

Beauty and the Beast of Technology in Gorodischer's "A la luz de la casta luna electrónica"

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Angélica Gorodischer's short story "A la luz de la casta luna electrónica" appeared for the first time in 1973, as part of the collection *Casta luna electrónica*. This Argentinean author, known for her contributions to Latin American science fiction, fantasy, and detective-thriller genres and translated into English by prominent science fiction (SF) writer Ursula K. LeGuin, stands out for her clever use and destabilization of established gender tropes in posthuman science fiction. Latin American authors such as Ricardo Guzmán Wolffer, Diego Muñoz Valenzuela, Enrique Araya, Ilda Cádiz Ávila, Elena Aldunate, and Alicia Suárez feature distinctly gendered, often hyper-sexual robot and cyborg characters in their respective narratives. This appears to be a recurring trait in posthuman SF from Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century.

There is a distinct tendency to characterize female robot characters as hypersexual Hollywood bombshell types meant to entice male characters and readers, often observed in works by male authors (see Grace Martin, "*Que Dios se apiade*"). Conversely, robots and cyborgs of all genders in narratives by female Latin American SF authors are typically depicted in ways that emphasize psychological and emotional development over physical sexual features, which are often downplayed or presented in

ambiguous, non-binary ways.¹ This is not to say that sexuality is avoided in Latin American posthuman SF written by women, however. Human-robot sexuality is highlighted by Latin American authors of all genders, albeit in starkly different ways: male authors favor the traditional male gaze found in SF pulps, while female authors tend to emphasize female characters' experience of sexual pleasure without necessarily focusing on the visual aspects of sex. This is where Gorodischer breaks the mold with "A la luz de la casta luna electrónica," a short story whose protagonist's male gaze guides the narrative, where women are secondary—often antagonistic—characters, and in which all these elements join with SF pulp narrative conventions to challenge patriarchal archetypes in the genre while simultaneously questioning the roles of technology and beauty in human sexuality, politics, and social stratification. Moreover, Gorodischer's text cleverly foreshadows the cooling effect of technology in human (sexual) relationships, which is no longer the stuff of (science) fiction.

In terms of plot, "A la luz de la casta luna electrónica" tells the comical (mis)adventures of dubious businessman Trafalgar Medrano, later to star in several of Gorodischer's humorous space-travel tales² and considered "her most famous character, and certainly one of the most well-known in Argentine science fiction" (Hoeg 95). In this particular story, Trafalgar stops by the planet Veroboar during a routine intergalactic sales trip. Veroboar stands out among planets for being ruled exclusively—and fearsomely—by a group of beautiful women denominated "Las Mil." While on the planet, Trafalgar is unexpectedly summoned to the governor's office in Verov (the capital of Veroboar). Once there, the beautiful but ruthless governor reprimands Trafalgar for providing reading materials to ordinary Veroboan citizens, an illegal activity in their territory. She then confines the salesman to his hotel room, which he must not leave until another member of the central government calls him into her office for further questioning. Trafalgar, however, becomes impatient after days of waiting and decides to pay a home visit to this government

¹ In "Juana y la cibernética," for example, Elena Aldunate pairs up her female protagonist with a non-humanoid industrial machine whose gender may be read as male, based on physical descriptions in the short story, or as female, based on the feminine pronouns used to refer to it (Martin, "Gendered Words").

² Gorodischer has written eight additional short stories featuring Trafalgar Medrano and his travels, which she later published, along with "A la luz," in the form of a collection titled *Trafalgar* (1979).

official. Once there, he finds the officer, whose ornate name he recalls imprecisely as “Guinevera Lapislázuli.” The attractive officer is lying in her bed, completely nude and accompanied only by a buzzing machine full of strange buttons. Unsure of what to do next but enticed by the woman, Trafalgar discreetly turns off the machine and proceeds to join Lapislázuli in bed, where they engage in a wild sexual encounter. Upon realizing that the machine had been turned off the whole time, Lapislázuli begins screaming and threatens Trafalgar, whom she had mistaken for a hologram of comic book character Mandrake³—her pre-set virtual lover. The now terrified salesman has no choice but to run for his life and flee Veroboar in order to escape the death penalty, reserved for anyone who dare defy or even touch Las Mil. Trafalgar makes his way back to Earth and tells his story to an unnamed friend of his, the story’s narrator, who retells the astounding tale in the form of a casual dialogue between him and Trafalgar at a local cafe.

