Spring 1995

Los gatos: Gómez-Arcos's Spectacle of Sacrifice

Sharon G. Feldman
University of Richmond, sfeldman@richmond.edu

LOS GATOS: GÓMEZ-ARCOS'S SPECTACLE OF SACRIFICE

Sharon G. Feldman
University of Kansas

Religion shelters us from violence just as violence seeks shelter in religion.
—René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*

Agustín Gómez-Arcos's ***Los gatos*** is a powerful, chilling piece of theater, a sacrificial spectacle steeped in passion, violence, and death, which straddles the balustrade between the emotional intensity of a Lorcan tragedy and the grotesque hyperbolism and dark humor of Valle-Inclán's *esperpentos*. In 1965, a censored production of ***Los gatos***, directed by Juan de Prat-Gay, premiered to a somewhat lukewarm reception at Madrid's Teatro Marquina.[1] Then, in November 1992, nearly thirty years after its original première, director Carme Portaceli resuscitated and restaged this post-Civil-War allegory for a new generation of theatergoers.[2] For this new production, which premiered at Madrid's Teatro María Guerrero (Centro Dramático Nacional) during the Festival de Otoño, Portaceli incorporated into her *mise en scène* an intriguingly apropos transvestic twist by casting two male actors, Héctor Alterio of Argentina and Paco Casares of Spain, in the principal female roles of Pura and Angela. In this manner, she was able to underscore the notion of patriarchal authority that is curiously incarnated in the images of these two women. The two-week run at the María Guerrero was so successful that the Ministry of Culture promptly selected ***Los gatos*** for a national tour of Spain, and in June 1993, Gómez-Arcos accompanied the cast and crew to Buenos Aires where he witnessed the play's Latin American première.

Los gatos continues the allegorical exploration of sacrifice, oppression, religious fanaticism, and eroticism that Gómez-Arcos initiated in his historical drama ***Diálogos de la herejía*** (staged in 1964); however, this time, he recontextualizes these themes within a more modern, bourgeois setting. With this two-part tragicomedy—or, "esperpento burgués," as he calls it (cited by Torres)—Gómez-Arcos foregrounds the oxymoronic dynamics of sacrificial ritual so as to reveal the inner workings of oppressive authority. Sacrifice, as René Girard points out, can be perceived as the bedrock of sociocultural order, manifesting itself in both modern and ancient cultures as an expiatory procedure designed to channel and satiate unavoidable violent desires and aspirations.[3] Yet, the underlying essence of this process is paradoxical and seemingly hypocritical, for sacrifice is also a form of transgression exercised within the context of taboo, a "coincidence of the permitted and the prohibited" (Girard 196). Gómez-Arcos's play casts an accusatory spotlight upon the inherently paradoxical nature of sacrifice in order to expose the grotesque entrails of authoritative institutions (concretely depicted here as the Catholic church) which shroud themselves in sanctity. In this manner, ***Los gatos*** leads the spectator into a dark, hidden realm of transgression, where violence lurks behind a sacred façade of taboo.

In his treatise on eroticism, George Bataille poses the somewhat disconcerting assumption that we are all potential transgressors in that the aspiration toward violence—toward a rupture of tranquil, civilized order—is an innate desire imbedded in the human persona. In light of Bataille's perceptions, our cultural history can be construed as a perpetual series of "no's": of denials, restrictions, and constraints whereby society struggles to map out and superimpose upon its inherent inclinations toward anarchy and disorder an orderly and authoritative grid that would serve to dominate and silence these primordial impulses. While this natural passion for violence often culminates in death, it also reveals itself through the experience of eroticism. The violence of eroticism plunges all semblance of existence and individual autonomy into a state of flux and suspension whereby life itself appears perilously close to slipping away. For Bataille, both death and eroticism imply a sacrifice of the "discontinuous" self, which entails a dissolution (literal or figurative) of the individual and a surrender of difference. Both aspire on a physical, emotional, or religious plane to produce a fatal union, known as "continuity."[4] ***Los gatos*** is subtly evocative of Bataille's conception of eroticism in that Gómez-Arcos's play seems to suggest that human nature takes on new significance when contemplated from the perspective of violence, and that violence—in this case, a sacrificial brand of violence—is the thread that enigmatically intertwines death with sensuality.

