expression that Bersani (2010: 75) reads as emphasising the scene's nonpornographic realism), his concerns about venereal diseases and a false start, keep the spectator uncomfortably on edge. The camera gradually zooms out and an invasive overhead shot breaks the sense of intimacy created in the previous close-up shots, literally distancing the spectator from the action. Antonio's outstretched arms also depict him as a martyr as the sex act is about to commence but that we will never see.<sup>7</sup> The necessary interruption to reach for the lubricant leads to another fade to black when Antonio turns the light off.

Sex scenes between men in Almodóvar's more recent work are still relatively scarce and, under close inspection, curiously mild. *La mala educación/Bad Education* (2004) stands out in that it contains frequent and explicit examples of sex between men in ways that, as Gutiérrez-Albilla has argued very persuasively, reconceptualise 'the bodily self's participation in the cinematic experience' (2013: 338). As he writes, with reference to the sex scene between Ángel/Juan (Gael García Bernal) and Sr Berenguer (Lluís Homar), the camerawork (which alternates objective and subjective shots from two different points-of-view) and, in particular,

the subjective shots filmed with a ‘trembling’ Super 8 camera held by the characters during the act itself, produce a ‘a kind of psychological and emotional disturbance and a physical fragility and disorientation’ (2013: 338), not dissimilar to what we saw in *El diputado*. While, as Gutiérrez-Albilla argues, the camerawork situates the subject ‘at the centre of the filmic space’ (338) and while homoerotic desire impregnates the entire visual narrative of the film, the complex editing and entangled plot lines also add a sense of risk and clandestineness to the sex acts. The sex scene between Ángel/Juan and Sr Berenguer is characterised by a feeling of rush and frustration, as the older man is keen to engage in an intercourse that never materialises onscreen. Indeed, they are interrupted by Ignacio (Francisco Boira), who enters the scene unannounced. In another crucial sex scene between Ángel/Juan and Enrique (Fele Martínez), the camera focuses close-up on facial expressions of the characters, especially the former, as he is penetrated. The focus on the face during the sex act is common even in hard-core pornography. In porn, ecstatic (or painful) facial expressions can be used as a substitute for those parts of genital sex that cannot be shown for practical (technological) reasons – sustained penetration, for example. As Jagose among others has explained (2013: 145-148) this is also usually the case in mainstream cinema even in the most liberal markets: facial expressions and soundtrack are used to convey sexual pleasure while avoiding the display of genitalia. In the scene between Ángel/Juan and Enrique the sex act arguably symbolises the power imbalance in the relationship: Enrique’s facial expressions suggest ecstasy; Ángel/Juan’s a mixture of pleasure and excruciating pain. Once again, however, the scene ends mid-way with just another fade to black.

In *Los amantes pasajeros/I’m so excited* (2013) gay sex is quite literally kept in the closet. The film’s main setting is the cabin of a long-haul flight that is experiencing technical difficulties on its way to Mexico City. In desperation, the cabin crew administers a sedative drink to Economy-class passengers and an explosive combination of alcohol and drugs to those

in Business class. In the bacchanal that ensues heterosexual sex is depicted quite explicitly. In contrast, the plane's pilot Alex (Antonio de la Torre), a married man, hides in the plane's bathroom with his secret male lover Joserra (Javier Cámara), the chief steward, for a quick sexual encounter that happens off-camera and literally behind closed doors. While the bathroom door, relentlessly pushed by the two hurried lovers as they seemingly engage in full-on penetrative anal sex may humorously and brilliantly be interpreted as a metaphor for Alex's closet, the storyline and the visual representation of sex between men is compromised. A similar pattern applies to the two other gay sex scenes in the film between another member of the cabin crew, Ulloa (Raúl Arévalo) and co-pilot Benito (played by heartthrob Hugo Silva), as we will see in the final section of this chapter.

