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Gay Men Are Not Men: the Figure of the Bicha in Brazilian Film

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An assessment on the relationship between gay male representation in contemporary Brazilian cinema and the place gay men occupy in Brazilian society must first examine the unique way Brazilians see and experience gender.

This text will attempt to illuminate the way the concepts of man, woman and gay man are translated from European and American paradigms to mean something else in Brazil - which, invariably, also transforms the relationships formed by them. I will, then, investigate how a sample of Brazilian films may help construct, reflect, reiterate, mark and render monolithic these singular gender and identity concepts.

Much is lost between the idea of sexuality and its practice, no matter where one is in the world. But while in Europe and the United States one could argue that the concepts of man, woman (always already and perennially re-articulated as heterosexual) and their necessary transgressions/oppositions (such as gay man) follow a similar code of conduct, the rules of sexuality in Brazil seem to accept less latitude.

While being a (heterosexual) man in an Anglo-Saxon context may take several acceptable forms, being a man in Brazil means following a very clear, non-ambiguous set of rules which requires constant reiteration at the expense of that which isn’t man (whether this Other be woman or gay men. Their roles often intersect). The need for men to Other-ize women (and gay men) in a heterosexual context isn’t exclusively Brazilian. The ways cinema serves as breeding and playing ground for men’s scopophilia has been seminally explored in Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” after all. But what is curious in the case of Brazil is the fact that, often, men use woman and gay man interchangeably to achieve pleasure and engage in scopophilia.
In her essay, Mulvey argues that the film spectator (assumed to be 100 percent heterosexual male) takes pleasure in objectifying, demystifying and disempowering the Other (exclusively women, she claims) and in recognizing his likeness. Man needs to objectify the Other (woman) in order to relieve his fear of castration, to ease his anxiety over the “lack” which he associates with woman (due to her physical lack of a penis), but which is ultimately his or “theirs.” Man, then, comes up with strategies to achieve this pleasure and ease his anxieties in a plethora of insidious ways in real life. The cinema, then, becomes a site where these strategies find fertile ground to grow but also an opportunity for contra-punctual readings, for un-masking the artifices that have been “naturalized.”

Although Mulvey’s essay has been criticized for various reasons, it is interesting to follow her logic and conclude that, in Brazilian society and cinema, the figure of the bicha (faggot) serves as a stand-in for woman when that one is not available, or sufficient. Which begs the question: is woman ever sufficient, even when it is available, for heterosexuality to find its logistic closure? May the bicha, and her demonization, be so present, so necessary, precisely to function as “filler” for whatever woman cannot suffice to bear or represent?

In Brazil, it is not uncommon to find heterosexual men who don’t see as a betrayal to the rules of heterosexuality to have sex with a bicha as long as he is the active partner (penetrator). In Brazilian cinema (and television), gay man are usually displayed as bichas, not men who happen to be gay. It’s as if once “gay” is agglutinated onto the human equation, the subject loses his condition of man (“man” being either 100 percent “man” or not “man” at all). And in terms of scopophilia, bichas serve similar functions in relation to woman on the screen: an entity to be likened as close as possible to woman and as opposed as possible to man. A way for the heterosexual male spectator to say, “That is what I am not.”

In “The Point of View: Universal or Particular?”, Monique Wittig argues that there is only one gender, and that is the feminine, for the masculine is neutral. Following her rationale, we can start making sense of the difference in strategy between American and Brazilian culture in naming non-heterosexual males. In the United States they are usually referred to as “gay male.” Here, their homosexuality serves as effect, or adjective to the person’s larger being (male). But in Brazil they would be made into a noun, not an (offensive) adjective: viado, bicha, boiola, baiola, fruta, maricas, ad infinitum.

It is important to notice how symptomatic it is to render “gay” as a kind of male being (a man who is also gay, a gay man) and to make them into another being altogether (a bicha). The idea of a man who is also gay would seem absurdly oxymoronic in this Brazilian context for “gay” here negates “man,” renders it moot, lacking, “absent” and, therefore, feminine.