The action of Gómez-Arcos's tragicomedy is played out against a backdrop of sexual repression and religious obsession, a grotesque painting of outrageous proportions that caricatures life in a small Andalusian village (in effect, a microcosmic version of a much larger picture that resembles, but is not limited to, the post-Civil-War landscape). While the dramatic text does not explicitly specify the historical period in which the play is situated, Gómez-Arcos's scenic descriptions do contain a few temporal references (such as the presence of an electric lamp) that suggest a twentieth-century setting. The stage directions at the beginning of Part I describe an oppressive atmosphere of decadence and decline whose tene-

Gómez-Arcos's *Los gatos*. Teatro María Guerrero, Madrid. Festival de Otoño, 1992. Héctor Alterio (sentado) y Paco Casares. Photo: Courtesy Ana Jelín. Producciones Teatrales Contemporáneas, S.L.

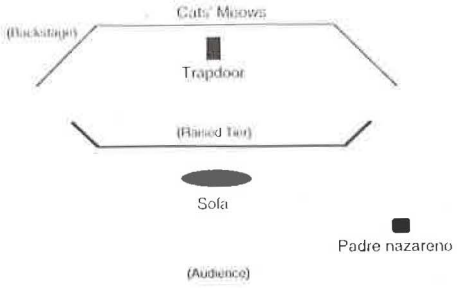
brous, somber tones are reminiscent of a Spanish artistic tradition marked by Francisco de Goya and José Gutiérrez Solana. *"Salón de casa provinciana, inmovilizado en el tiempo: cuadros oscuros pintados por amigos o parientes con ramos de flores y antepasados, con gatos enredados en ovillos de lana; . . . flores de trapo viejas, vírgenes realistas, angelotes y santos de toda devoción revestidos con túnicas bordadas o pintadas, reclusos en homacinas y campanas de cristal, . . . muebles oscuros, tan rabiosamente españoles como incómodos, terciopelos oscuros, damascos antiguos, cortinas oscuras, aparatosamente oscuras, lujo nonacentista en trance de descomposición, aromas antiguos, aire antiguo, antiguas plantas de salón en macetones de escayola. . . ."* (9).

Within the enclosed space of this parlor, Gómez-Arcos presents the story of two unwed sisters in their fifties, aptly (and ironically) known as Pura and Angela, whose obsessive attitude with regard to eroticism and religion situates them within a Spanish literary tradition of sexually-repressed females, such as those created by Benito Pérez Galdós, Leopoldo Alas ("Clarín"), and Federico García Lorca. Additionally, their characterizations represent an allegorical rendition of the interplay of continuity and discontinuity, transgression and taboo. Both are virgins, as their names imply, although Pura is by far the more prudish of the two. Her most distinguishing feature is her ultra-pious disposition: she spends her days cloistered like a nun, sitting in her rocking chair with her back to the window (that is, to the outside world), maintaining her composure through her contemplative readings of the religious meditations of her spiritual adviser Father Carrión. At one point, she declares that marriage never held any importance for her and that she feels sufficiently fulfilled by her unification with God. Her first communion served as the sacramental substitute for a wedding; in her words, "entre recibir el cuerpo de Cristo y recibir el cuerpo de un hombre hay una gran diferencia" (48). Angela, who is characterized by her intense fascination with all forms of transgression, expresses more of an interest in the subject of men and marriage. When, on one occasion, she suggests that she even may have gone so far as to have kissed a man, Pura is both horrified and scandalized (54). Like a dictator who derives great pleasure from the tyrannical rule of the inhabitants of her regime, Angela delights in the sense of power that she garners from the heavy-handed discipline of her cats, whom she is punishing for having committed a supposedly abominable crime.

While superficially Pura and Angela project a sanctimonious façade of purity and restraint, they are nevertheless capable of performing a most extreme, violent act of transgression: a sacrificial murder of surreal proportions that will propel them into the realm of continuity, fulfill their erotic yearnings, and banish violence from their consciousness (as well as from their living room). Their religious beliefs have become so twisted and exaggerated, and their ideas about sexual comportment have become so contorted and misconstrued that they have lost all sense of differentiation between right and wrong. Moreover, their blind obedience and adherence to sociocultural taboos ironically has had, and will have, the effect of converting them into transgressors. In Pura's words, "A veces, la frontera entre el bien y el mal es mínima. Una sutileza" (63).

