Who's Afraid of *Boi Neon*? Fertilising Utopias in the *Sertão*

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Abstract: *Profound anxieties around gender, couplehood and reproduction, as they stand today, can be felt the world over. Simultaneously a swing towards the political right and the so-called culture wars have escalated, curtailing abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights. The work of Brazilian transmedia artist Gabriel Mascaro enters a dialogue with such anxieties and makes a bespoke, utopian proposition: that the abolition of gender stereotypes goes out with neither a bang nor a whimper but rather as a non-event. I call this speculative proposition utopian because it elaborates an unforeseen possibility, a more auspicious alternative to the current scenario, especially with respect to care practices and familial structures under the sway of late capitalism. This analysis of Boi Neon (2015) situates the film in a transitionary moment: a bellwether of the change in zeitgeist that occurred when the forward-thinking of Lula and Dilma Rousseff devolved into retrograde, reckless leadership or, as many Brazilians call it, the* desgoverno *of Jair Bolsonaro. My reading of this cultural production situates this film as political in nature and decolonial in reception.*

Resumo: *Ansiedades profundas sobre questões de gênero, conjugalidade e reprodução familial são detectadas mundo afora hoje. Paralelo a isso, a guinada política mundial para a direita, e as chamadas guerras culturais, vão tolhendo o acesso ao aborto e aos direitos LGBTQIA+. A obra do artista transmediático Gabriel Mascaro entra num*

> *diálogo com tais ansiedades e propõe uma discreta utopia: a abolição dos estereótipos de gênero sem alarde, nem lamúria, mas enquanto não-evento. Eu insisto que tal proposição especulativa é utópica, à medida em que ela elabora uma possibilidade pouco prevista, uma alternativa mais frutífera ao atual cenário, sobretudo no que se refere a práticas do cuidar e estruturas familiais sob a influência do capitalismo tardio. Essa análise de Boi Neon (2015) o situa num momento de transição: como termómetro da mudança do zeitgeist definido pela transição dos governos progressistas de Lula e Dilma Rousseff derivando para a direita mais retrógrada e liderança inconsequente, ou, como falam muitos brasileiros, o desgoverno de Jair Bolsonaro. Minha leitura desta produção cultural a situa como sendo política por natureza e decolonial em sua difusão.*

Introduction

In the Brazilian nursery rhyme *Boi da Cara Preta* (Black-faced Bull), a bull is asked to chase a child who is scared of grimaces. In *Boi Neon* (*Neon Bull*, 2015), a child grooms a bull that has been painted with neon colours and put on display, performing rodeos to earn his keep and that of his caregivers. Commodified, unthreatening and cared for here is Gabriel Mascaro's beast, and its burden is to carry an image of Brazil in transformation to international audiences.

Gabriel Mascaro is a visual artist and filmmaker from Recife, a state in Northeast Brazil, who received international attention by screening his documentaries at prestigious film festivals such as IDFA and Locarno. *Boi Neon* is Mascaro's eighth film (second feature film), which premièred in Venice's Orizzonti section, where it won the Special Jury prize. In Brazil, however, the film has been criticised for presenting a progressive Eden where male and female stereotypes

get upended without any consequences. This article aims to advance a dialogue with the critics of such a rosy vision, sadly incongruous with Brazil's shameful top ranking as the most hostile country for LGBTQIA+ individuals (Pinheiro, 2022). Mascaro has been accused of pandering to the transnational festival circuit, which fully embraced his film. In this way, *Boi Neon* renews the discussion of what gets to be called "real (Brazilian) art" at home and abroad.

My analysis proposes that non-events—dramatic occurrences that do not ripple the characters' path—are neither a concession nor an oversight but instead an intentional deployment of a utopian proposition at a time when utopianism sorely needs to be rekindled. This stresses Mascaro's relevance as a contributor to the medium and to Brazilian utopian discourse. Indeed, Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* (2009)—published around the end of the second mandate of President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva—explores our paucity of viable political alternatives and interrogates why our capacity to dream up new utopias has become so crippled. I will engage with critical work by Fabio Andrade (2016), Francis Vogner dos Reis (2016) and Dana Khromov (2021) to elaborate on how the production of such a utopia is at once symptomatic of a domestic political transition in Brazil and an aesthetic method. Responding to these authors will help me situate *Boi Neon* within contemporary Brazilian film production, one that increasingly distances itself from realism, so often an injunction for filmmakers from the global periphery.