If, for Wittig, there is only one gender, the feminine, in Brazil there is a bifurcation of that feminine, a kind of bad copy of the original, woman, that is still burdened by some of its same functions: bichas. It’s as if once man went slightly astray from the strict rules of heterosexuality he left the realm of maleness invariably altogether and ended up somewhere else, much closer to the sphere of female, but not quite there yet.

It may seem illogical to non-Latin American minds, but despite the genitalia (the anatomical evidence, undeniable mark of male-ness), bichas are thought of as closer to being women than men. They must abdicate of whatever value is thought to be inherent to the masculine position once their phallus is reduced to its naturalized referent: the penis. The defense mechanisms behind this cultural strategy aren’t hard to figure out. But what interests us here is how Brazilian cinema can perfectly represent these mechanisms, or their result. Gay men in Brazilian film, as in day-to-day life, is anathema. They are some kind of hybrid creature -- a little crossdresser, a little transgender, a little woman - that leave the realm of masculinity, and the perks and responsibilities it entails, completely and automatically once masculinity has been forgone.

While the notion of fair, masculine representation of gay man in American film and television has evolved and arguably broadened (From Will Truman in Will and Grace to Jack and Ennis in Brokeback Mountain), the few times Brazilians took away the aesthetics and functions of woman from the bicha (on telenovelas), the audience was repulsed and the authors were “forced” to kill the characters off or deny much-anticipated “kiss scenes” in final episodes.

While the American way of thinking of sexuality would find it hard to see past sexual genitalia in its construction of gender (penis = male, no matter what), the Brazilian way seems to focus less on physicality, more on role. The logic to follow is that activity/passivity decides which sphere (masculine/feminine) the person will inhabit and what functions he/she will have in society. In the case of the bicha, she will occupy socially the extreme version of the woman’s role: disempowered, taken as mere object (of scorn, shame or sexual pleasure), used as a means to relieve castration fear and to reiterate man’s sense of man-ness.

For Richard Parker, the bicha occupies a limbo-like space, a state of nothingness and abjection, she is “seen as a kind of walking failure on both social and biological counts - as a being who is unable to realize his natural potential because of inappropriate social behavior, yet who is equally unable to cross the culturally constituted boundaries of gender due to the unavoidable constraints of anatomy.”

Following this rationale of what decides where one falls in the spheres of gender, in a Brazilian context one can’t use “gay man” as an umbrella term (as is used the United States) to mean any penis-holding individual who has sexual contact with another penis-holding individual despite the role they take on in bed. The logic is, instead, that whoever is passive (penetrated) inhabits one sphere (the feminine), and they can be either woman or bicha. What decides who is bicha and who is not lays in the kind of performance exerted during the sexual act and social performativity, transcending the otherwise tautological relationship between perceived morphology and its putatively respective gender.

A man who penetrates another man is still heterosexual, because he is the penetrator. A man who is penetrated is quickly thrown in the same sphere of woman before the permeability of boundaries come to the surface, before anxiety builds and gives in begin to lose solidity. It would be hard to imagine the concept of versatility (so present in homosexual gay practice and popular discourse in Euro-American contexts) to hold much value in this Brazilian scenario because the notion of one being able to switch on and off one’s standing in the social and sexual set-up from active to passive would constitute an absurd concomitance akin to walking forward and backward, looking black and white, being poor and rich at the same time.
Although the practice of the *troca-troca*\(^{11}\) (taking turns as to who penetrates who) may be a non-spoken widespread reality in Brazilian boyhood, it tends to remain just that: a childhood/adolescent practice, not an identity. The shame of whoever is on the receiving end is all the more unspeakable than the one borne by the penetrator. Whereas in the United States a great number of self-described gay men label themselves as *versatiles* (potentially active and/or passive partners) that would be an illogical concession within this Brazilian schema, where one's homosexuality automatically entraps him in the realm of the feminine turning “him” into a “her,” doing away with any space for liminality to creep up. In this state of abject non-being, the *bicha* is seized as a quasi-woman and definitely not a man - *man* desiring other *man* constituting an ontological anathema.