Renowned in Latin American SF circles, Gorodischer and her works have been studied previously by various critics—“A la luz de la casta luna electronica” included. J. Andrew Brown and Jerry Hoeg, for example, have found that Gorodischer’s texts have a “propensity for social commentary” (Hoeg 95) and feature themes such as power abuses and their intersection with race and gender, as well as the constant questioning of gender roles, performances, and sexualities (Hoeg 96, Brown 195). In regard to “A la luz,” Brown observes that Gorodischer inverts gender hierarchies to reinforce the idea that power will inevitably corrupt whomever holds it regardless of gender or race, a theme the author had previously presented in her 1967 story “Los circuitos, las ondas, los ojos, los tableros de control, Equis y Gama”⁴ (Brown 195).

While Brown’s assessment of Gorodischer’s project is accurate, there is much more to “A la luz” than its evident—but still crucial—subversion of gender hierarchies. Gorodischer destabilizes gender dynamics not only in her treatment of plot and characters, aspects Brown observes, but also through her narrative style. In addition, the author takes gender and power beyond clear-cut binaries. Although it may seem that Gorodischer is

³ Mandrake the Magician is an actual comic strip character created in 1934 by Lee Falk, author of the well-known superhero comic *The Phantom*.

⁴ In the futuristic world of “Los circuitos,” there is a reversal in power where White people are marginalized while Black citizens are at the vanguard in both politics and wealth. This change was prompted by serious mistakes White factions in power made in the past, especially regarding the handling of nuclear weapons (Brown 194-95).

simply switching opposites to make a point, she is actually confounding these supposed polar extremes, highlighting gray areas in both and making their complexities more evident. Furthermore, "A la luz" brings the intersection of beauty and power to the fore, suggesting the effectiveness of physical attractiveness as a form of capital while simultaneously questioning the strong social influence of beauty standards for women.

Critics agree that Gorodischer's works are consistent in their questioning of sexual identities and traditional gender paradigms that privilege maleness and heteronormativity (Brown 195). However, this is not done in an overt, simplistic, or even moralistic way in "A la luz." Rather than challenging heteronormative clichés in SF with a "strong female character" *de rigueur*, Gorodischer makes Trafalgar Medrano, a self-centered man who is permanently terrified—and resentful—of women, the hero of her short story. Conversely, female characters in Gorodischer's story are portrayed as "víbora[s]" and "brujas" (140). In addition, both Trafalgar and his unnamed friend/narrator add a thick layer of traditional male gaze to Gorodischer's short story. Upon describing the governor of Veroboar, for example, Trafalgar focuses on her physical attributes above all else, emphasizing her sex appeal: "Flor de gobernador. Rubia, ojos verdes, muy alta, con unas piernas que si las ves te da un ataque . . . y dos manzanas duras que se le veían a través de la blusa y unas caderas redondas" (140).

The overt male gaze in Gorodischer's text is, however, balanced by a societal/power role reversal where women rule the planet Veroboar with an iron fist. "A la luz" is never so polarized or simple to read, nonetheless. The narrative boasts a very humorous tone where everyone and everything is mocked—women and men, rich and poor, Earth's society and alien ones. The story's ultimate goal seems to be comedy rather than social critique. Yet this does not mean the latter is absent, but rather masterfully intertwined with other key aspects of the text. Just as there is humor and a distinct, colloquial Argentinean tone,⁵ there are plenty of elements in "A la luz" that call into question not only gender hierarchies and inequalities, but also corruption and deviousness at all levels, as well as the role of technology as the root of such evils.

