Crest or Pepsodent: Jorge Díaz's *El cepillo de dientes*

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> The centers of power export not only machinery and patents to us, but also ideology. If in Latin America the enjoyment of worldly goods is limited to the few, it then follows that the majority must resign itself to the consumption of fantasy. (Galeano 117)

In the special 1983 issue of *Estreno* devoted to Jorge Díaz, Tamara Holzapfel asserts that, "Para Díaz, el absurdo no radica en una actitud filosófica o metafísica, sino en la realidad socio-económica propia de Latinoamérica, que él considera modificable" (32). His theatre, then, is involved in a social critique of existent forms which Chile shares with its neighbors: militarism, poverty, imperialism, social and class inequities. In the same issue, Juan Villegas demonstrates the specificity of Díaz's work and postulates that each dramatist writes for an immediate public and thus will reflect concerns of that public: "Por lo tanto, la ambición universalista de Jorge Díaz era posible sólo en cuanto satisficiera en primera instancia el mundo de referencias e intereses de los sectores medios que asistían a las salas teatrales donde estrenó sus obras" (8). For Díaz, as for several other dramatists, the emergence in the 1960's of a disenfranchised, marginalized lower class demands an examination and critique of affluence and consumerism in Chile. Even as Díaz's play examines the "universal" themes of alienation and the general absurdity of the human condition through absurdist techniques, he also denounces the social construction of the Chilean bourgeoisie.

In *El cepillo*, a study of the construction of the bourgeoisie, its dependence on consumerism and narcissism, requires a critique of mass media. The play discloses and censures the bases underlying the way of life among the bourgeoisie by tracing them back to the vacuous forms of mass media. After all, as Díaz explained in 1983:

> La Radio y la Televisión en América Latina siguen las pautas deformantes que marca U. S. A. Es una Televisión y una Radio al servicio de unas multinacionales ávidas de ganar más que hacen

> *tragar* productos culturales alienantes que crean falsas necesidades de consumo. ("Lucha cuerpo" 5)

An affluent society, for which most needs are fulfilled, comes to see itself through manufactured signs, products and consumerism. In particular, *Cepillo* presents the absurdity not so much of the human condition *per se*, as of the existence of a narcissistic, Americanized, consumer class amid Third World poverty.

A burlesque, parodic psychodrama is offered for our delight in the first scene of the play when Ella evokes a Freudian scenario: "Anoche . . . sí, anoche soñé con un tenedor. Bueno, eso no tiene nada de raro. Debe ser un símbolo sexual inconsciente" (65). Ella's mention of complexes and dream analyses depends on the common coinage of Freud's psychoanalytic theories. There is no pretense here of true psychological depth, nor of a serious application of Freudian theory; the episodes played out upon the stage are conscious fantasies socially constructed among a class, not among individuals. Ella and Él are exhibitionists who play out their borrowed fantasies before us on a stage. Freud's vision of an exhausted civilization, which has practically become a cliché of modern Western society, is apparent on the level of language and through the staging that simulates a merry-go-round of signs within modern marriage.

Indeed, several telling images construct the physical world of the couple, chief among which are the battle ground and the merry-go-round. Él and Ella are characterized, appropriately, first by their possessions. The furniture on stage sets up a binary opposition between the two: he with his Spanish decor, she with a modern Danish one; and in the middle of the stage "*el campo neutral donde se desarrolla todos los días la batalla del desayuno matrimonial*" (64). Another structuring motif in the play is the merry-go-round, the clue to which is in the subtitle, "*Náufragos en el parque de atracciones*," and in the first few lines of the play when Ella remarks on the amusement park just outside the apartment (64).

