

THE REMAKING OF LANGUAGE

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Zhiyin Du

SPOILER ALERT

“Desire is not song. It destroys and burns, like a snake, like a wind,” says Sappho, a lyric poet from the island of Lesbos in the 7th-6th century BC, to the nymph Britomart. These two legendary women from different epochs and cultures fatefully encounter in Cesare Pavese’s *Dialoghi con Leucò*, specifically in the chapter *Sea Foam*. Perched on a seaside cliff, they observe the formation and dissolution of the sea foam, exchanging profound insights on desire, will, death and rebirth, escape, and acceptance. Cesare Pavese, renowned as one of the pioneers of Italian neorealism, delved into the intricate destinies of classical mythological characters, often crafting demanding prose. The resonance and connection Argentine director Matías Piñeiro perceives between Sappho and Britomart is at the heart of *You Burn Me*.

Premiering in the 2024 Berlinale Encounters section, *You Burn Me* marks Matías Piñeiro’s departure from his twelve-year engagement with adapting Shakespearean structures. Piñeiro has mentioned in earlier interviews that this transition was catalysed by the video correspondences that he embarked upon with his fellow filmmaker Mariano Llinás during the pandemic lockdown. Despite being separated, in New York and Buenos Aires, they filmed various fragmented scenes at home and exchanged letters. Through these interactions, Piñeiro developed an enthusiasm for a more fragmented, essayistic perspective. “I was kind of ready for a new way of thinking,” he remarked.

This film presents a romantic encounter featuring two leading actresses, Gabi Saidón and María Villar, both frequent collaborators with Matías Piñeiro. The actresses engage in an intimate role-playing game, embodying the spirits of Sappho and Britomart with new flesh. Their dialogue unfolds against the backdrop of a meticulously crafted modern Eden, where apple trees and blossoming flowers thrive, nestled beside tranquil yet occasionally tumultuous sea cliffs, all bathed in the warm glow of the setting sun. Within this picturesque setting, their exchange illuminates diverse viewpoints on desire and commitment—tender, yet tinged with restlessness—as they endeavour to challenge the constraints of traditional gendered love paradigms. To escape the pursuit of men, Britomart is willing to leap off a cliff. Interwoven are stories of other women with distinct beliefs and destinies, such as Helen, a goddess of beauty amidst fluctuating desires and tumult, yet eternally serene. Surrounded by unending male conflicts, she remains passive in her choice of partners. The tangled relationships of the characters and the twists and turns of ideas intertwine to form a complex knot.

The text’s filling of characters’ stories outside the main dialogue, akin to footnotes, is intriguing, serving as Piñeiro’s attempt to bridge the gap between the main text and its annotations. Pavese’s suicide in 1950 is subtly revealed in the murmurs of the film’s narration. Simultaneously, in another disjointed timeline, a female biology student, amid a conflict with her girlfriend, encounters Sappho’s poetry, porcelain, and sculptures in an Italian museum. One might argue that this narrative offers an alternative path to interpreting the works and lives of Pavese and Sappho, a divergent approach to understanding these two literary creators.

The title of the film, *You Burn Me* (*Tú me abrasas*), draws its inspiration from the 38th poem in Sappho’s collection, which, though quite simple, unabashedly encapsulates the poet’s yearning and anguish. Throughout history, Sappho’s sexual orientation and personal life have been subject to ridicule and criticism. However, her impassioned, unfiltered verses, her courageous defiance of societal norms and her pursuit of freedom carry the director’s focus on feminist empowerment, discussions on identity, and sexuality. Indeed, her narrative carries a weighty and distinctive significance.

Matías Piñeiro’s enduring passion for pre-modern literary texts has led him on a journey to explore the intricacies of character dialogues, the depiction of conflicts, and the potential intersections with reality through adaptations of literature and drama. Before immersing himself in Shakespearean works, Piñeiro explored the influence of writer and former Argentine President Domingo Faustino Sarmiento teasingly interweaving the literary and the performative. Since 2010, each of Piñeiro’s films have formed a part of a larger project exploring the female characters in Shakespeare’s comedies, entitled *Las Shakesperidas* (or *Shakespeare-reads*). Piñeiro’s exploration of variation and transformation is not limited to his combinatory approach to text, the development of his Shakespeare project has also been characterized by a penchant for temporal digressions and increasingly fragmentary structures.

Fragmentation is indeed a prominent feature of *You Burn Me*, of Sappho’s nine volumes of poetry, only one poem has survived in its entirety. This incomplete state, reminiscent of scattered scraps of papyrus, eroded sculptures, and buildings, does not hinder its transmission or acclaim. Matías Piñeiro, undoubtedly a contemporary poet of influence, employs visual fragments and disjointed language in his essay film composition, allowing poetic essence gradually to seep through the crevices of collage.

The creamy-toned celluloid imagery plays a pivotal role in crafting the film’s atmospheric ambiance, while the rich granularity of the rough texture organically complements the vast expanse of the azure sea and the vibrant Mediterranean summer. *You Burn Me* witnesses Matías Piñeiro’s inaugural use of the Bolex 16mm camera, a technological innovation that infuses the film with a sense of ritual, from the filming process to post-production editing. Before editing, Piñeiro elaborately prints his frames onto small paper sheets, arranging them on a lengthy scroll organised according to the script, scrutinising each detail with care.

Furthermore, this ritual is also reflected in the abundance of handmade artistry that permeates the film: casual handwritten graffiti on books gradually evolving into meticulously outlined watercolour sketches, serving as embellishments within the romantic context of Greek mythology. The gentle acoustic guitar melodies, accompanied by the low, roaring sounds of waves crashing against rocks, intertwined with the melodious chants of Gabi Saidón and María Villar, foster an underlying sense of ambiguity that lingers persistently within the imagery.

Matías Piñeiro’s profound literary consciousness and the seamless integration of poetic qualities into the visual realm infuse this densely packed film with accessibility and vitality, breathing new life into theoretical frameworks.

You Burn Me also signals a trailblazing experiment in the reproduction of visual language. The film's narrative is largely composed of excerpts from Pavese's original texts and Sappho's fragmented poetry. The textual elements are juxtaposed with unrelated visual images through montage techniques, such as "Tú" (You), "me" (Me), and "abrasas" (Burn Me), corresponding to three mundane fragments of daily life: a corner of a building exterior, the press of a button, and the flow of water in a sink. In this cyclical repetition, new meaning is infused into the imagery, with the sound eventually detached, guiding the audience through a process of reevaluation and prompting the emergence of a novel visual language.

Sappho and Britomart, engaging in role-play through WhatsApp messaging, search for each other in the city, pursued by the deliberate temporal dislocation created by the director. Despite the intangible intimacy between them, they are simultaneously drawn and repelled by each other. However, in Matías Piñeiro's essay, the disjunction between signifier and signified is not eternal. Through footage like the annihilated sea and the tug of the tides, the film underscores the tense relationship between individuals caught up in passionate love. Accompanied by whispered narration, "Because if you escape today, Soon you will pursue. And if you don't love, soon you will want to love." In the tension between text and imagery, how can one discern the forms of literature (or poetry) and cinema? This is a film that kneads poetry into our unconscious daily lives, one that demands to be read.