A *Boi* Before its Cart

Boi Neon is set in the Brazilian periphery, the *sertão*—the arid backlands in Northeast Brazil—a region often represented in Brazilian cinema. No longer the barren, hunger stricken,

godforsaken territory of *Cinema Novo*, Mascaro's *sertão* is instead a globalised rural area where surfwear factories thrive, and cattle hands order Armani perfumes.

His protagonist is one such cowboy: Iremar (Juliano Cazarré) contrives to become a fashion designer while working with truck-driving go-go girl Galega (Maeve Jinkins) and co-parenting her daughter Cacá (Alyne Santana) in the *vaquejada* (rodeo) circuit. Despite having no legal or biological connection to Galega, Iremar helps her raise Cacá, and she assists his fashion-design ambition by serving as a model for his designs and "early adopter" of his outfits in her performances. His interest in seemingly frivolous fashion design added to his complete libidinal indifference towards Galega, even while in close proximity, leaves Iremar's sexual orientation blurred for most of the film. This constitutes a second implication of Mascaro's method: it allows spectators to find another axis for spectatorial investment that does not rely on certitude, in this case, regarding his characters' sexual orientation.

Iremar's identitarian blurriness may come into focus in the third act, depending on one's reading, once he has a tryst with a security guard/perfume saleswoman Geise (Samya de Lavor). She initiates physical contact at a textile factory, the site of Iremar's aspirations but also a place just as conceivably sterile as the *sertão* itself. *Boi Neon* does not stop at bending gender stereotypes or rerouting spectatorial investment; it also conjoins carnality and motherhood, the highest expression of which is this sex scene. This scene is formally intensified by austere composition and extended duration, which places great demands on Mascaro's spectator, as it exhausts mere titillation before returning spectators to the flatlands of the non-event.

Beyond its aesthetic propositions, it is also worth looking at *Boi Neon* as a global commodity to test the extent to which its formal approaches are informed by the circulation of such a filmic product. The growing trend of coproduction funding, often connected to the festival circuit (Campos, 2013; de Valck 2014; Falicov, 2016), justifies a discussion of its production scheme, festival inclusion and promotion in a transnational context. A key piece of these promotional campaigns is attendance at Q&A events and other types of audience engagement events. This warrants a receptive analysis of Mascaro's aesthetic propositions to assess what kind of affect is triggered in such interactions and to further understand how the filmmaker interacts in audience engagement events. While he may not be openly pandering to this circuit, film festivals are an inevitable scene of courtship—between makers, distributors, programmers, and their agendas—one that encourages a certain readership. A question that animates so many Q&As is posed by Adam Phillips (2015), who suggests that we move away from discussing what the text means. Instead, Phillips encourages inquiring into what we want the text to do for us, acknowledging that readership is always invested. I hope to shed light on the interests that surface in *Boi Neon's* audience engagement events to further our understanding of Mascaro's aesthetics and how it engages with the dynamics of the sphere where his film lands. While this film is a far cry from any attempt to suture a deeply divided Brazil through cinematic storytelling, I stake my claim in the value of a covert attempt to open up unforeseen scenarios in the service of dialectical growth in gender politics in Brazil and to secure for Mascaro a place beyond the burden of representation.

Provisional Gendering

In the period following the release of *Boi Neon*, the pro-life Evangelical movement rose significantly in Brazil. Therefore, it makes sense to characterize this film as a bellwether of the zeitgeist that saw a transition from the progressive, gender-diversity-affirming years of the consecutive presidencies of Lula (2003-2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) and the subsequent swing towards the most retrograde leadership or, as many Brazilians call it, the *desgoverno* (ungovernment) of Jair Bolsonaro. The motor driving this swing was the joining of forces between the right-wing leadership and the evangelical contingent in strategizing to unseat president Rousseff and criminalize President Lula (Cunha 2020).