The hyperbolic characterizations of Pura and Angela thus create a turbulent intermingling of continuity and discontinuity, transgression and taboo—a situation that is mirrored in the design of the scenic space. For the 1965 production, set designer Víctor María Cortezo emphasized the ecclesiastical atmosphere of the living room through the addition of a vaulted ceiling containing a set of large stained-glass windows.[5] Lighting technicians projected an eerie sort of glow through these windows, bathing the stage in an ominous aura of sanctity. For the second *cuadro* of Part I, which takes place specifically during the period of *Semana Santa*, Gómez-Arcos's written text calls

for the presence of a distinctly purple hue that would cast a mood of spirituality upon the stage, optically creating an illusion of ethereality: "*El silencio y el aroma, espesos, borran casi completamente los contornos de los objetos. Como por arte de magia, en este espacio no subsiste un solo color que sugiera la posibilidad de otra época del año: es exactamente Semana Santa, y no puede pensarse en otra cosa. Incluso parecen haber surgido, en sitios donde no estaban, pesados damascos morados, morados Nazarenos de tamaño natural, Dolorosas moradas y traspasadas de puñales de plata. . . .*" (29). In the 1965 production, the images of the saints, Virgins, and Nazarenes were represented not as miniature figurines, such as those that one might customarily find in a traditional Spanish living room, but as looming life-sized or larger-than-life figures, reminiscent of Spanish cathedrals and Holy Week processions. At the edge of the stage, off to one side, Cortezo positioned a gigantic hooded penitent (a *Padre Nazareno*) who seemed to hover and lean toward the audience. Together, these scenic elements worked to reinforce the idea that in ***Los gatos*** profane acts of transgression are carried out within the sacred frame of a church, or church-like space.[6] The following diagram depicts a hypothetical rendering of the sisters' parlor as designed by Cortezo for this original production:



In his stage directions, Gómez-Arcos describes the presence of an adjoining room, "el cuarto de los gatos," distinguished by a door containing special holes for the feeding and observation of the cats (9). The door marks a boundary between the living room (the realm of taboo) and the cats' room (the realm of transgression). In the 1965 *mise en scène*, Prat-Gay and Cortezo further emphasized the presence of these two realms through the use of a raised tier or platform which designated a kind of threshold on the (under)world of the cats. The invisible world situated beyond the door is thus a psychic interior region, while the realm of the living room, as signified by an old-fashioned sofa, is an exterior world of appearances and quotidian mundaneness. For the 1992 production, Portaceli, no longer constrained by the limits of censorship, added a more overtly concrete political dimension to Gómez-Arcos's allegory: along the perimeter of the stage, she installed a backdrop of red-yellow-red stripes, thereby creating the impression of an enormous Spanish flag, which literally and figuratively enveloped the living room within a sociohistorical context.[7]

While the cats play a key role in this spectacle, they never actually reveal themselves to the spectator as a physical entity, for they are portrayed by a harrowing sound rather than a material form, a noise rather than words. In the 1965 production, the cats' meows were represented through the use of a recorded soundtrack, which was often amplified to a level that exceeded any realistic proportions. Whenever the meows were heard, the *Padre nazareno* would simultaneously veer out toward the audience. The howls of the cats, which resemble metonymically the erotic moans and orgasmic cries of a human being, are in effect an acoustical manifestation of the sisters' displaced sexual urges, a resounding representation of transgression, eroticism, and violence. These resonating sounds, at once horrific and erotic, emanate from behind the door (backstage) and penetrate the entire theatrical space. Thus, coinciding with the Artaudian conception of the theater as an assaulting sacrificial spectacle, the presence of the cats inspires an intense rupture of the margins of theatrical representation as well as a jarring violation of the boundaries separating actor and spectator.[8] The disharmony of these unnerving sounds shatters the silence and placidity that in a more traditional (realist/naturalist) setting would typically characterize the space occupied by the audience. The meows are therefore an instrument of sacrifice in that they have the power to violate and dissolve the discontinuous nature of the individual spectators, to engage them in a collective ritual of sacrifice and inspire in them the essential emotions associated with transgression: desire, fear, excitement, and anguish (Bataille 37-39).