## **B Images in the Dark**

Editing and literal hiding are not the only forms of concealment of sex between men in Spanish film. Lighting also plays an important part. Darkness – indirectly implied in the frequent fades to black in the examples discussed so far – is also common. In Armendáriz's *Historias del Kronen/Stories from the Kronen* (1995) the brief sexual encounter between the protagonist Carlos (Juan Diego Botto) and his closeted friend Roberto (Jordi Mollà) is also partly veiled. The film's visual narrative builds up an increasingly intense homoerotic tension between the two men, reaching climactic proportions at the party towards the end. Yet, the only sexual contact between the two friends is reduced to a rushed scene of masturbation in the dark (shown from the waist up). Carlos gives Roberto a quick hand-job, but immediately dismisses the event as a meaningless drunken one-off experience, and rejects Roberto's kiss with the same aggression that characterised the brutal one-way sex act.<sup>8</sup>



In another well-known example of sex between young men, in Cesc Gay's *Krampack/Nico and Dani* (2000), poor lighting also obscures the already awkward main sex scene between gay teenager Dani (Fernando Ramallo) and his mostly heterosexual friend Nico (Jordi Vilches). After engaging in a series of mutual masturbations and one episode of oral sex (scenes shot from behind and ending with fades to black), Dani persuades Nico to have penetrative sex with him – shortly after interrupting a sexual encounter between Nico and his girlfriend. In the sex scene between the two adolescent boys, not only is Dani offering himself as a consolation prize (and potentially coming across as a manipulative predator), the sex act, hardly visible in the dark, is once again interrupted because Nico does not even seem aware that he was not actually quite fucking his friend. He climaxes all too soon and then refuses to wait for Dani to reach an orgasm, instead turning around with the excuse that he has a headache. Nico's attitude serves both as a parody of heterosexual sex and a critique of the neglect suffered by some heterosexual women with selfish male partners who put a frustrating end to the sex act once they are done (see Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito 2007: 55). What concerns me in the context of this chapter is that the scene also aggravates the sense of frustration of spectators seeking to identify with Dani, the gay character, while Nico, the straight one manages to climax even in these admittedly unfavourable circumstances.

In a more recent example in *Mentiras y gordas/Sex, Party and Lies* (dirs. Albacete and Menkes, 2009), explicit sex between young men is staged in the back room of a nightclub, where, naturally, the poor lighting partly obscures this casual sex encounter. Importantly, the scene symbolises the final blow in the gay protagonist's (Toni – Mario Casas) fast decline in a destructive lifestyle fuelled by addiction and that will lead to his imminent death as he leaves the club shortly after; turning him, as Perriam argues, into a classic tragic queer figure that must be killed off (2013: 89). The overwhelming sense of sexual frustration for the gay character is heightened, as noted by Gras-Velázquez (2013: 116-119), by contrast with scenes

of heterosexual sex involving Toni's best friend Nico (Yon González) and his girlfriend Carmen (Elena de Frutos) in a well-lit room. The warm ambience of this domestic space also contrasts sharply with the cold and seedy blue lighting of the club's 'dark room'.

Plenty of Spanish films of the last two decades or so depict sex acts between men in plain lighting. The scenes are however disrupted in other ways. This is the case of the film *Más que amor frenesí/Not Love, Just Frenzy* (dirs. Albacete, Bardem, Menkes, 1996), which contains one of the most explicit scenes of sex between men in Spanish cinema to date. The sequence starts with atmospheric low lighting while the camera follows the men on medium shots while they undress and kiss, walking together towards the bathroom. In the well-lit scene that follows (in plain daylight), the men kiss and caress each other's naked bodies while preparing for anal intercourse in the shower. This is followed by a succession of close-up shots showing various body parts of both men, clearly signalling their sexual roles. Their lips lock under the shower, Alex (Javier Albalá) lifts Alberto (Gustavo Salmerón) up in the air, opening his legs, gently penetrating him with a finger. The highly erotic scene continues, with the camera now zooming out onto a long shot as Alex uses some shower gel to lubricate Alberto, then proceeds to full penetrative sex – apparently without protection. The sex act, however, is shown only for a few seconds and only as a reflection on the bathroom's mirror – a foreboding effect, since, the mysterious stud that is shown vigorously fucking the gay protagonist will once again turn out to be heterosexual and will never have a relationship with the smitten gay character (see Fouz-Hernández and Perriam 2000: 107-108 and Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito 2007: 121).