Sexuality can be framed not only as the starting point of conventional biological reproduction and familial bonds but also as a quintessential expression of will. I will anchor my debate in the gender utopia that Mascaro presents in *Boi Neon* in terms of sexual events and gender performance. In this film, women are allowed to be truck drivers such as Galega or security guards like Geise and cattle hands such as Iremar aspiring fashion designers on the basis of will. Alternative familial formations, such as in the case of Iremar performing safeguarding and mentoring roles for Cacá, are also couched on will alone. Altogether, sex takes on a very divergent finality from reproduction in *Boi Neon*: Geise does not have sex to produce offspring, as she is already pregnant, and neither does Galega, who also has sex outside of any co-parenting intent. Dana Khromov argues that this film fosters "a sustained state of sensual arousal, a deployment of the erotic that releases it from conventional dramatic and reproductive functions" (2021, p. 427).

Although Brazil has no shortage of representations of out-of-wedlock, non-procreational sex, the question gains a political dimension here: who is entitled to such recreational sex and on what grounds? Second, what happens when an existing pregnancy is not a deterrent to sexuality and when maternity is dislodged from a frame of self-sacrifice, no longer fragmenting women into mother-whore stereotypes? Galega is a sexual agent when she buys provocative underwear and flirts with the salesman while remaining protective and maternal when Cacá skins her knee. These represented characters evade some level of gender normativity, which was in the process of being dialled down in the PT years. The outrage against the Workers Party leadership's more expansive gender and family policies in Brazil perhaps speaks to the ongoing tension around gender mores. *Boi Neon* engages with such tensions by means of speculative alternative formations. The loss of the exclusive privilege to representations of wilful, recreational sex might be seen as just as threatening to the Brazilian ruling class as the loss of exclusivity of air travel enabled by the PT government (Cavalcante, 2019).

According to dos Reis (2016), *Boi Neon* is the least political, in that meaningful situations, wishes and desires are presented, and none of them bear many consequences or resistance. As mentioned earlier, upending gender roles has no power to unravel society in this film, and gender subversive action does not evoke a reaction. This disconnect between action and reaction is resonant with Argentine filmmaker Lucrecia Martel's divine apparitions in *La Ciénaga* (2001) and *The Holy Girl* (2004), a non-event that fails to redeem anything, embodying what she calls "the levity of revelation" (Andreani Foundation, 2020, own translation). What Martel ties to revelation, Mascaro seems to have invested in his non-event, as if asking: what if abolishing these gendered

strictures bore no degrading impact on social organization whatsoever? This type of speculation is as political a gesture as any, in the sense that it works to disarm the existing gender panic (Pinheiro, 2022), which, as the Bolsonaro years have proven, has always been simmering in Brazil. This imagined social dissolution due to subversive performance of gender is as much speculation as Mascaro's utopia.

In addition to disentangling action from reaction, Mascaro also addresses another sensitive point in family-centric Brazil: alternative familial organisations. Family composition was in flux in Brazil, arguably in connection with PTs' progressive policies, which encouraged women to stay single longer with more education, job stability, economic independence and contraception plans. The National Family Observatory noted a substantial 16% decrease in the number of nuclear families in the last two decades before this 2015 report (Figure 1).

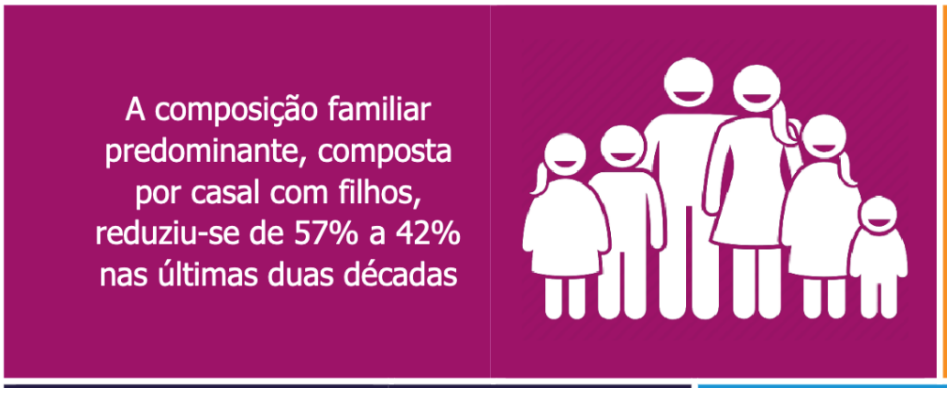

Figure 1: "The dominant family unit, made up of a couple with children, had gone down from 57% to 42% in the last two decades": Fatos e Números: Arranjos Familiares no Brasil, Observatório Nacional da Família 2015, p. 2

This shift occurred at a historic moment when Brazil's policies enabled education and economic autonomy, including social policies that addressed gender equality (Cunha, 2020), and, along with global trends, contributed to a diversification of family constitutions outside the norm of the heterosexual nuclear family. Mascaro's characters constitute a family by means of care practices and common objectives. They are all invested in the *vaquejada* performances, Galega supports Iremar's costume designs, Cacá's upbringing, and Cacá helps him by taking on animal grooming duties. This mutual aid could also be considered a rosy vision.