Although men and women appear to be pitted against each other in Gorodischer's story, gender and moral ambiguity are the thematic

⁵ Both Trafalgar and his listening friend/narrator use *voseo* constantly, and expressions such as "piba" (146), "macanadas" (146), "el moño" (147), "ché" (147), and "porteños" (148) are commonly found throughout the text.

cornerstones of “A la luz.” First, there is constant questioning of Las Mil’s sexuality. As Trafalgar explains the group’s sexual rules and rituals to his friend/narrator, he mentions Lapislázuli’s conscious choice of a heterosexual posthuman partner but also speculates about homosexual polygamy among Las Mil (Gorodischer 150-51). Similarly, the women in this elite circle are portrayed as simultaneously virginal and sexually ravenous. Their titles often contain the words “iluminada” and “casta,” yet, as Trafalgar confirms, “tal vez fuera[n] iluminada[s], pero casta[s] no era[n]” (147).⁶ In addition to Las Mil of Veroboar, Trafalgar mentions various alien races with fluid gender paradigms while recounting his (mis)adventures in outer space. In planet Drenekuta V, for example, “los hombres se maquillan y se enrulan el pelo y se pintan las uñas” (139-140), and the men in Anandaha-A express themselves through dance rather than speech (140). Trafalgar’s own sexuality is ambiguous. Despite his obvious lust for the blonde matriarchs of Veroboar, when his friend teases him about developing “una exquisita inclinación por los jovencitos frágiles, de piel tersa y ojos claros,” Trafalgar does not deny having bisexual tendencies (136). Furthermore, the protagonist is never completely sure of Lapislázuli’s womanhood, often highlighting his confusion through phrases like “creo que era una mujer” (136), “la mujer que a lo mejor no era” (138), and “ya te dije que creo que sí [era una mujer]” (146).

Trafalgar’s confusion is understandable, as Las Mil are ambiguous on multiple levels. Their sexual practices and preferences are perplexing and elusive, and so are their origin and nature. Are they human or machines? Their sexuality is a major clue: the group considers posthuman sex superior to any other kind. Once a year, each member of Las Mil is entitled to go on sexual leave for a week, provided they follow a complex bureaucratic process: they must first file an official petition and then wait for approval. Other members of Las Mil congratulate those going on sexual leave by presenting them with special gifts and throwing lavish parties in their honor (Gorodischer 150-51). Once the petition is officially approved, the member in question spends several days home alone having sex with a special hologram machine. The process, as Trafalgar explains, is nothing more than a highly customizable simulation:

⁶ Near the end of the text, Trafalgar emphasizes Las Mil’s virginal reputation once more: “Se supone que son vírgenes e inmortales. La gente sospecha, sin embargo, que no son inmortales. Yo sé que no son vírgenes” (150).

La máquina les da dos cosas: una, alucinaciones visuales, táctiles, auditivas y todo, que responden al modelo que eligieron y que ya está programado en el artefacto. El modelo puede existir o no, puede ser el portero del ministerio o un engendro imaginado por ellas, o, en mi caso, un personaje de historieta de las malditas revistas que yo mismo le vendí al mecánico. Y dos, todas las sensaciones del orgasmo. (151)

Sex with machines is, evidently, a joyous occasion for Las Mil. Sex with humans, on the other hand, is a complete aberration to this group, as it becomes evident in the death sentencing of Trafalgar for engaging in human coitus with Lapslázuli. When considering the vast socioeconomic gap between the two characters, Trafalgar's sentence could be read as a commentary on class segregation and political elitism. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Las Mil exclude all humans outside their female-only group, regardless of social or political standing, from participating in their sexual rituals (Gorodischer 150). What makes posthuman sex the superior choice then? Las Mil may prefer the customizability of machines over the unpredictability of human interactions and the species' "imperfections." However, as Trafalgar points out, Las Mil's predilection for machines may be a sign that these women are actually machines themselves:

¿Cómo sé si Las Mil tienen la misma fisiología que las mujeres comunes? ¿Cómo sé si no las alteran? . . . ¿Cómo sé si Las Mil no son máquinas ellas también y si no la han fusilado o algo peor a la hija del flaco igual que a todas las que aspiraron a ser como ellas, cuestión de quedarse con la plata y seguir haciendo el amor con otras máquinas? (153)