The stage world is, in itself, a construct whose *raison d'etre* is primarily commercial and economic. In other words, an economy of commodities and values structures the physical, teleological, psychological and sexual ambience of the world Él and Ella inhabit. Díaz deconstructs the physical frame of the play when in Act II he suggests that the set from Act I be rotated 180 degrees: "*Todo lo que se veía a la izquierda está a la derecha y viceversa*" (91). The circular, inverted image of the original easily evokes the circular rotation of the merry-go-round, whereas the division of the play into two acts parallels the binary opposition that is being performed as a battle throughout the play. Toward the end of the couple's day (and the end of the play), the reality of the set itself is called once more into question. Little by little the props are removed from the stage, and the stage is dismantled in spite of the characters' protests that they have not finished (117). This metatheatrical touch, however,

does not unveil the characters Él and Ella as actors performing the play written by Díaz; the pretense of their fictional world is foregrounded, but not abandoned. Él and Ella are still the same characters:

> Él: (*Incorporándose.*) Ay, ¿qué pasa?
> Ella: Que están deshaciendo nuestro campo de batalla.
> Él: (*De pie.*) ¡Todos los días lo mismo! . . . (*Gritando hacia los laterales.*) ¡Dejen todo como está, que no hemos terminado todavía! (*Un silencio. Y luego el último bastidor o elemento es retirado.*) (118)

Subsequently, each seeks to retain his or her own chosen possession against the stage hands who are removing the props--he, a gramophone; and she, a chinese paper lamp. The world Él and Ella constantly seek to buttress and to transform is without substance. The couple covers up the ephemeral, inconsequential basis of their world by symbolic play.

The play discloses and critiques the principles that inform the economy of modern society by making explicit the system of exchange operating within and around the basic social unit of the family, conceived here as a binary coupling, Él and Ella. The simplified familial structure also lends itself well to unmasking the operation of desire without the complications of parental responsibilities or the need to plan for a future which the presence of children would signify. Él and Ella are not only a matrimonial pairing but, sans children, suggest the extension of childhood itself into an adulthood fashioned by games, consumerism, exchange, and fabricated desire. When necessities are taken care of, the life of the child revolves around the mediation of desire--the channeling of desire into play, games and fetishism. For instance, the objects that surround Él and Ella not only define them, but are fetishized objects: the toothbrush and Gardel records for Él, the chinese paper lamp and radio for Ella.

Él and Ella, as prime consumers, are in collusion with mass media in order to fan the dying fires of desire in their marriage. I agree with critic Ronald Burgess that the goal of the couple is union, but I would suggest that this union is never more than sexual. More importantly, the language and games of the play are not obstacles preventing Él and Ella's union. On the contrary, the couple use the fantasies borrowed from mass media to delay and enhance their sexual play; the constant postponement of the union is the erotic buildup necessary to create desire or stimulate the libido when this is no longer spontaneous. But desire, too, must be manufactured, as Freud has suggested:

> Some obstacle is necessary to swell the tide of libido to its height; at all periods of history, whenever natural barriers in the way of satisfaction have not sufficed, mankind has erected conventional ones

> in order to be able to enjoy love. ("The Most Prevalent Form . . . " 67)

Much of the play, which George Woodyard aptly calls "linguistic foreplay" (61), calls into question the fantasy of bourgeois consumerism and eventually reveals its inauthentic and hollow nature. Highly influenced by the media version of Freudian psychology bastardized in self-help columns as well as by the depiction of human relations in the cinema, on the radio and on television, the couple come to accept sexual desire as the pivotal force in their lives. Indeed the preoccupation with sex comes to replace sex itself, just as the mass media continually hints at a postponed or simulated gratification, gratification promised but not delivered.

There are several moments in the play that tease us with the possible union of the two. However, the point *is* the tease. Such moments are purposefully diverted back into games. Several encounters are possible and denied. Such is the case when Él admits to Ella that he has fallen in love with Ella, his wife. Note that, even in this instance, Él refers to his wife as if she were another woman, thus establishing from the beginning a certain erotic distance. He speaks as if he were contemplating adultery. In spite of the potential tenderness of the moment, Ella encourages her husband not to proceed along these lines, but rather to think of something else, such as the fat next-door neighbor or cholesterol (75). To follow any other course would risk premature consummation.