Unlike the progressive world of *Boi Neon,* Brazil witnessed a vehement regressive trend: the Evangelical leadership, a significant driver of this reaction, was eventually rewarded with the nomination of pastor Damares Alves as Minister of Families, Women and Human Rights by Bolsonaro. Her first statement as an elected official raved about going back to the normative apex of girls wearing pink and boys wearing blue, a vocal pushback against the LGBTQIA+ rights conquered, including the legalisation of same-sex families.

Boi Neon neutralises gender subversion and makes it irrelevant. Mindful of the impact of industrialization, Mascaro purposefully draws on the economics of the *vaquejada* circuit and the protean social organization to challenge gender stereotypes. The opposite sentiment was expressed by the Brazilian conservative values crusade, ringing alarm bells against things such as unisex bathrooms causing social dissolution and promoting enduring fake news around the school distribution of supposed "gay conversion kits"[1].

[1] Human Rights Watch has been monitoring the extreme reactions to a fantasised gay "indoctrination' initiative, fuelled by fake-news campaigns of the Brazilian right (see, e.g., Cabrera, 2020).

Mascaro challenges this conservative rising tide in Brazil, with *Boi Neon's* speculative utopia, and takes it to the extreme, with the futuristic dystopia of his subsequent film *Divino Amor* (*Divine Love*, 2019), in which, similar to *Handmaiden's Tale* (2017), fertility rates have plummeted, and 'viable' women are the most coveted and regulated commodity. Instead of rural workers, the protagonists of *Divino Amor* are urban, tech savvy evangelicals who host sacrosanct fertility rituals where group sex practices are seen benignly in the name of religion and no less oppressive for it. If in *Boi Neon* sensual encounters were willed by autonomous individuals who engaged in them on their own terms, sexualizing places of industrial production, there is a reversal of this in *Divino Amor*, where the prudish space of the evangelical sect becomes sexualised by the need to supply the market with new life. Sex is reproduction driven, mass enforced and not necessarily successful. The consequential non-event for the protagonist of *Divino Amor*, Joana (Dira Paes), is that she fails to become pregnant, which unravels her life, whereas Geise is visible in all her prenatal voluptuousness. Joana's job is to prevent couples from divorcing by imposing a barrage of bureaucracy. Thus, Mascaro's oeuvre moves from surf and fashion wear productions to a regulated effort to produce babies and the attempt to keep families intact, reflecting the demands of an increasingly polarised Brazil.

Mascaro addressed certain social anxieties in *Boi Neon* before the country tipped over, but instead of reproducing the country at that moment, it imagined the next stage of a national progress that was thwarted by conservative forces, whereas in *Divino Amor*, he held up a mirror taking Evangelical rhetoric to an extreme. If *Boi Neon* was gestated and produced in the years that bore the imprint of progressive values, its release occurred during the transitional period which

followed, between Rousseff's impeachment in May 2016 and the election of Bolsonaro. Fabio Andrade (2020) acknowledges that "categorising filmmaking practices by presidential tenure might seem arbitrary". While I broadly agree with this statement, it seems that both *Boi Neon* and *Divino Amor* are remarkably attuned to their very distinct tenures.

Post-PT Sertão

Just as the PT's progressive policies touched a nerve within the nation, Mascaro's speculative possibilities also caused a stir in the receptive sphere. Dos Reis criticises *Boi Neon*'s dramatic world, where poverty does not equate with deprivation and where labour does not bear the stain of exploitation. This omission, he claims, proves easy for colonial powers, especially in view of this film's ability to project an image of Brazil to Western audiences, given Mascaro's latitude in this global circuit. Indeed, *Boi Neon* is transnational at its very inception, something that surely bears on the images of the *sertão* it projects for the world to see: it is a coproduction between Brazil (Desvia Filmes), Uruguay (Malbicho Filmes), and the Netherlands (Viking Films), and it received funding from Ibermedia (Spain), Canal Brasil (Brazil) and the Hubert Bals Fund (IFFR).