Trafalgar's constant questioning of whether Lapslázuli is a woman or not takes on another layer of meaning, this time in regard to whether she is human or a robot. The text never reveals whether Las Mil are fully organic, fully cybernetic, or a hybrid. In any case, they are certainly posthuman in two ways: first, they embrace virtuality and information patterns as an integral part of their sexuality, and second, they operate as a collective rather than individually. According to Katherine Hayles, virtual reality and similar technologies—such as holograms and sensorial simulations—are highly intriguing and enticing because they evoke a parallel reality that intersects the subject's perceived reality in multiple ways (14). In this sense, information cuts through the flesh without physically violating its

boundaries. This virtuality—that is, information patterns interpenetrating material objects (13-14)—hybridizes the subject, thus creating a posthuman experience without the need to fuse physical cybernetic and human parts. Hayles asserts that, indeed, a posthuman subject need not be a literal cyborg:

Whether or not interventions have been made on the body, new models of subjectivity emerging from such fields as cognitive science and artificial life imply that even a biologically unaltered homo sapiens counts as posthuman. The defining characteristics involve the construction of subjectivity, not the presence of nonbiological components. (4)

In order to become posthuman, Hayles argues, the subject should rely on collectivity, where multiple parts contribute to the creation of a whole (3-4). *Las Mil* are, above all, a collective. The group's name itself implies fragmentation into multiple smaller pieces, but its basis on the number *one* gives the idea of a single unity.⁷ Additionally, they don't appear to operate alone but rather as a group: if one member desires to take time off, the rest must be notified and grant permission collectively. They do not act individually. Similarly, the rest of the population refers to them as a faction, without singling anyone out within the group. There are many women in *Las Mil*, but they all share the same look—young, slender, attractive, blonde physique—and the same outlook—sex with humans is forbidden but sex with machines is celebrated. “Mil” and “Una” at the same time.

Although their characterization as posthuman blonde bombshells is nothing new within the Latin American sci-fi context, *Las Mil* stand apart from similar posthuman characters in science fiction from this region because their physical beauty is inextricably tied to social, political, and economic power.⁸ As Trafalgar explains, female beauty trumps lineage

⁷ The denomination *Las Mil* is also reminiscent of binary code, as it is formed by only the numbers one and zero, which are the basis for this renowned computer coding language. This is yet another way in which this group is marked as posthuman within Gorodischer's text.

⁸ The word “casta,” used both in the full title of this story (“A la luz de la casta luna electronica”) and the official titles for members of *Las Mil* may, then, not be a synonym for chaste, as Trafalgar assumes, but rather a reference to these women's caste and their elevated sociopolitical position in Veroboar.

and social connections when it comes to joining the government in Veroboar:

La posición de Las Mil no es hereditaria, no son hijas de familias notables. Salen del pueblo. Cualquier chica que sea linda pero muy linda y consiga, cosa que no es fácil ni mucho menos, reunir una suma determinada antes de empezar a arrugarse, puede aspirar a ser una de Las Mil. Si llega, repudia familia, pasado y clase. Las otras la pulen, la educan y después la largan. Y lo único que tienen que hacer de ahí en adelante es pasar bien, ser cada vez más rica porque todo el mundo trabaja para ella, y gobernar Veroboar. (Gorodischer 150)

The mixture of physical, social, and sexual attractiveness identified as sexual/erotic capital by Catherine Hakim (501) plays a much more pivotal role than other kinds of capital traditionally linked to power, be it economic, cultural, or social. This is not to say that the latter are irrelevant in Gorodischer's text, but they are secondary to erotic capital in the case of Las Mil. As explained by Hakim, "erotic capital has greater value when it is linked to high levels of economic, cultural, and social capital [and] is thus partially linked to social stratification" (503). Indeed, Las Mil are at the highest stratus in their planet because they are incredibly rich and involved in politics in addition to being perpetually young and beautiful. However, their only way to reach this position is through gender—female only—and outstanding attractiveness. In this sense, Gorodischer's narrative highlights two issues: first, the simultaneous power and oppressiveness of contemporary female beauty standards, and second, the destructive effect of restricting power to only one gender.