The *bicha* is not a woman and of her position she only shares the drawbacks. In being automatically expelled from *man-ness*, like a reflex (or reflex), the *bicha* only has one other place to occupy - *woman's* -- for heterosexist binarism to be able to re-articulate itself as a system of fixed positions without legitimate in-between-ness.\(^{12}\)

In *Beneath the Equator*, Richard Parker highlights the idea that what effaces the phallus in the *bicha* isn’t only the fact that she supposedly is only sexually passive, but also her passivity as a social being: “Within the terms of this model, what is central is perhaps less the shared biological sex of the participants than the social/sexual roles that they play out - their *atividade* or *passividade* as sexual partners and social persons”.\(^{13}\)

**SO HOW DOES BRAZILIAN CINEMA CONTRIBUTE TO THIS SEXUAL MODEL AND REITERATE THE IDEOLOGIES INTRINSIC TO IT, SERVING AS A SITE WHERE CULTURAL MIMICRY TAKES PLACE?**

Perhaps, the seemingly logic film to explore would be Karim Ainouz’s Madame Sata (2002). But since here we are concerned with the figure of the *bicha* within a heterosexist context, it would be more effective to examine films that aren’t considered “gay,” but that happen to have gay characters in them. The storyline of Ainouz’s film is, also, more historically relevant than that pertinent to Brazilian everyday life, so it would not lend itself properly to homologous analyses between reality and fiction.

Hector Babenco’s *Carandiru* is an interesting example because it offers a multiplicity of everyday Brazilian characters inside a prison system. A national allegory reading wouldn’t be far off, but neither would a (homo) sexual one (the constant surveillance, the harassment, the nonsensical rules).

*Carandiru’s* gay character, Lady, is, like all gay characters in the films I assess here, something between a crossdresser and a transsexual. To say that she embodies the gay stereotype would be a redundancy, since the *bicha* is intrinsically stereotypical. Here the *bicha* is dramatic, promiscuous (she has had over 2,000 partners), a former prostitute, unapologetically and unabashedly sexual. The *bicha* is only one, she doesn’t vary. She is a frame of reference used to measure, relieve, solidify and hold together the concept of man-ness.

Lady, and the few other transsexuals that appear in the film share some of the same functions and “impotencies” that a female character often adheres to on screen. While all other prisoners have a somewhat lengthy back-story that explains how they got to prison, Lady Di is simply there. Even though she has just as much screen time and diegetic importance as all the other prisoners, Babenco does not give her a flashback to explain her trajectory. Her flatness serves the purpose of de-humanizing the *bicha*, conserving her in the thing-like state of constitutive border (between legitimacy and deviance). Lady’s identity is limited to the function of delimiting that of man’s.

The men’s back stories all suggest that there is an essential core to actual man that is neutral and presumed legitimate until they do something crazy - often because of a woman (the corrupting effect), who triggers them into unreason and disorder. The *bicha*, however, is illegitimate even before she acts. Without a journey of good character gone bad (due to external feminine forces), she is corrupted from the start.

One can see evidence of the similarity of function between the *bicha* and woman by highlighting what kinds of roles de facto women play in the film. They too serve as effects to male characters’ all-important storylines, to colorize, contrast and help identify man. In the flashback of the inmate who steals the girl from the white guy, for instance, she appears as just an object with no free will that goes from owner to owner.\(^{14}\) Then, he promptly picks up a black girl at the local samba bar, adding on to his feminine possessions -- things he owns exterior to his body, as a constitutive reminder of the identity of that body.

It is also pertinent to mention that the one crime prisoners will not forgive is rape. Rapists in *Carandiru* end up hanged in jail: “Esse ai não estupra mais ninguém” (“That one won’t ever rape anyone ever again”). And “I’m against death penalty, except for rape,” says one of the prisoners. This illustrates and further marks women as defenseless, small precious things (“passivas”) that men have the duty to care for. Like gems (or *bichas*), devoid of activity. Man’s failing to protect woman (resulted in rape) is here the ultimate tragedy they cannot bear: a tragedy worth killing for. Rape as the evidence of man’s failure, of man’s lack, of the fictitiousness of the all-powerful phallus.
in Brazilian society and cinema, the figure of the bicha (faggot) serves as a stand-in for woman when that one is not available, or sufficient. Which begs the question: is woman ever sufficient, even when it is available, for heterosexuality to find its logistic closure? May the bicha, and her demonization, be so present, so necessary, precisely to function as “filler” for whatever woman cannot suffice to bear or represent? ... 