Before he wove himself in the global arthouse scene, Mascaro "came of age" as an artist and filmmaker during the Lula government, when a strong federal programme decentralised culture funds and spread resources beyond the Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo industrial axis. Northeast Brazil was one of the great beneficiaries of this programme, which enabled filmmaking

talent such as Kleber Mendonça Filho, Aly Muritiba and Claudio Assis. Mascaro basked in the spotlight cast upon the region from within and without Brazil.

Dos Reis extensively compares *Boi Neon* to *Bye, Bye, Brazil* (1980), by Carlos Diegues, in that both feature performers who travel though the backlands and were produced under eras of expansion in the Brazilian economy (the building of the trans-Amazonian highway in *Bye, Bye Brazil* and the transregional growth egged on by the Lula years in *Boi Neon*). While the migrant couple who joins the performance troupe in Diegues's film does so out of need, Iremar alternates between cattle work and fashion design out of his own freewill. "The world of Iremar is born out of desire more than necessity" (2016), he claims. If the sole legacy of the Lula years was that it allowed freewill and desire into the popular existential lexicon, that strikes me not as a luxury so much as a belated acceptance of Brazilian Northeasterners as desiring, no longer solely engrossed by survival, in short, moved by what makes us full subjects. According to dos Reis, the film falls in an ideological trap and a fetishisation of style: the lack of conflict and dialectic makes this film a seductive poster for contemporary agendas and aesthetics. He thus questions the seamlessness of the deconstruction of traditional gender roles in the Brazilian backlands: "Why does the director satisfy himself with merely lifting the curtain upon a "new reality"?" (2016). Mascaro's for-export utopia is deemed irresponsible, for all that it does in oversimplifying reality.

In his article entitled *Brazil in Social Unrest: Cinema in a Provisional State* (2020), Andrade comments on other films from the same period—*Araby* (2017), *Boas Maneiras* (*Good Manners*, 2017) and *Era Uma Vez Brasilia* (*Once Upon a Time in Brasilia*, *2017*)—and claims that they do not pander to but resist this circuit's demand for an ostensible double mandate: to fit within "national

cinema," which performs this country's heuristics and stands as "real art," a cohesive and acceptable aesthetic of representation of narrow range. National cinema, a long-established force in Brazilian cinema (Shaw and Dennison, 2007; Johnson and Stam, 1995), is defined as film production, which provides a societal mirror image, supported by public funding and its selection criteria, is driven by a primordial desire to draw the contours of the relatively young nation on the big screen and to inscribe it into a legitimized global existence. Meanwhile, Americans "enjoyed the luxury of being above petty nationalist concerns" (Stam and Xavier, 1997, p. 297). Perhaps *Boi Neon's* strongest national trait is the fact that it takes place in the *sertão*—as mentioned earlier, the iconic arid landscape that characterises the Northeast in Brazilian cinema, a desert one must overcome, a motivator of centrifugal trajectories, in that this region is known to provide migrant labourers to the rest of the country.

When Andrade writes that "one now solicits the right to be whomever one chooses to be for a little under two hours" (2016), he seems to pick up on the film's self-consciousness, aware of the provisionality of cinematic suspension. He then compares it to both *Bye, Bye Brazil* (1980) and *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station* 1998), where characters travel towards a clear objective. Mascaro's characters can choose to stay, according to Andrade, in a film that starts in a new backland and ends there too. When addressing *Araby* (2017), Andrade comments on another unlikely filmic road trip, this one on foot, whereas *Boi Neon's* navigates in circles. Dislocation in both films is no longer aspirational and ambitious, but it remains wilful. The search here is not for a new *topo*s but for "the opportunity to refine the artistry of the gesture" (2016). Andrade describes *Araby* as "apolitical 'art cinema' [which] is politicized from within" (2020). *Boi Neon* is

internally politicised whenever it confronts spectators with their own assumptions, especially around the dynamics between its characters, and by means of a compelling filmic grammar, as I will develop further. Mascaro's film is still politicised in a conventional way to the extent that it includes the expansion of agrobusiness, the export textile industry and the centrality of gender politics on the eve a transformation where Brazil regressed so quickly.