At times, the boundaries between the two worlds depicted on stage—the realm of the cats and the realm of the sisters—also seem to dissolve and overlap. The juxtaposition of these two worlds reaches a point of extreme dramatic tension during a scene in which Pura presents a catechism lesson to Loli, the voluptuous nine-year-old and daughter of Manuela (the sisters' domestic servant). This episode is composed of two scenes occurring simultaneously. The spatial positioning of the characters, as designated by the written text, facilitates the spectator's perception with regard to this simultaneity of events. Angela stands near the cats' door (within the raised area of the stage) and torments the animals with the pungent odor that exudes from a package of fish scraps. Several days have passed since the cats' last feeding, and their incessant howling proportionally rises with the crescendo of Angela's emotional frenzy. This depiction of "continuity," occurring upstage, contrasts with the scene of taboo and discontinuity, occurring downstage, in which Pura and Loli (situated on or near the sofa) recite in a monotonous trance-like tone the questions and answers of the Catholic catechism (15-19).

Angela, meanwhile, imposes her dictatorial strategies

upon her oppressed feline proletariat. She curtails their "uprising" by tempting her captive animals with false hopes, and she tortures them physically and psychologically by depriving them of their basic needs. In a prophetic gesture of cannibalistic (and, almost incestuous) sacrifice, the cats eventually satisfy their hunger by devouring the smallest and weakest of their own. Hence two texts—one sacred, the other profane—collide within the theatrical space. On one side of the living room, Gómez-Arcos depicts taboo: order, religion, chastity, restraint; on the other side, transgression: anarchy, hunger, torture, cannibalism. This convergence of taboo and transgression gives way to a fusion of death and eroticism. When Angela witnesses the sacrificial violence that is taking place on the other side of the door, her crescendo of excitement mirrors the emotional pleasure associated with sexual ecstasy. And, while Pura's longing for sexual plenitude is not as explicitly evident as that of her sister, it is not entirely absent from this scene. Pura, as it would seem, has merely displaced her primordial cravings for violence to the other side of the room; she has psychically exiled her interior desire for continuity to a hidden realm where death and eroticism reign.

In the world of ***Los gatos***, eroticism is thus portrayed as a potent force that Pura and Angela attempt to battle and suppress. So powerful is the erotic impulse that it invades all aspects of tranquil domestic life. This situation is epitomized in a scene in which Doña Rosa, a neighbor, joins the sisters for afternoon tea. Doña Rosa, whose husband has "disappeared" because she refused to physically consummate their marriage, displays the same type of aversion to sensual pleasure as does Pura. When Angela asks if she should "plug in" the electric lamp in order to brighten the atmosphere of the parlor, Doña Rosa shrieks with disgust and covers her ears (22). She takes extreme offense to Angela's use of the verb *enchufar*, a word that is saturated with sexual connotations. During the same scene, Manuela offers Doña Rosa a plate of sweets with a spoon and fork, triggering the following dialogue:

DOÑA ROSA.—¡No!
MANUELA.—¿No quiere dulces la señora?
DOÑA ROSA.—Quiero dulces. Sigo siendo golosa. Además, los he comprado yo. Pero no quiero juntos el tenedor y la cuchara. Ni juntos ni revueltos. ¿O te parece mal?
PURA.—A Manuela nada le parece mal, Rosa. Si tú no quieres comer los dulces con cuchara y tenedor, los comes sólo con cuchara, o si no con los dedos, y santas pascuas.
DOÑA ROSA.—¡Qué manía de juntarlo todo! En mi

Los gatos. Teatro María Guerrero, Madrid. Festival de Otoño, 1992. Photo: Courtesy Ana Jelín. Producciones Teatrales Contemporáneas, S.L.

> casa los tengo separados: unos en un cajón, otras en otro. Y para la luz, conmutadores, llaves, nada de enchufes. Así está el mundo, con tanta mezcla. Debe de ser sexual.
>
> PURA.—¡Vaya por Dios! Ahora va a resultar que la culpa de cómo está el mundo la tienen los tenedores, las cucharas y los enchufes.
>
> DOÑA ROSA.—Son símbolos, Pura. (23-24)

Eroticism, as it would seem, pervades the mundane realm of electrical sockets and even the drawers where silverware is kept. In this absurd conversation, the allegorical intersection of intolerance and unbridled freedom emerges once again, and what one might offhandedly take for comic is in reality dead serious. In Bataille's terms, Doña Rosa disapproves of all manifestations of continuity; she wants everything—men, women, and even all types of silverware—to be stored in separate, orderly compartments. Her objection to electrical plugs and outlets and to the intermingling of two different genres/genders of silverware, is a figurative expression of her personal aversion to sex.