That is essentially Deusdete's story line. He was a perfect citizen, studious and completely non-involved with the drug lords from his slum, until the day men infringe in the preciousness (the thingness) of his sister (his possession). This violation of the woman undoes an entire structure of decency, dignity and reason. He murders the men who harassed his sister and is sentenced to dozens of years in prison.

The scene when Deusdete is approached by his sister's rapists also suggests the sexual model previously discussed, where having sex with another male doesn't diminish one's masculinity (perhaps even augments it), provided he be the active one. As a way to frighten Deusdete, one of the rapists, smilingly, warns him -- without anger, but lust --- that he will caress him (Deusdete) “the way we did your sister.”

Another instance of this unspoken homosexual conduct travestied as constitutive part of heterosexual practice is singer Rita Cadillacs's performing for the prisoners and asking them if they are “fooling around a lot.” They all eagerly answer yes (even though this would have to mean they are fooling around with one another, man with man, given that they are all locked up). The prisoners would probably not realize this implication, however, as they are entranced by Cadillacs's body - as she dances on top of a beer bottle after putting a condom on it (scopophilia at its "best").

The bicha also appears as comedic, at times. The very choice of casting hints at an inevitably humorous mis-en-scene, since Lady Di is grotesquely taller than her manly love interest. The scene where they both come into the nursery to get tested for HIV together feels, due to the contrast in height between the two actors, inappropriately funny for a diegetically dramatic moment. The choice of love interest for Lady not only makes her look even more clownish and “monstrous” (abject), but also makes him (the supposedly active partner) seem small and clueless. As if only an oblivious and unattractive man could allow a mere constitutive practice (such as the troca-troca) become an identity-forming relationship.

Lady also never addresses the camera confessional-style as the men do in order to make important points about their characters or highlight social commentary. The only time a transsexual addresses the camera in the film is to speak of her condition as transsexual, not as de facto prisoner. It's as though the bicha's femininity robbed or took over her condition of prisoner, the neutral, man-ish condition in a prison.

In Babenco's Pixote, another film set in the prison system, although not entirely inside it, Lilica is the bicha character. She is the one non-masculine “boy” from the group of main characters around whom the film centers. Like Lady, she inhabits an in-between (non-“passable”) aesthetics of the “incomplete” feminine and decidedly unacceptable masculine.

In a scene at the beach, after the minors flee their correctional facility, Lilica, Pixote and Chico are exchanging stories of what they would do with the money when they got rich. Chico says he would buy a gun to rob a bank. And as he dramatizes the scene of the heist in front of Lilica and Pixote, he says: "This is a hold up! Get up, I said get up, viado escroto ("fucking faggot")." Lilica laughs hysterically, completely unfazed by the usage of the homophobic epithet. She may feel so worthless as to not think she could have the right to be offended by the term. She may be so used to it that it doesn't feel like it hurts anymore. Or it may be her naturalized way of accepting the epithet as identity for lack of any other label she feels that she can claim.

Lilica's lack of rage over the word "viado" being shouted may point to an implicit difference between the terms “bicha” and “viado.” While both mean “faggot,” bicha (ending on the feminizing letter “a”) refers to those who have been granted a more feminized status (closer to women), whereas a “viado” may not necessarily be gay, but just an offensive way of referring to a man in an attempt to diminish his masculinity.

When she mentions that she will turn 18 soon and Pixote advises her to quit being a criminal then, Lilica says that even if she did it - - if she straightened up her act- it wouldn’t matter because “They would still find a way to bother me.” Then, she paraphrases a cop telling her: "Ain’t that right, bicha escrota (fucking faggot)." Here she chooses to use “bicha” over “viado,” when referring to herself, as if in the hierarchy of epithets bicha was higher up, or better than viado, which, despite meaning "queer/abnormal", also is stuck in the masculine "o." “Viado” may have come to point to an originally (or ultimately) male creature gone “incredibly wrong,” while bicha sounds closer “in nature” to bona fide woman.