To conclude, my thoughts around the new *sertão*, as a trending locus: circularity also structures Marcelo Gomes' 2019 documentary *Estou Me Guardando Para Quando o Carnaval Chegar* (*Waiting for the Carnival*), where a small town, also in the backlands, revolves around denim manufacture. Folks work 13-14 hours a day, six days a week, taking a yearly break for Carnival, when they borrow money to afford the small luxury of going to the coast. It is almost as if Gomes' film had rearranged all of Mascaro's anchoring elements: the textile industry in the *sertão*, labour conditions, and meaningful extravagances. Such extravagances constitute an allowance made to the Brazilian working class, which, after all, saw its GDP grow significantly (Kaufman and Escribano, 2013) since the years that gave us *Bye, Bye, Brazil*. It follows that representations of working-class characters indulging in the occasional capricious consumer habit or being moved by will, and not subsistence alone, would become more common.

Post-Eroticism: Formal Strategies

Andrade's definition of art cinema is "real location houses real problems that get in the way of characters who seem to lack any desire or goal, weaving the story arc towards an open-ended narrative" (2020). With four characters merely spinning around the *vaquejada* circuit, who

never seem to achieve a clear outcome, lack of desire seems less applicable to *Boi Neon*, where the validation of desire replaces questionable hope for something that might fundamentally change their condition.

The greatest expression of a wilful desire occurs in the sexual encounters taking place in *Boi Neon.* Although Galega's seduction of a younger cow hand also deserves attention, I will deepen my formal analysis of the encounter between Geise and Iremar to understand how it marries formal strategies of politicising from within to the film's gender utopianism. Dos Reis claims that the sexual encounter between Geise and Iremar reduces her to a hyperfemininity (pregnancy) and him to a hypermasculinity (the primitive labourer) in a very heteronormative coitus, filmed with a 'publicitarian persuasiveness' and achieving a 'regime of visibility.' To extract meaning from this scene, Reis demands a consequence from the sexual encounter between a pregnant woman who claims her desire for casual sex and a wannabe fashion designer who finally had access to the site where his ardent aspirations might play out. This faith in payoffs, or revelations, is precisely what drives the hegemonic cinema that Mascaro seems to be divesting from. The scene does, however, advance the matter of Iremar's desire. He may or may not be attracted to women, but he is certainly mesmerized by the sight of new life within Geise. I suggest reading this pregnancy as an embryonic Brazil in 2015, full of possibility. Andrade encapsulates the sex scene as an expression of Iremar's "desire for transcendence of his own condition" (2016), but I propose that a more accurate statement would be that this is an expression of Mascaro's desire for Iremar's transcendence, lest we forsake that Iremar is his fictional character.

Iremar's aesthetic fascination, whether directed to metallic synthetic fabrics or gestating bodies, gives him a symbolic dimension, normally not associated with cattle hands in the backlands. Failing to give him such a dimension would perpetuate Cesar Gonzalez's (2021) notion of marginality fetishism, where marginal characters are deprived of layers such as flights of fancy, ambivalence and so on, reducing them to a raw one-dimensionality. The force of will and desire can and must inhabit these characters, as a site of *potência*, a Portuguese and Spanish term, ill-translated as potency, more than power, a Deleuzian becoming more than stable, achieved clout and leverage.

In her aptly titled analysis, *The Transgressive Force of the Erotic: Boi Neon's Sensual Speculation in Northeast Brazil* (2021), Khromov claims that Mascaro destabilises multiple dyads, such as urban/rural, male/female, and human/animal, and creates "lines of flight from late capitalist agro-industry's extractivist and heteropatriarchal order" (2021, p. 438). The director introduces Geise as an itinerant perfume saleswoman, who also works as a security guard at the surf wear factory at night. She sells one commodity, perfumes, which is predominantly associated with femininity, while working a job predominantly associated with men—security guard. She embodies maternity (presumably achieved by hors-text reproductive sex) and performs promiscuity, which goes against Reis' argument for reducing to hyper femininity, or at least a patriarchal vision of femininity. Again, Mascaro does not reproduce reality; he produces a utopia, where a willed transactional sexual encounter is, without consequence, good or bad; this tryst is rhetorical, a non-event.