Throughout the text, Las Mil are admired for their physical allure, though they are more feared than revered. Their cruelty toward anyone who dares defy them and their constant abuses of power lead other characters to fear and loathe them. Trafalgar, for example, narrowly escapes execution by Las Mil and spends the next few weeks unable to function normally, perpetually terrified of the pretty, blonde matriarchs of Veroboar. Similarly, Veroboan characters such as El Flaco keep low profiles, remain in permanent caution, and obey Las Mil unconditionally in order to avoid this elite's ruthless punishment. By the end of Gorodischer's story, female beauty has become a symbol of both power and monstrosity, perhaps echoing the duplicitous nature of the beauty

industry and its contemporary standards: simultaneously lovely and crushing.

As observed by Brown and Hoeg, respectively, Gorodischer's recurring inversion of gender and power hierarchies suggests that "power corrupts and that it does not matter which gender or which race holds power, it will inevitably result in oppression" (Brown 195). This certainly holds true in "A la luz," yet corruption does not affect those in power exclusively. Revoking men's political and social influence has led to a tyrannical rule where Las Mil get away with using all of the planet's economic resources for themselves and leaving the rest of the population in complete misery, without being challenged.⁹ The matriarchs¹⁰ are clearly corrupt, but characters without sociopolitical or economic power, such as El Flaco or the cab driver, are not immune to moral depravity. The cabbie drives Trafalgar to his ship so he can escape Veroboar after being paid a hefty sum from the latter, despite Trafalgar's status as a wanted criminal on that planet (Gorodischer 152). Similarly, El Flaco is well aware of Las Mil's questionable practices and tyrannical rule yet aspires to sell out his own daughter to Las Mil (151). Gorodischer, then, presents a fantastic realm where the mere promise of power—in the form of money—leads to corruption and dishonesty, and both rich and poor, women and men, are susceptible to such evils. As the nameless narrator remarks, "No se puede confiar en las mujeres" (149). And as Trafalgar replies, "en los hombres tampoco" (150). No one is completely free from guilt or safe from temptation in Gorodischer's narrative. Power corrupts, yet seldom in a clear-cut, neatly divided way.

Despite its comedic, seemingly light-hearted tone, "A la luz" presents the reader with a markedly dystopian vision of future technologies. It has been widely theorized that, once virtual reality becomes more accessible, activities such as travel, medical training, product testing, and

⁹ Extreme opulence and extreme poverty are contrasted at various points throughout the text, which highlights a clear disdain toward Las Mil: "Todo es miserable y triste en Veroboar. Todo menos Las Mil" (Gorodischer 143). "Miseria, mugre y barro y olor a enfermedad y a podrido por todos lados. Eso es Veroboar. Eso y mil mujeres espantosamente ricas y poderosas que hacen lo que quieren con el resto del mundo" (149).

¹⁰ The term is used here in its "ruler" rather than "mother" connotation, as Las Mil do not experience maternity: "No tienen hijos. Ni hijas. Se supone que son vírgenes e inmortales" (Gorodischer 150). The author does, nonetheless, refer to Las Mil as matriarchs in multiple instances: "Veroboar era un aristomatriarcado" (139), "al quinto día me cansé de las matriarcas rubias y sus secretarias" (143).

entertainment of various kinds will be replicable through virtual simulation and thus become significantly more affordable to the general public (Bletter, Todd). However, in Gorodischer's universe, virtual reality has reached innovation heights that are still the stuff of fantasy today, yet these technologies are reserved only for the elite. Virtual reality's potential to improve life in Veroboar is wasted, and its private, frivolous use sets a dangerous trend: deeming traditional human contact—the kind free of technological mediation—not only obsolete but also abhorrent, regardless of gender. Slavoj Žižek proposes that new posthuman sexual trends which do away with requiring multiple human actors—much like the machine sex that Las Mil favor—will inevitably lead to humanity's downfall:

The end of sexuality in the much celebrated "posthuman" self-cloning entity expected to emerge soon, far from opening up the way to pure spirituality, will simultaneously signal the end of what is traditionally designated as the uniquely human spiritual transcendence. All the celebrating of the new "enhanced" possibilities of sexual life that Virtual Reality offers cannot conceal the fact that, once cloning supplements sexual difference, the game is over. (Žižek n.p.)