The more recent *Chuecatown/Boystown* (dir. Juan Flahn, 2006) goes as far as showing Rey's (Carlos Fuentes) bare behind, as he gets ready for sexual intercourse with his boyfriend. The couple kiss in close up, then, the camera zooms out to show how, with the help of his boyfriend, Rey removes all his clothes and then turns around, ready for intercourse. Just before

the sex starts, however, a travelling shot takes the spectators away from the scene and into the couple's apartment's dark corridor to focus instead on a murder scene shown through an objective shot from a window in the couple's apartment. A scene that had started with close-up shots of the couple kissing and medium shots of loving foreplay is interrupted by creating – once again – a literal distance between the couple and the spectator, as the camera gradually zooms out and leaves the bedroom, directing our attention instead to a scene of death by strangulation of the couple's beloved elderly neighbour. The connection established between anal sex and death here could hardly be more explicit, even though the murder is part of the master plan of a caricaturesque estate speculator (Pablo Puyol) to obtain properties from elderly ladies and resell them to gay couples at the height of the gentification period of Madrid's Chueca gay district. At a time when the threat of AIDS seemed to be gradually contained (or at least manageable), the association of gay sex and death persists. Here, it is not the gay characters who die; however, the death of third, innocent parties could be interpreted as a displaced desire to kill gays – as Watney observed in his study of mass media coverage of the AIDS crisis in the USA (1987: 82).<sup>9</sup>

### **C Family Affairs and Dangerous Liaisons**

Perhaps the most common form of disruption of sex between men in contemporary Spanish films is actual interruption by various characters that walk into the scene. As already seen in *La mala educación*, the most common 'intruders' are usually family members, but especially unsuspecting wives of men who are involved in affairs with other men. *Perdona bonita, pero Lucas me quería a mí/Excuse me, Darling, but Lucas Loved Me* (dirs. Ayaso and Sabroso, 1997) provides some classic examples propitiated by a fairly simple storyline: three gay men share an apartment with an attractive heterosexual man, with whom they separately fantasise to be having a secret affair. Not only are these affairs a figment of their imagination, even in their fantasies they keep interrupting one another as they are about to initiate erotic contact

with the heterosexual stud of the title, Lucas (Alonso Caparrós). Interestingly, the various fantasised stories – frustrated in themselves as they are just that, fantasies – insist on the very idea of interruption and sexual frustration, an idea perhaps best contained in the very fact that Lucas, the object of the gay men's desire, ends up dead. The constant interruptions of the various imagined homoerotic scenes between Lucas and each of the gay men is partly unconsciously motivated by the suspicion that he was indeed secretly having sex with one of them. Meanwhile, as we find out later, the person with whom the protagonist Lucas had been having sex all along was one of their female acquaintances.

**Figure 28.**

**Javier Bardem and Jordi Mollà in *Segunda Piel/Second Skin*, directed by Gerardo Vera. Antena 3 Televisión, Lolafilms, Vía Digital, 1999.**