Khromov anchors her notion of the erotic in both George Bataille's conception of it as "the sensual engagement with the other at the limits of the boundaries to the self" (2021, p. 438) and in Audre Lorde's extension of it "beyond the sexual to the everyday mundane activities" (idem, p. 439). With that composite notion, she includes grooming, so frequently included in this film—Galega waxes, Iremar uses perfume, and Cacá brushes horsehair—under the banner of erotic endeavor, and even spectatorial engagement, for all that it entails in terms of blurring the boundaries between spectator self and identification with the celluloid other. Khromov conflates the erotic with the mill of quotidian lives, something that purportedly characterizes this apolitical cinema of humdrum trajectories.

Grooming might also be lensed under Andrade's "artistry of the gesture," or even as a care practice. In his 2022 campaign, Lula profusely used the expression "*cuidar do Brasil*" in a clear nod to care politics, opposing the pandemic negligence of Bolsonaro. Gestures of care are at once political, erotic and gendered within the world of *Boi Neon*.

Dos Reis (2022) also noted that around 2015 Brazil was being governed by its first female president, Dilma Rousseff, and the general sentiment that erupted with the #MeToo movement contributed a few heroines to Brazilian cinema. While in *Boi Neon,* women are not the protagonists, they are featured as assertive and moved by will: it is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that Geise is the initiator of sexual contact. Mascaro, attuned to these gender-political tendencies, roots his speculative utopia in the surrounding reality at the time and projects it further.

With respect to formal strategies, Andrade affirms that what makes the sex scene emblematic are two things: a precise choreography of assertive gestures—Geise's decided gaze and the charged way in which Iremar touches her pregnant belly—and the use of durational shots. The latter, he claims, move us away from the stultifying shock value and into confronting ourselves with our expectations and prejudices surrounding such an encounter. This use of a leisurely, uninterrupted shot from a sedate medium distance stands in direct contrast to a scrutinizing study of the pregnant, sexualized body through a series of analytical shots. Framing bodies from a certain distance, Mascaro claimed in his Toronto Film Festival Q&A, enabled a better sense of intimacy than awkward close-ups, which tend to dissect dramatic action. Proximity and distance, violence and pleasure, playing out in the body are recurring topics in most reception-related events for *Boi Neon*.

These aesthetic choices approximate Mascaro to 'slow cinema', which is often defined by durational unfoldings. It takes an audience with the ability to make time for intellectual endeavours—as opposed to a quick fix of entertainment before they resume their working week—to bear with extended duration and de-dramatisation. It bears noting that in Brazil, films such as *Boi Neon* are mostly watched by art-house-going urban elites, not rural labourers like Iremar and Galega. Therefore, Mascaro might be assumed to address this class, which has always had the privilege of will and recreational sex, which the film concedes to labourers.

Andrade (2022) claims that drama indeed takes place not within the narrative, in the form of action-reaction in the plot, but between the viewer and the film. This displacement towards the spectatorial evocative mobilises the audience's affects more than the displayed narrative events.

Andrade frames this film as political to the extent that it draws one to one's own condition, something that necessitates a level of removal enabled by the distant camera. Finally, Andrade points to a visual pun in making Geise a pistol-carrying security guard, referring to the Brazilian slang *pistoleira*, which qualifies women with no qualms about being sexually forward.

It is precisely this use of the sensual encounter as the ripest opportunity for the political exercise of what Andrade calls autonomy, but I prefer to name as an act of accountability for our preexisting conceptions of what these subjects should be, that leads me to affirm that Mascaro is indeed using the red herring to his advantage. While we are busy making sense of this atypical rural environment, which we expect to be inhabited by simple folk, he gives us characters with dimensions that we peel away at the cost of having to confront our own prejudices around pregnant women, cowhands, and go-go dancers.

This *Boi* is Situated: In Reception.

I have already mentioned *Boi Neon's* transnational origin and will now approach the international reception this film enjoyed, probing into symptomatic readings to verify whether Mascaro overtly played into the hands of the art-house circuit and what it expects to validate as "real (Brazilian) art". Tracking audience engagement with *Boi Neon* is important due to two factors: first, today, a filmmaker must increasingly aid spectators in processing the filmic text, and second, a film from the global South (in another language and bearing foreign cultural codes) will impose even more textual hurdles for the spectator to overcome. This handholding is a mission that far exceeds Mascaro, or even any global South filmmaker, and it often takes the

shape of creating a semblance of intimacy and priviness. One might, for instance, feel like one has become closer to Martin Rejtman, for watching his Criterion Channel closet selection, and now knowing his childhood favourites. In a current context where one has access to seemingly infinite content and a weakened sense of community, the draw of audience engagement lies in its capacity to establish a semblance of closeness where exclusive anecdotes, for example, may be dealt for the discriminating spectator. This impression of complicity makes an event out of the regular screening.