The love letters in the personals columns are another indication of the couple's desire to prolong the games and postpone consummation. Again, Él and Ella find the distance implicit in correspondence with a stranger titillating. As "Lucho solo" (Él) and "Esperanzada" (Ella) read their letters to each other, the stage directions indicate the distance maintained, "*Él dobla la carta y se la desliza a Ella surepticiamente, como haciendo un acto inmoral. Ella la toma de la misma forma. La lee ansiosamente y luego ambos dialogan sin mirarse, como separados por una gran distancia*" (79). Obviously, the particular game is erotic because it is a fantasy of denied, perhaps even forbidden, love. It also suggests encounters with a stranger, starting over with an unknown, instead of the "rutina gris" established between two people deadened to one another. The situation is immensely rich in suggestive potential--the epistolary form itself is associated with the romantic, with longing. The unknown allows fantasy free reign, as Él makes apparent, "Ay, 'Esperanzada': desconociendo su nombre me veo en la obligación de imaginármelo todo" (78). Ironically, this is the case between Él and Ella anyway; having forgotten each other's name, they constantly reinvent each other.

Embedded in many of these fantasies is the note of the forbidden: adultery or love with a stranger. In marital sex, there is no transgression, no obstacle. The roles are standard, the conduct highly codified and socially accepted. So trapped by their societal roles of husband and wife, the couple

set up artificial obstacles in order to create excitement and tension. The play begins with a nightmare vision of desire within these constraints:

> Voz de Ella: ¿Cómo podemos sobrevivir?
> Voz de Él: ¿A qué?
> Voz de Ella: A este cariño tremendo. (65)

In Act I, Él and Ella work within the boundaries of this codified arrangement, teasing with possibilities such as self-help columns, sexual fantasies involving French women, and jealousy. They even take recourse to marital bickering in the hopes that the excited emotions (anger in this case) might lead to sexual titillation. However, Act I shows the impossibility of following this well-worn road of conformity--hence the death of the spouse. This leaves Act II free from the matrimonial plot, free to construct other relations between the empty signifiers, Él and Ella. Ella comes on the stage in Act II as the maid Antona. Act II, then, allows Él and Ella to test other conventional roles, to delve into other erotic fantasies.

In *El cepillo de dientes*, the characters and their world are driven to create desire. In turn, this desire is mediated by signs and fantasies, establishing a relationship between subjects and signs (Freud, *Interpretation* 604-5). The creation of desire between Él and Ella does not constitute the relation of Él to Ella, or vice-versa, but rather the relation between Él and Ella as signifiers, desire being the signified. Hence at various times, Ella is Antona, Consuelo, "la mujer transistorizada," "Esperanzada," the victim, the wife, or the lover. Similarly, Ella can only relate to Él by means of other names, "mi hijito," "el señor-patrón," "el cura," or "el interrogador-policía." If not for these name substitutes or their generic and gendered labels, these two characters would have no identities. For there is never a moment in this play that the two characters are not involved in their games or rituals:

> Ella: Bueno, ¿y cómo quieres que te llame entonces?
> Él: Por mi nombre.
> Ella: Lo olvidé completamente, pero estoy segura que terminaba en o . . . Bueno, tienes que apuntármelo hoy día sin falta en la libreta de teléfono. (69)

Not only do the characters constantly assume other identities in response to their own emptiness, but these identities envelop Él and Ella into other stories or other scripts. Thus, the two characters often voice the borrowed discourse of the media. The skits in the first act are almost always adapted from the printed pages of mass communication, "revista femenina" or the newspaper. Act I is a series of skits in which the characters act out, unannounced to the audience, ever changing roles. Some of the skits even have embedded titles, such as "Desayuno en su hogar," which is the title of a magazine article

offering "consejos para comenzar la jornada" (68). Other possible titles are "Los huevos y vuestro hígado" or "La importancia de los huevos en la vida de la mujer" (72), but the most important of the skits of the first act is the spousal murders. Él is poisoned, and Ella is strangled with the radio strap. In Act II, these skits are replaced by a much clearer focus on the language of mass media. Díaz exposes the vacuity of language and reveals that desire is manifest through the symbolic systems of consumerism. Such symbolic systems indeed define the bourgeois class.