"What can a bicha expect from life?”, Lilica asks, suggesting that even if she were a law-abiding citizen, she would still never come unscathed out of the social experience for she is always already symbolically flawed.

Another illustrative scene in Pixote takes place in an empty

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apartment, over a drug deal, and it pits woman and bicha in the same room. Lilica and the boys are selling drugs to the mysterious stripper Debora, who offers to "pay later." While the demands from Debora are obviously shady, Dito still prefers to please woman over the reasonable bicha, even though man and bicha have been romantically or, at least, sexually involved. It is as though woman always comes first as choice-object, for the bicha is, no matter how logically "superior," always a badly accomplished copy of woman, or co-inhabitant of some of woman's positionalities.

In Cláudio Assis' Mango Yellow, the hotel janitor Dunga embodies the bicha character. Although she inhabits a space perhaps not as close to woman as Lilica and Lady, at least aesthetically, his reason for being, function and role are similar to theirs. Dunga cooks, cleans, and hums while sweeping (a simultaneous action typically associated with females and maids, specifically).

But a more telenovela-esque film spawns more telenovela-esque characters. This bicha is vindictive, knife-and-predatory. These are characteristics perhaps inherent to the bicha and, as the film will show, apparently also to woman. Here the bicha is envious of woman's symbolically given value, woman-ness, versus bicha's femininity, which is always sufficient not to be man but always insufficient to be woman. So Dunga schemes against the women in the film to try to conquer their man. But bicha fails.

Wellington, the straight butcher object of Dunga's affection, juggles two women -- a stereotypically frigid good girl and an unabashedly sexual bad girl (this the one who is friends with Dunga, of course). Whenever Dunga sees Wellington he blatantly tries to seduce him, to no avail. Here again man suggests having sex with bicha in a way that doesn't undermine his masculinity and, in fact, marks his man-ness even further. As Wellington dodges Dunga's sexual attempts, he ultimately warns bicha: "One day I will fuck you." And in his speech there is a sense of malignancy, as if provided Wellington is in control (if he is the seducer, not Dunga), then the sex could happen. And it would be more of an "acerto de contas" (a social balancing act of sorts) than anything else. The naturalized idea that women don't enjoy sex as much as men (if at all) plays a fundamental role in the establishment of this dynamics, for bicha's explicit, outwardly search for pleasure jars her likeness to woman's culturally established (a)sexual performance.

Dunga also represents what Parker refers to as "a socially constructed space for the bicha (...) in quite unexpected places," who even with his/her mini-shorts, scandalous outfits, swaying and swishing (perhaps, precisely because of these: a "balancing act" in trying to liken themselves to woman and do away with any trace of masculinity that might scare away man's possible sexual interest) - people don't unnecessarily spew hatred on the bicha - as long as she perpetually remains in her place. Parker goes on to point out how effeminate gay men play an important role in the structure of Afro-Brazilian religions and highlights the bicha's sexual value, likening it to the prostitute: for when a de facto woman isn't available, a knock-off.

The film's most obvious motif is meat. The meat Wellington butchers, the flesh Isaac takes so much pleasure in shooting and tasting, the meat that makes Kika sick, the piece of ear Kika bites out of Daisy. And, of course, the meat Dunga is after but will not get - precisely because he attempts to reverse the rules of the game by being the hunter and not the prey. The same happens to Kika, Wellington's angelic wife, who is "kind of weak in bed, but good for a wife," yet grows completely bestial and bites flesh off of Daisy's body when confronted with man's betrayal.

Like in Carandiru, this is someone so accustomed to being a law-abiding flawless citizen, but who, due to unfortunate circumstances loses reason and commits horrific acts. Yet in Mango Yellow, this someone is a woman. And she doesn't get a direct address to the camera to explain and redeem herself. Instead she cannot "go back" to the "feminine." And she soon devours another man in bed (Isaac). This suggests the always already construction, artificiality and fictitious-ness of all figures in the man-woman-bicha triad. The non-essential performativity that comes to the surface at times of visceral turmoil in Mango Yellow isn't specific to the film nor to Brazilian culture or (Brazilian) cinema. This sudden disarming or spontaneous shedding of putative identity caused by a surge in the ID gone unrepressed reveals the very lack of nature-ness of human "nature."