At other moments in the drama, Pura and Angela disclose fragmentary information regarding their brother, Carlos, an artist whose wife abandoned him (presumably for another man), leaving him to raise his young daughter, Inés, on his own. During Part I, it is revealed that Carlos, who has recently died, has left the eighteen-years-old Inés to live with her aunts. Additionally, Pura and Angela allude to the presence of a third sister, Paloma. Their nostalgic recollections reveal that Paloma is also dead and that she was the former owner of the cats who are now in Angela's custody. In a description that recalls the poetic imagery of Lorca's ***La casa de Bernarda Alba***, the sisters refer to Paloma's sexually promiscuous behavior, remembering how she loved to venture out to the balcony to chat with her suitors. The memory of Paloma, summoned like a ghost from the past at strategic moments throughout the play, serves as an *outlet* for the unrealized aspirations of her two sisters, whose exaggerated sense of piety and whose ignorant sense of their own human need for freedom of (sexual) expression have inhibited them from fulfilling their deepest hopes and desires. Angela reminisces: "Yo bajo aquí, y lo miro todo, objeto por objeto, y todo me recuerda lo que pudo haber sido mi vida. Miro el retrato de Paloma . . . y el balcón . . ." (14).

Soon after Inés's arrival near the end of Part I, Angela develops an almost pathological inability to distinguish between her niece and Paloma. In Inés, who is blond, as was Paloma, Angela perceives the resuscitated image of her dead sister. Their faces seem to waver back and forth, forming a hazy double image. Angela repeatedly substitutes their names interchangeably, mistakenly referring to Inés as "Paloma," as though Paloma were still alive (33). Angela's confusion between her sister and her niece, which parallels the ambiguous intersections of taboo and transgression, eroticism and death, functions as an element of dramatic prophesy, casting a shadow of imminent doom upon the characterization of the young Inés.

When Inés inquires about the circumstances surrounding the death of Paloma, both *señoritas* vaguely insinuate that it is the cats who are somehow responsible. Once again, Gómez-Arcos presents a juxtaposition of two textual images, each offering a different perspective of the same incident. Pura's version exemplifies discipline and reserve. In her view, Paloma died of the blood-poisoning that resulted from a simple scratch: "Un día la arañaron. Los gatos tienen uñas . . . (*Hacia Angela*) . . . como los hombres. Se le infectó la herida y murió de septicemia. No se pudo hacer nada" (34). In contrast, Angela's version is a harrowing tale of transgression in which the cats ("esos criminales") intentionally murdered Paloma by poisoning her with their hatred and their venom-saturated claws:

> Se pusieron veneno en las uñas para corromperle la sangre. El veneno del odio, porque la odiaban. Venían chicos a visitarla, cada día, y entonces Paloma se olvidaba de ellos. Abría el balcón, y hablaba con unos y con otros. Le contaban cosas de la vida, y chistes, y hasta le decían algún piropo. Ella se ponía ahí, y yo aquí. Las dos nos reíamos. ¿Sabes?, los gatos se volvían inquietos, celosos. Ronroneaban alrededor de sus piernas—yo sé muy bien lo que querían los impúdicos —pero Paloma no les hacía caso. Yo tampoco. Llegaba primero uno, luego otro, luego otro, y después acercaban todos juntos. Y nosotras nada, como si no existieran. Por eso se vengaron: se sentían desplazados. (34-35)

Angela's recollection of the murder is saturated with ambiguous syntax and suggestive imagery. It opens the way to a complex network of double meaning and foregrounds the allegorical value of the invisible presence of the cats. The cats, who have long occupied a place in literary history as a metaphor for sexuality and the embodiment of feminine genitalia (Bataille's own ***Histoire de l'œil*** is but one example), are the incarnation of a violent chimerical desire. They are an allegorical rendering of the innate aspiration toward Bataille's "continuity," the inner longing for violence that underlies the sisters' (especially Pura's) calm, placid facade of restraint. Pura and Angela's savage animal instincts and inner longings have thus manifested themselves in the concrete form of a feline. As a result, the cats are at once a remedy and a poison: they are a *re*placement for the sisters' erotic fulfillment and a *dis*placement of their repressed sexual energy, anguish, and frustration. And because they—this multibodied force of erotic desire—felt "displaced," they took revenge in the form of a violent crime, a sacrifice designed to yield continuity of being. In this manner,

Gómez-Arcos seems to invert the process of the Bataillean "death wish": here, the continuity achieved through death becomes a substitute for the continuity realized through the experience of eroticism, instead of vice versa. Paloma's blood poisoning signifies a defilement of her body and thus functions as a metaphor for her lost virginity, the result of a violent passion. At the same time, it is a sacrificial remedy through which violent urges may be channeled and expelled.