Examples of sex between men interrupted by wives or girlfriends are abundant. In well-known films including Gerardo Vera's *Segunda Piel/Second Skin* (1999), Bigas Luna's *DiDi Hollywood* (2010) or the recent *El sexo de los ángeles/Angels of Sex* (dir. Villaverde, 2012) closeted men lead double lives. Their same-sex relationships are defined and punctuated by passionate scenes overshadowed by the underlying fear of getting caught. In *Segunda piel*, one of the much anticipated erotic scenes between Diego (Javier Bardem) and Alberto (Jordi Mollà) is eventually interrupted by an insistent mobile phone call that Alberto pretends is from work but that is in fact from his wife Elena (Ariadna Gil).<sup>10</sup> The interruption (figure 28) transforms a pleasurable experience into a particularly frustrating episode that sets the tone of this doomed same-sex relationship for the rest of the film, ending in tragedy, once again insisting on the equation of gay sex and death seen in *Chuecatown* and *Mentiras y gordas*. In the other two films, the opposite-sex couples will find creative ways of reinventing their relationships,

following equally traumatic discoveries in the midst of two otherwise memorable steamy sex scenes between the men – in both cases they are caught with their male lovers in the shower.

In other films, usually comedies, mothers are the ones who enter the scene disrupting sex between their son and another man. Examples include another scene of the aforementioned *Chuecatown* and also *Reinas/Queens* (dir. Gómez Pereira, 2005). These sexual disruptions are particularly interesting. In the context of these light comedies, the erotic disruption provides comic relief by means of a double Freudian joke at the expense of the homosexual men's overbearing mothers, and also through the queer reversal of the primal scene. Importantly, the comic effect of these interruptions is also politically charged: in presenting mothers apparently at ease with seeing their sons in bed with another man (in both films the mothers stay in the scene, chatting with the lovers as if nothing had happened, even laying in bed with them in the case of *Chuecatown*) the scenes provide casual evidence of familial acceptance of same-sex relationships. In so doing, these potentially awkward situations become symbolic of a new domesticity and GLBT visibility in contemporary Spain. This provides an interesting counterpart to those previous cases, where sex acts between men were always undercover. In that sense, while frustrating the erotic potential of the scene, then, these moments also add political currency to the films, especially perhaps in the case of *Chuecatown*, since Concha Velasco, who plays Rey's mother, achieved gay icon status after playing another key role in the important gay-themed film *Kilómetro 0/Kilometre Zero* (dirs. Yolanda García Serrano and Juan Luis Iborra, 2000). Three of the mother figures in *Reinas* are also famous 'Almodóvar's girls'. As noted by Ellis (2010: 73), the film also advertises the capitalist value of same-sex weddings and gay tourism in Spain. In some sense, then, *Reinas* thus offers a problematic counter-argument to the vision of same-sex relationships as failure from a capitalist perspective that Hocquenghem (1993) critiques.

There are instances of much more disturbing interruptions involving attacks (or the threat of one) by male characters. An early example of this is Eloy de la Iglesia's *Los placeres ocultos/Hidden Pleasures* (1977), or his final film *Los novios búlgaros/Bulgarian Lovers* (2003), an adaptation of the homonymous novel by Eduardo Mendicutti, but we could also include the violent murder of Villaronga's *El mar/The Sea* (2000). In *Los placeres ocultos*, as in *El diputado*, the protagonist (also a middle-aged, closeted, powerful professional – in this case a banker, Eduardo, played by Simón Andreu) is infatuated with a younger, lower class adolescent (Miguel – Tony Fuentes). Eduardo displaces his desire for Miguel (who has a girlfriend and an older female lover on the side) by having casual sexual encounters with (heterosexual) rent boys. As in *El diputado*, the bodies of the younger men, well-toned and often topless, are also at the centre of the homoerotic spectacle of the film. Yet, sex with them is all but unachievable for the gay male protagonist. When Eduardo invites rent boy Ness (Ángel Pardo) back to his apartment and starts to touch his torso in erotic anticipation, Ness's friends show up unannounced (it was all part of a plan orchestrated by Ness) and threaten him with a knife, then rob him in his own home. *El mar*, a film that, as Allbritton has pointed out, is characterised by 'the sexualisation, and the intense cinematic gaze placed on the overt physicality of the male body' (2012: 64) turns what some might have expected to be the climatic sex scene between friends Andreu (Roger Casamajor) and Manuel (Bruno Bergonzini), into a scene of violent rape followed by self-defence murder. As Allbritton also notes, 'the eroticisation and fixation on the male body are concepts that are woven into the entire film, and they have very negative consequences' (65) that are tied partly to religion and Villaronga's challenging of and emphasis on 'complacency and heteronormativity' (64). Yet, the homoerotic narrative once again culminates in a scene of violent sex, with fatal consequences for the characters. The role of the phallic knife in both *Los placeres ocultos* and *El mar* is an unsubtle reminder of the same pattern that equates anal penetration with death.