Throughout the scene in which Él hides the murdered corpse of Ella in the bedroom and tries to prevent the maid, Antona (who is in actuality Ella), from discovering the body, irony both punctuates the humor of the dilemma and discloses the issue of class:

> Antona: Ah, ¿y la señora?
> Él: Requiescat in pace.
> Antona: ¿Qué dice?
> Él: Que duerme como una muerta. (92-93)

The irony in this case is based on plots borrowed from telenovelas or radionovelas that offer to the masses fantasies of social mobility. This verbal interchange is not only meant to hide the *corpus delecti*, but also to underscore class difference.

Both lines delivered by Él, the ironist, are commonplace expressions, ones usually reserved for two different linguistic contexts: a funeral and a proverbial saying using simile. Antona is the dupe, the butt of the joke, who does not understand what Él and the audience understand, *i.e.* that the señora is dead. The Latin phrase, obviously unintelligible to Antona, underscores the class joke implicit in this sexual fantasy. For we must remember that everything that happens here is an elaborate fantasy or game which Él and Ella periodically play out each morning. The sexual fantasy is one in which the "patrón" goes slumming. Antona's subservient position in relation to Él allows him the fantasy of domination. It also calls forth all the stereotypes about the natural woman (Antona was raised in the provinces). Él associates Antona with "un encanto animal" (93) and flatters her as "un animal premiado en cualquier feria" (95). Obviously, his attraction to Antona stems from her "otherness," socially and economically constructed. Her lack of education allows Él to show off and also guarantees him the superior position.

Antona's supposed ignorance even extends to not understanding the patron's seduction. He must teach her what love is. Of course, this is a standard romantic cliché. However, through the extension of this cliché, Díaz discloses the inadequacies of the linguistic symbolic system that he suggests dominates and constructs our reality. Él instructs Antona on the meaning of love from within the closed, circularity of language itself--the Encyclopedia: "Vamos a ver, vamos a ver, vamos a ver . . . Amor . . . amor, amor, amor;

aquí está, amor, amor, amor: 'Afecto por el cual el hombre busca el bien verdadero . . .' " What follows is a concatenation of words that we recognize have little or no relationship except contiguity in the dictionary. Él goes on to read the definitions of "amor seco," "Amor al uso," "Arbolillo," "el almorejo," etc. (94). Once this verbal narcissism has begun, Él cannot escape the game. When Antona retorts, "Usted no tiene moral," Él again consults the dictionary and finds that "moral" is "Arbol moráceo de hojas ásperas, acorazonadas y flores verdosas, cuyo fruto es la mora" (94). Antona, an illiterate, is defenseless in such a verbal match. These puns call into question a system of values and ethics based in language at the service of only one class. The so-called mass media, although apparently linked to the desires of the majority, guarantee the continuance of a social hierarchy of privilege for the minority. The fantasy of social mobility stands in for any substantive social reformation desired. No real change occurs, just as nothing really happens in *Cepillo*; the society contents itself with its relationship to other signs, the fantasies, not the substance.

However, as products themselves of a society rooted in these fantasies, Él and Ella seek authenticity in language, and their failure is instructive. "Y si nos hiciéramos el amor en latín," Él suggests when all their verbal games have failed (113). And as the last remnants of their amusement park are being disassembled before their eyes, Él vainly believes that language still might give their existences some validity: "Que a lo mejor sólo se trataba de decir una sola palabra. Una palabra bien sencilla que lo explique todo . . . Una palabra justa en el momento justo . . ." (119). Well, Él does find a single word that might well sum up their absurdity; "mierda" fills in the slot for the long-expected, magical, curative word, although it is expressed as an invective, a gut reaction to the fact that the lights go out at this climactic point (119).