The cloning against which Žižek warns us—the creation of electronic facsimiles of humans and their use as sexual partners—seems too far from our current technological means. However, the effects of replacing humans with machines in relationships, both sexual and nonsexual, are already palpable. Hyper-realistic virtual reality and convincing humanoid robots may not have been developed yet, but there certainly are enough gadgets and software that redefine socialization and interaction today. Couples miles apart can simulate mutual physical contact with the aid of devices such as Tachilab's "iFeel_IM" hug robot. The Vstroker, an interactive USB attachment for the famous sex toy Fleshlight, is currently marketed as an enhancing device for POV pornography, allowing the user to simulate sex with a porn star of their choice. New and (much) improved virtual reality experiences are in current development, many of which are intended for cybersex. Even technologies as ubiquitous as smart phones and social media are radically changing human interaction—both sexually and non-sexually. The past seven years alone have marked a significant shift in communication where spoken words have been steadily replaced with brief, quick lines of text (Turkle, Vanderbilt, Wayne). Regardless of complexity, all of these communication and simulation technologies are

already leading us into the same problematic direction Gorodischer envisions: less contact.

Replacing actual human interaction—whether physical or verbal—with technological proxies or substitutes can be dangerous. Sherry Turkle believes these practices, in all their convenience, can and do cause problems in the long term. They do so both in how people relate to one another and in their capacity for self-reflection. The customizable, editable interactions Las Mil have with their virtual lovers are precisely the kind of interactions Turkle identifies as the preferred ones today:

Technology appeals to us most where we are most vulnerable. And we are vulnerable. We're lonely, but we're afraid of intimacy. And so from social networks to sociable robots, we're designing technologies that will give us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. We turn to technology to help us feel connected in ways we can comfortably control. But we're not so comfortable. We are not so much in control. (n.p.)

In “A la luz,” Las Mil sentence Trafalgar to death for transgressing their systematically isolated and controlled virtual romance environment. Will we, one day, live in a society as segregated, isolated, and terrified of human contact as Veroboar? To critics like Turkle, this is a distinct possibility. Escapism may be the bread and butter of science fiction universally, but Gorodischer makes it clear, amidst jokes about sleazy salesmen and angry women, that avoiding reality and each other may not be the best course of action for humankind—a thought that, decades and myriad technological advances later, researchers have begun to echo: “our fantasies of substitution have cost us. Now we all need to focus on the many, many ways technology can lead us back to our real lives, our own bodies, our own communities, our own politics, our own planet. They need us” (Turkle n.p.).

Despite its witty, humorous tone, Gorodischer’s story conveys serious social critiques that still ring true. Gender and its performance are fluid, and can vary and reconfigure themselves from one group to the next, just as the masculinities of Drenekuta V, Anandaha-A, and those of Earth are embodied in radically different ways. Nevertheless, sexual objectification continues to exist in Gorodischer’s futuristic universe, even in non-heteronormative characters such as Trafalgar. “A la luz” reinforces the notion that power corrupts, both when it is possessed and when it is

coveted, and physical beauty can be an even more effective type of capital than money in the quest for said power. Who is to say that the beauty and sex appeal that sell products, put viewers in front of big and small screens, and persuade masses to undergo costly surgeries and treatments today won't be the driving force behind economies and governments tomorrow? Finally, Gorodischer foresees technology's potential for creating permanent, dangerous rifts among people, both at the individual and societal level. Replacing human companionship with machines does not require high-tech devices, such as the virtual reality machines Las Mil possessed. Instead, household technologies such as USB-powered attachments, smart phones, and social media are already steering us in an anti-social direction. When comparing Gorodischer's 1970s fiction to present-day reality, a significant idea becomes evident: perhaps robots do not need to be indistinguishable from humans in order to replace them; machines simply need to change the way people feel about their own humanity. Having greater control over all aspects of human experience (or the illusion thereof) appears to be a good enough tradeoff for the advancement and longevity of the species.

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