Bersani (2010: 18-25) sees this pattern as a manifestation of a historical fear of a practice that challenges established conceptions about sex with regards to both gender and power – as Edelman has also discussed at length (1991).

As we will see towards the end of the chapter, Eloy de la Iglesia's *Los novios búlgaros* stands out as perhaps the film with the most explicit and uninterrupted scenes of sex between men. Yet, it does not quite buck the trend of the case studies examined so far. While the sex scenes between the gay protagonist (once again, older and upper-middle-class gay protagonist Daniel – Fernando Gillén Cuervo) and a Bulgarian working-class married man Kyril (Dritan Biba) are mostly fulfilling, one of the most explicit sex scenes between Daniel and another Bulgarian rent boy (Emil – Oscar Iniesta) is also violently interrupted midway by two gunmen who break into the house looking for Kyril – due to his involvement in underground criminal activities. The violence of the act is doubly emphasised, visually through the emphasis on the gun pointed at the men while they are having sex, aurally through the diegetic sound of the weapon being loaded – which effectively alerts the men about the break-in causing them to stop sex abruptly. The gun is then shown in close up, another reminder of the phallus-in-rectum as a killer in the one scene where Daniel is the one on top, furiously penetrating his male companion.

In other films, the entrance of a third person into the sex scene disturbs it only temporarily, without stopping it altogether. Examples include *Cachorro/Bear Cub* (dir. Albaladejo, 2004) – where the vigorous morning sex scene that opens the film continues quite naturally when a third man enters the room after using the bathroom – and *20 centímetros/20 Centimetres* (dir. Salazar, 2005) – where a neighbour catches a fairly explicit scene between Marieta (a pre-op transsexual woman played by Mónica Cervera) and the film's stud ('El reponedor', played by Pablo Puyol) from her window. 'El reponedor' enjoys so much being

penetrated by Marieta that he refuses to stop. The sense of risk and ridicule, although presented as comedy, overwhelms the erotic spectacle, and then the scene comes to a sudden end when Marieta hurriedly draws the blind on the neighbours. The curious neighbour is a classic voyeur figure that stands in for the spectator, perhaps suggesting that it is also inappropriate for us to snoop on the characters during this intimate moment. Her frenzied reaction, however, also implies that the act is scandalous and undignified, a circus (she excitedly summons others in her house to come and watch). The blind, like the shut toilet door in *Los amantes pasajeros*, is a symbolic reminder both of what we, as spectators are deprived of, but also of our very desire to see what apparently cannot be shown – or at least not without interruption.

#### **D Anti-climax**

Perriam's work (2013) has been fundamental in drawing attention to the importance of short films and videoart pieces in Spanish queer cinema production. As he argues, the short film has become a key format not only because it allows new filmmakers with basic means to present their products to relatively large audiences through festivals, art galleries, and online streaming, but also due to its versatility and aesthetic peculiarities (2013: 15-16, 108-11). In six minutes, the critically acclaimed short film *Fuckbuddies* (dir. Juanma Carrillo, 2011) encapsulates the idea of interruption and sexual frustration discussed throughout this essay. One of the trailers for the short film starts with the following lines written across the screen: 'He wants quick sex. He also wants sex. Many film festivals want sex'. The trailer, like the film, starts with the promise of sex and sets high expectations for it, but the sex is never actually realised, despite a certain verbal and visual explicitness characteristic to the work of video artist and filmmaker Juanma Carrillo.<sup>11</sup> The whole film takes place almost exclusively in the inside of a car where two men (played by Domingo Fernández and Richard García Vázquez) are about to have sex.<sup>12</sup> From the start, the film makes a clear statement about the explicit depiction of sex. The