One might celebrate the inventiveness of Él and Ella. After all, they are dealing with an absurd world in which transcendence is an illusion, communication empty, life discontinuous and meaning fragmented. As a substitute for the missing logic and meaning in modern life, fantasy acts as both a subterfuge or retreat and as a bridge over the chasms created by fragmentation. But Díaz's play disrupts these fantasies, reveals the violence and desperation behind them, and proposes that our symbolic systems, such as language itself, are ideologically suspect, maintaining economic and class rigidity and structuring a particularly narcissistic sensibility. Él and Ella might play out humorous, clever games and fantasies which make us laugh, but the signs that they depend upon are not their own, nor do they control these signs. Ella is associated with "la mujer transistorizada," a machine. Neither Él nor Ella is in control of his or her acts, hence the constant repetition. They themselves are sign vehicles, signifiers. Metatheatrically, they are actors, puppets of the embedded scripts offered by commercials, quiz programs and their own culture.

Since desire is mediated through the exhausted, exploitative signs of consumerism, the play suggests that there is no recognition of a humane system of values or ethics. Of equal weight are the magazine's instructions on how to spend the morning and the therapy prescribed by the psychiatrist. Sex and murder seem to become interchangeable activities. "Masacre en el Vietnam" could just as easily be a movie title as a headline in the news (71). The use of a toothbrush becomes "un problema de dignidad humana" (84). And the overwhelming question within the domestic sphere of Él and Ella comes to be the superiority of one detergent over another: Tersol or Bimpo (114-115). The world of products, objects, slogans and jingles constantly mediate between Él and Ella. These characters talk through the dictionary, through proverbs, through commercial slogans, through magazines and newspapers, through tangoes and jingles which constitute a common language among the contemporary bourgeoisie. Díaz relates all these systems to basic language, and this relationship illustrates the lack of real understanding or any meaning that is not economically constructed.

Él and Ella are pawns of the signs created by consumerism. Not only do the two use products to eroticize their lives, but they are also victims of a consumer mentality that embues products with a sexual subtext, equating desire for products with sex. This is apparent when Antona recounts the sponsor's lead-in to the radionovela, "Flor de Fango," which eroticizes the product, "'¡Nosotras sabemos que Fibronailon nos acaricia!' . . . Ay, de sólo pensarlo me pongo tiritona" (101). As Griselda Pollock has shown in her study of the colonization of the woman's body in advertisement within a capitalist and bourgeois ideology, "one of the dominant significations of woman is that of sale and commodity" (31). Antona sees herself in terms of her decreasing marketability, "y el día menos pensado, ¡paf! . . . amanecer tan inservible y pasada de moda como un corset en naftalina" (101). What sells detergent? Sex appeal. And this sales strategy is mostly directed toward the woman seeking to enhance her own desirability. Él's reaction to Antona proves the case, "Antona, mira, tu olor a lavaplatos me conmueve, me enloquece, me rejuvenece" (111). Later, the fight that leads to Él's murder is based on two competing commercial lines, both of which appeal principally to the woman's sex appeal:

> Él: ¡Qué bien hueles!
> Ella: (*Coqueta.*) Sé que te vuelves loco. Es el superdetergente tamaño gigante Bimpo.
> Él: (*Cariñoso.*) No digas tonterías, cariño . . . Sabes que sólo me descontrolo con Tersol, "que brilla en su cocina como un sol . . ." (114)

The subtext of the play is that individuals are reduced to commodities, and the relationship between the sexes is based on exchange. In the seduction of

Antona, Él uses his position and his sexuality to buy silence from Antona, and Antona, likewise, negotiates terms, "¿Y no tiene más que ofrecerme?" (103).