Throughout her commentary, Angela employs a third-person-plural pronoun (*ellos* = "they/them") whose antecedent is never clearly specified and therefore evades any precise interpretation. She refers, for example, to *their* purring sounds and to the manner in which *they* ("los impúdicos") would shamelessly gather around Paloma's legs. ("Ronroneaban alrededor de sus piernas . . . "). In effect, the spectator may wonder, "Who is this *they*?" "The men?" "The cats?" Angela's commentary seems to vacillate between each of these interpretative possibilities. Her double-sided syntactical constructions convey an implicit hesitation, a zone of indeterminacy, whereby the allegorical referent infinitely escapes concretization. The employment of *they* carries a translucent poetic value which transcends the limits of language, of concrete signifiers and signifieds, and opens a window onto a world without linguistic barriers. Angela's ambiguity of expression is thus a form of linguistic continuity, in which signifiers are stripped of their corresponding signifieds and fused on a continuous plane of multiple meaning that eschews precision and, in what was an added advantage in 1965, eludes the wrath of the censors. Hence poetic language emerges as a form of transgression. As Bataille notes: "Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism—to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity" (25).

In a later scene, Inés finally confesses to her aunts the news of her pregnancy (the result of a clandestine encounter with her seafaring lover, Fernando). Pura and Angela are predictably appalled by this revelation but at the same time, Inés's confession incites a great deal of curiosity on the part of the virgin sisters. Angela, especially, wishes to hear all the minute details regarding the conception of Ines's child. She would like to sample vicariously a taste of the violence and sexual pleasure that Inés has experienced. Ironically it is Pura, rather than Inés, who does most of the talking. Both sisters seem to savor the opportunity to discuss sex in the hope that words will provide them with a semblance of erotic pleasure, of continuity, and of life in general:

> ANGELA.—¡Sigue! ¿Dónde fue? ¡Quiero saberlo todo! ¿Qué sentías?
> PURA.—Sentía calor, ¿verdad? Un calor sofocante . . . que te hacía vivir.
> ANGELA.—Calor . . . calor . . . ¡Sigue! Sigue tú, Pura.
> PURA.—Y . . . la sensación de estar descubriendo los misterios de la naturaleza.
> INÉS.—Tía, por Dios . . .
> ANGELA.—¿Qué misterios? ¿Qué misterios?
> PURA.—La suciedad, la liviandad, el placer, el pecado, la transgresión, todo eso que la gente llama los misterios de la naturaleza. (67)

The play culminates with a violent paroxysm. For Pura and Angela, the only way to restore tranquil order to their household is through the performance of a sacrificial ritual. They punish Inés for her erotic transgressions and expel violence from their living room by battering her to death with their canes, thereby invoking a repetition of the death of Paloma. Virtue and sin thus converge within the walls of their sacred church-like space. Once Inés is dead, they dispose of her body by throwing it to the cats. (Seventeen days have passed since their last feeding and the only way to continue their torment is to incite their hopes and desires with some food.) The cats devour Ines's body, and Pura and Angela cathartically revel in the continuity that they have achieved through the violent horror of their niece's sacrifice. The sensations conjured by the image of the mutilated corpse—a simultaneous rush of anguish and fear, desire and pleasure—appear to coincide with the emotions that spring forth during the transgressive experience of eroticism.[9] Death in this case has replaced eroticism, and order once again has been restored to this sacred realm. The cats delight in their banquet of human flesh and await their next victim.

In the final scene, Angela ambiguously declares: "Servirá para Loli . . . dentro de un par de años. No es necesario que me dé prisa en terminarlo" (73). The message is unsettling and disturbing, for it is unclear whether she is referring to the sweater that she is knitting or to the fact that Loli may indeed become the next sacrificial victim. In this tragic cycle of sacrifice, death and eroticism have come to represent parallel gestures, movements in a common direction signifying an ambiguous transition from order to anarchy, from difference to ambiguity, and from taboo to transgression. The frontier between right and wrong is never clearly established, and the line separating the saintly and the sinful effortlessly seems to dissolve away. Through a theatrical process of identification, displacement, and catharsis, Pura and Angela are able to bask in the continuity of existence that Inés has achieved through death (***Erotism*** 22).[10] In witnessing the spectacle of the victim's continuity, they able to experience vicariously a sensation of full and limitless being.