excitement of anonymous, quick sex is what drives the narrative. The film builds up the sexual tension swiftly with a series of close-up and medium close-up shots of one of the men smoking, the other opening a condom with his teeth, the two men removing their clothes, uncomfortably lying in between the two front seats on top of each other, without talking. The lack of dialogue for most of the first two minutes (almost a third of the duration of the film) draws our attention to the diegetic sounds, anticipating, it seems, a steamy sex scene (heavy breathing, bodies getting undressed and rubbing against each other). The scene is another example of sexual awkwardness involving anal sex. It turns out that the man in the receiving position had lied to the 'top' about his sexual preferences (he also prefers to 'top'). The conversation then reveals that both men are in relationships with women. The promising sex scene is thus (once again) interrupted while the dialogue gradually takes over, turning attention to the possibility of having anal sex with their female partners, then to domestic worries of their stable relationships with women: house ownership, mortgages fees, bank accounts. This capitalist narrative, then, explicitly infiltrates and prevents this scene of anal sex. The two are, as Hocquenheim argues, mutually exclusive: pleasure associated with that organ that belongs only in the private sphere, the anus, must be sublimated (1993: 97-103). The film ends with the two men sat side-by-side in the back of the car, one of them smoking, a parody of the post-coital cigarette cliché but here perhaps more evocative of sexual frustration, since the phallic imagery the man sucking on the cigarette seems also inescapable in this context.

**Figure 29.**

**Domingo Fernández and Richard García Vázquez in *Fuckbuddies*, directed by**

**Juanma Carrillo. Emociones Produce, 2011.**

Comically, during sex, the man in the receiving position and with his legs still up in the air (figure 29) first asks the other man to rim him, then, keeping a straight face, states that it is

not ok to have anal sex with a steady girlfriend, because that is what you do with ‘dirty sluts’. In his influential essay ‘Is the Rectum a Grave’ (originally published in 1987), Bersani states that ‘Women and gay men spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction’ (2010: 18), adding that ‘this is an image of extraordinary power’. He goes on to say that the ‘image of a grown man, legs high up in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman’ was ‘intolerable’ for the average citizen (18).<sup>13</sup> Is this powerful image, quite explicitly presented in some of the examples discussed (*La ley del deseo* and, partly, *Chuecatown*), too powerful even for queer audiences to bear? Is this unbearable prospect, is this the ‘intolerable image’, to use Rancière’s term (2011: 83-105), what prevents us from seeing uninterrupted sex acts between men on the screen? The two examples that I have saved for the closing section provide some evidence to the contrary, albeit in two very different representational models.

## **E. Climax**

As mentioned earlier, Eloy de la Iglesia’s *Los novios búlgaros* stands out among the examples discussed in this chapter for its explicit and, in one case, *uninterrupted* depiction of sex between men. The film visually constructs the physical bonding between Daniel and his Bulgarian lover Kyril by alternating between medium shots of vigorous penetrative sex and close up shots of the gay protagonist’s face, aided by a diegetic soundtrack that combines Daniel’s groaning sounds with those of Kyril’s vigorous pounding. Contrary to some of the facial expressions of pain seen in the previous examples, Daniel’s ecstatic expression in the climactic moment, his smiling, his sobbing at the end, allows for a sense of erotic relief and satisfaction so often denied to the queer spectator. This sense is undoubtedly magnified by the insistent use of objective close-up shots for the best part of the minute leading up to the climax. As Doane has lucidly argued in her study of the close-up, historically the analytical discourse of this shot type