The society Díaz critiques is one that sees life as a narcissistic search for self-gratification. As Él and Ella see it, "cada día es una maravillosa caja de sorpresas con premios, un largo túnel de amor" (120). With no other purpose than self-stimulation and play, Él and Ella are victims of a world that creates a false sense of movement and change by repeating the same empty act, by inventing desires for objects and constantly changing the objects within a pattern of sameness. Díaz suggests that mass media constitute a complex system of signs, many of which are conventional and repetitive, with the purpose of creating desire. The implicit lesson of *El cepillo de dientes* is that desire, as constructed in the society under scrutiny, is the drive to seek what is absent. It depends, therefore, on not being satisfied, hence the extended games, the drawn-out foreplay. Consumerism in an affluent society is founded upon never satisfying the market: objects are bought, used up and replaced. In order to ensure this constant flow of goods, a complex dream machine--commercials, fantasies both popular and elite, and life-style guides--is put in motion in order to produce not only the commodities themselves, but also the desire to consume them.

Stimulation--whether passion, love or anger--is the drug of the bourgeoisie, and there is little or no difference between a battle and an act of love. Díaz proposes this confusion when Él and Antona give in to lust: "*Da la impresión de una pesadilla. Esta especie de absurda lucha amorosa frustrada lleva una progresión que culminará con la destrucción de objetos. Jarrones, sillas, cuadros que caen al suelo*" (111). The goal of a society responsive to satisfying the needs of all its citizens does not figure in this narcissistic and self-destructive circle.

Díaz allows his characters moments of lucidity in which they reveal, at least to us, the nature of their interaction. After their violent sexual encounter, Él complains: "Isabel, Mercedes, Soledad . . ., ¿es realmente necesario que tengamos que repetir esto todos los días? . . . Para hacernos el amor vamos a tener que contratar a un asesor . . ." (112). Although they both complain about the repetition of their daily rituals, they can find no way out. The final moments of the play repeat the first few lines with a slight variation. Again the question is how can they survive "a este cariño tremendo," but to the response that they are strong, invulnerable, inseparable is added "intolerables" (120). So, perhaps we have not simply gone full circle with Díaz, but arrived at a judgement. The playful, inventive nature of Él and Ella ends in a pathetic, intolerable farce.

In conclusion, Díaz's theatre need not be rejected as "mimético, colonizado, europeizado," a criticism Díaz himself raised in 1983 ("Lucha cuerpo" 5), nor limited to a single pronouncement on the human condition: alienation or the impossibility of communication. In an essay written in 1970,

around the time of *El cepillo de dientes*, Díaz described the specific cultural, historical context for his plays, as well as the audience for whom he wrote:

> Debo reconocer también que el contexto económico-social en que estaba sumergido me determinó decisivamente. Me refiero concretamente a lo siguiente: empiezo a trabajar, investigar, escribir y estrenar en un teatro cuyo público habitual está formado por una minoría económicamente fuerte, bien informados, acostumbrados a viajar y muy europeizados, en general. Mi educación, mi formación intelectual es precisamente la de ellos. Yo me convierto así, involuntariamente, en su vocero autorizado. ("Dos comunicaciones" 73)

Ironically, although applauded by the bourgeoisie, Díaz has been consciously critical of the affluence of this class within the context of Third World poverty --indeed this is the basis for his sense of absurdism. His voluntary exile in Spain seems to have arisen from the awareness that his audience continued to misunderstand or discount his criticism: "me doy cuenta que mi propósito de denuncia crítica es fundamentalmente ingenuo porque es ahogado cada vez por el aplauso benévolo y el palmoteo en el hombro. Desorientado y un poco harto salgo de Chile." In spite of his disillusionment with the play-going minority in Chile, Díaz declared in 1970 his support of a theatre of denunciation (rooted firmly in a specific historical, social context) for two reasons: "1) porque el teatro debe expresar su exacta situación histórica y 2) porque a pesar de que el nuevo teatro no sea un arma eficaz en la acción inmediata, crea conciencia, prepara un cambio de mentalidad, forma sensibilidades" ("Dos comunicaciones" 74). If theatre has this potential, so too do other forms, such as mass media, but with dangerous effects. In the case of *El cepillo de dientes*, Díaz discloses, examines and censures the hidden social and economic bases of the consumer mentality determined by mass media.

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