The members of the audience also bear witness to this spectacle. As participants in this collective ritual of sacrifice, they too are able to experience a parallel sensation of plenitude, and they are therefore left to ponder whether the characterizations of Pura and Angela merely represent a case of piety and intolerance taken to impossible extremes or if, instead, the sisters' actions are entirely

plausible. ***Los gatos*** is thus a play in which individuals —Pura, Angela, and perhaps, even the spectator—are projected beyond themselves. It uncovers the nexus between death and sensuality, exposing the spectator to a limitless, interior domain of violent excess which lies buried at the core of sacred authority.

NOTES

1. The 1965 production starred Cándida Losada as Pura, Luchy Soto as Angela, and Alicia Hermida as Inés. Cf. reviews by Juan Emilio Aragonés, Enrique Llovet, and José Monleón.
2. Portaceli, who is presently one of Spain's most prominent and successful female directors, had already staged Gómez-Arcos's ***Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas*** in 1991.
3. Girard lists both religion and theater among a roster of socio-cultural institutions that derive from the sacrificial process.
4. According to Bataille, both death and eroticism represent violent transgressive forces that attempt to sever any semblance of order. Both traverse barriers and push existence to its limit: death irrevocably defies life; eroticism simulates and approximates this defiance as it becomes the expression of an instinctive longing to shatter all sense of being, to saturate life with as much violence as it can possibly withstand without completely destroying it.
5. All information regarding the staging of the 1965 production was obtained through my conversations with Gómez-Arcos and Lee Fontanella (a spectator who witnessed the première).
6. A similar type of sacrilegious setting can be found in the works of Spanish writers, such as Galdós, Clarín, Valle-Inclán, Francisco Nieva, Fernando Arrabal, and in the films of Pedro Almodóvar.
7. All information regarding the staging of the 1992 production was obtained through my conversations with Gómez-Arcos and his long-time friend and collaborator Spanish actor/director Antonio Duque.
8. Artaud, in his redefinition of the *mise en scène*, calls for the presence of a necessary violence (physical or psychical) in the theater—of erotic obsessions, savagery, and atrocious crimes.
9. Bataille comments: "In the parallels perceived by the human mind between putrefaction and the various aspects of sexual activity the reelings of revulsion which set us against both end by mingling" (61).
10. The theatricality, and with it, the cathartic function of sacrificial ritual, approximates certain notions of the theater proposed by such historically distant figures as Aristotle and Artaud. Cf. Richard Schechner, who ascribes the cathartic function of sacrificial ritual to "an ancient, persistent, and robust therapeutic tradition of performance (208). Correspondingly, Stephen Greenblatt observes that "there is no more theatrical event in the Renaissance than a public execution" (332).

WORKS CITED

Aragonés, Juan Emilio. "*Los gatos* de Agustín Gómez-Arcos." *Veinte años de teatro español (1960-1980).* Boulder, Co.: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1987. 83-84.

Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater and Its Double.* Trans. Mary Caroline Richards. New York: Grove Press, 1958.

Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality.* Trans. Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986. Trans. of *L'érotisme.* Paris: Minuit, 1957.

_____. *Histoire de l'œil.* Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1979.

Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred.* Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977. Trans. of *La violence et le sacré.* Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1972.

Gómez-Arcos, Agustín. *Diálogos de la herejía. Primer Acto* 54 (June 1964): 26-53.

_____. *Los gatos.* Madrid: Sociedad General de Autores de España, 1993.

Greenblatt, Stephen. "Loudun and London." *Critical Inquiry* 12.2 (1986): 326-46.

Llovet, Enrique. "Estreno de *Los gatos* en el Teatro Marquina." *ABC* 27 September 1965: 91.

Monleón, José. "Gómez-Arcos: La honesta herejía." *Primer Acto* 238 (March-April 1991): 132-44.

_____. "*Los gatos* de Agustín Gómez-Arcos." *Primer Acto* 68 (1965): 53-54.

Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* New York: Routledge, 1988.

Torres, Rosana. "Héctor Alterio y Paco Casares interpretan a dos beatas intolerantes: *Los gatos*, de Gómez Arcos, llega a Madrid." *El País* 6 November 1992.