has tended to treat it ‘synchronically rather than diachronically, as stasis, as resistance to narrative linearity, as the vertical gateway to an almost irrecoverable depth behind the image’ (2003: 97). As she maintains, this discourse suggests ‘a desire to stop the film, to grab hold of something that can be taken away’ (97). Importantly, the fixation on the close-up can also be understood as ‘an attempt to reassert the corporeality of the classically disembodied spectator’, since scale ‘can only be understood through its reference to the human body’ (108). In presenting the sex act until the very end and by focusing close-up on the ecstatic face of Daniel, the queer protagonists that spectators are actively encouraged to identify with, then, *Los novios búlgaros* succeeds in drawing the spectator into the erotic experience of the film, referencing back to their own bodies. Arguably this applies to all the examples of intimate close-ups discussed throughout the chapter, except in this case the narrative and visual experiences are complete. There is no awkwardness here, no false starts, no sudden stops, no darkness, and no interruptions. The camera stays close to the characters until they climax. The line is drawn perhaps in the absence of any palpable proof that the orgasm has taken place.

**Figure 30.**

**Raúl Arévalo and Carlos Areces in *Los amantes pasajeros/I’m so excited*, directed by Pedro Almodóvar. El Deseo, 2013.**

This brings me back to Almodóvar’s *Los amantes pasajeros* and the other veiled gay sex scenes that I referred to at the start of this chapter. Both scenes involve steward Ulloa (Raúl Arévalo) and the plane’s co-pilot Benito (played by heartthrob Hugo Silva). Like the captain, Alex, Benito won’t identify as gay or acknowledge the sexual tension with Ulloa. The only evidence we have of their sex act, apart from Benito’s ecstatic facial expression is the presence of semen on the side of Ulloa’s face. The evidence is further tested (and, importantly, *tasted*) by Fajas (Carlos Areces) (see figure 3), the comical but jealous fellow steward who is left out

of the action, and thus stands in for the film's (queer) spectator. Like the spectator, he wants the palpable proof of the sex act that he hasn't been able to see, one that, like the money shot in porn, satisfies the viewer's desire by substituting 'the relation between the actors [with] the more solitary (and literally disconnected) visual pleasure of the male performer and the male viewer' (Williams 1999: 101). As Jagose explains, there is effectively a contradiction of terms between the desire to represent orgasm and the impossibility and resistance to do it (2013: 28-34). This resistance to represent the sexual climax is even stronger in scenes between men, which are repeatedly cut short by ellipsis, fades to black, darkness or interruptions by other characters that walk into the scene. It goes without saying that penetrative (or phallic) sex is not the ultimate goal here. There are many other ways in which sex between men, or any type of sex, can be satisfying and complete. The problem lies in that the majority of the examples discussed make an issue out of penetrative sex only to then stop the lovers in their tracks, often by surprise and sometimes quite aggressively. These examples are quite different, for example, to those that Williams, citing Bersani, refers to as 'an itch that does not seek to be scratched' (2008: 14). I also take Krzywinska's point that the ellipse has the potential to let the viewer 'project into the gap their own personally tailored fantasy' (2006: 29). As I hope to have shown, however, many of these sex scenes do not exactly encourage identification or personalised fantasies. This is where *Los amantes pasajeros* is quite different. In touching, smelling and tasting the evidence of the orgasm that was hidden from view, Fajas is preparing the spectator for the film's haptic and affective climax, one that will see the queer spectator finally rejoice in a wonderfully excessive amount of white, frothy stuff. While the homoerotic narrative of the film was always visually evident from the very image of the phallic plane – and, as Levy noted (2015: 115), the very name of the airline, *Península* – the foam path sprayed on the runway in preparation for the emergency landing is particularly suggestive. In the final moments of this film, released internationally as *I'm So Excited*, the foam surrounding the

phallic plane serves the perhaps contradictory purpose of hiding just another heated sex scene between men while at the same time, at last, giving the queer spectator something to be really excited about.