NOTES
2 Although beyond the scope of this paper, the relationship between economic class and masculinity/femininity is perhaps less obscure than one would think. One is obliged to note Brazil's colonial mark as always already underdeveloped/poor/less and the compensatory mechanisms of symbolic value that this mark is bound to trigger.
3 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in Film Theory and Criticism, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Considering language itself it becomes evident that the adjectivation of the term man with the term gay is possible and well-used in the English language. Yet, in Portuguese man (homem) and gay (gay) as a composite ("homem gay") is a linguistic sore or oxymoron. In Portuguese homem gay (gay man) becomes "something else," either a string of endless epithets or the scientific and disease-tainted homosexual.
4 The relationship between filmic and televisual production in Brazil is one of intense interchangeability when it comes to actors, producers, production companies, directors and source material.
5 Richard Parker suggests in Beneath the Equator that this sexual model, following a activity/passivity binary other than male/female is a direct inheritance from the slave/plantation system. In Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality, and Emerging Gay Communities in Brazil. (New York: Routledge, 1999). This relationship between constructed identities in Brazil is symptomatic of the essential binarism inherent to the heterosexist system in general. See Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter (New York: Routledge, 1993).
6 The exact passage is: "Gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in the singular because indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the "masculine" not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine, but the general". Monique Wittig, "The Point of View: Universal or Particular?" in Feminist Issues, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 1983, p. 64.
7 This designatory logic, however, falls victim of another set of problems for it assumes that "gay men" have, necessarily, much more "in common" with man than with woman.
8 This "yet" is solely conceptual for even transvestites and "transsexual women" in Brazil are generally referred to as "he,"
whereas in the United States it wouldn't be absurd to call "even" a crossdresser a "she."


10 This logic could be said to be less essentialist than the American model for it bets the chips of gender on the performativity of the body, not on the body itself.

11 Richard Parker refers to troca-troca as a game of exchange, "in which two (or more) boys take turns, each inserting the penis in their partner's anus." The practice finds its American version perhaps in pornography websites, as the niche known as “Circle Jerk”, when presumably straight men masturbate themselves (and, perhaps, one another) in a circle while watching heterosexual pornography on screen. Beneath the Equator, 33.

12 While it may seem that the bicha is split into two functions, one in relationship to man (constitutive of the border between legitimate and abject) and one in relationship to woman (likeness), those really form the same function: the oppositional continuously re-articulatable function whether it be a way to define man or a way to define woman (both sharing a means).

13 Beneath the Equator, 30.

14 For Judith Butler, expropriation is the condition of identity for women. “For women (...) propriety is achieved through having a changeable name, through the exchange of names, which means that the name is never permanent, and that the identity secured through the name is always dependent on the social exigencies of paternity and marriage.” Bodies That Matter, 153.

15 Curiously, the American comedy Harold and Kumar: Escape From Guantanamo Bay (2008) echoes this sense of a “homosexual act” ultimately signifying a heterosexualization of the active party. The film presents as the worst punishment of the Guantanamo Bay prisoners to have to eat “cock meat,” which means having to perform oral sex on a security guard (sexual submission appears as worse than water-boarding). Yet when Harold asks an officer if all Guantanamo guards are gay, the officer replies that “obviously not.” Because the one who performs oral sex is gay, the one who receives it is a real man.

16 It's worth noting that Debora is played by Elke Maravilha, a hybrid figure herself in Brazilian pop culture for the past many decades. Hiding behind extremely heavy make up, scandalous clothes, wigs and a slur, she has always been a cross between woman and drag queen.

17 When a little street kid does Dunga a favor (giving a note to Kika, which will eventually rigger horror), he tips the kid with a coin, but then says he will tip him with "something else" afterwards, because “he is already old enough" (the kid looks no older than 14).

18 Beneath the Equator, 35.

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