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 8 of Fouz-Hernández and Martínez Expósito (2007).

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank my colleagues Alfredo Martínez-Expósito (University of Melbourne) and Fiona Noble (Durham) for their constructive comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Tropiano (1997) explores the work of de la Iglesia from that perspective. I have studied this and other aspects of the homoerotic gaze in the work of Pons elsewhere (see Fouz-Hernández 2015).

<sup>4</sup> I am very aware of the problematic issue of terminology surrounding the ‘gay’, ‘homosexual’, ‘queer’ and ‘LGBT’ labels and of the importance of not using them interchangeably. In this chapter I will be mostly talk about ‘sex between men’ to refer literally to sex acts between two

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male characters on the screen, regardless of whether or not they may identify as ‘gay’. Some of these characters may potentially identify (or may be perceived) as queer, gay, bisexual or even heterosexual. While identity politics is not the main concern of this chapter, it does affect the argument about spectatorship and identification. I will make this as clear as possible in the relevant passages.

<sup>5</sup> This and next section’s titles are references (and homages) to Bourne’s (1996) history of lesbians and gays in British Cinema (1930-1971) – itself entitled after David Lean’s famous film *Brief Encounter* (1945) – and to the first encyclopedia of gay and lesbian film and video, *Images in the Dark* (Murray 1996) respectively. Much has been written about the gay and camp sensibilities of Lean’s heterosexual narrative (see, for example, Dyer (1993)), an argument partly based on the sexuality of the film’s writer, Noel Coward. Bourne’s book adopts the title to refer precisely to the ‘wink-and-you-miss-it’ nature of same-sex desire in the history of British cinema (and perhaps also to the format of the book, that deals briefly with key relevant films and names of the period studied). Here the section title refers to the length of sexual encounters between men in some classic examples in Spanish cinema. The section ‘Images in the Dark’ refers to the fact that in many cases these encounters are obscured by literal darkness – as well as fades to black.

<sup>6</sup> Melero Salvador has noted how at the time of its release some critics perceived *El diputado* film as ‘pornographic’ – a perception that, as he also writes, would be possibly unthinkable for present-day audiences (2011: 136).

<sup>7</sup> As Paul Julian Smith explains, the power balance is reversed by the end of the film, when Diego will be forced to obey Antonio (1997: 187).

<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the visual narrative of this film culminates with explicit home video footage of the death – by enforced alcohol intoxication – of Pedro (Aitor Merino), a character bullied on

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the basis of his perceived weakness due to illness (he is a diabetic), his effeminacy and (suspected) homosexuality.

<sup>9</sup> The sex scene anticipates the murder from the start. As part of the foreplay Rey initiates a sexual role-play by pretending to be a Wolverine character ‘ready to murder’.

<sup>10</sup> Eight years earlier these two successful actors had co-starred in Bigas Luna’s *Jamón, jamón* (1992), where their characters were also involved in a love triangle with homoerotic undertones (although in that case they were competing for the attention of a woman, played by Penélope Cruz). Years after the release of *Segunda piel*, director Gerardo Vera revealed that some televisions and distributors did not buy the film due to the explicit sex scenes between the two men (RTVE 2011). This seems to confirm the main thesis of this chapter, that sex scenes involving two men are still too difficult to ‘sell’ to the general public, even if they are incomplete.

<sup>11</sup> Perriam examines Carrillo’s important work in detail (2013: 16-17, 107-111).

<sup>12</sup> There are only two brief shots filmed outside the car: a establishing shot showing the car from outside, parked in a vantage point outside the city, and a close up of the rear-view mirror showing the reflection of the two men having sex.

<sup>13</sup> In their provocative essay *Por el culo* Sáez and Carrasco (2011) discuss at length the cultural taboo surrounding the representation of the anus as a sexual organ.