Another testament to a contemporary demand for this type of engagement with the audience is how New York City's art-house Roxy Cinema not only holds such discursive events but also makes a bulky catalogue of them available online.

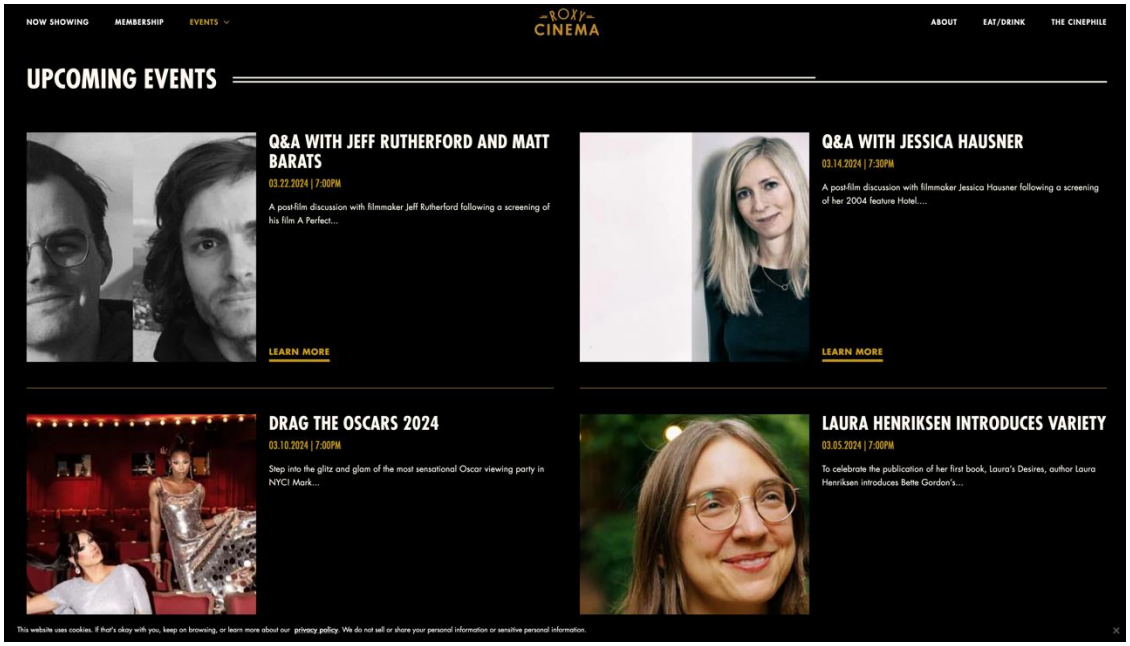

Figure 2: Roxy Cinema webpage screen caption.

Live events that aid textual digestion might also aim at coaxing audiences back into theatres, as at-home, individual, streaming viewership continues to gather momentum. Both entertainment films and art-house fare fight uphill battles to keep theatres relevant against the demise of social film viewing; thus, regardless of whether they return to gimmicks such as Wim Wenders' *Anselm* (2023), which requires theatrical 3D glasses, or the release of *Barbie* (2023), which was fuelled by pink clothing flash-mobbing, or by surrounding screenings with Q&A's and introductions that create a sense of a discursive community, the picture is clear: the circuit is responding to the demise of social film viewing by providing incentives, which leave the spectator with a surplus sentiment; they are no longer just a consumer, they are part of a cognizant community.

While writing about Locarno Film Festival's 2022 edition, critic Bernardo Oliveira (2022) comments on the reach of this new wave of Brazilian cinema vis-à-vis the transnational imprint of Brazil abroad. Oliveira starts by reminding us how the Lula years caused tectonic shifts for the filmmaking elite, who had their class and race-based privileges checked. Subsequently, under Bolsonaro's rule, funding for arts and culture was deeply cut, rolling back some of the advances the film industry had made in supporting lower income filmmakers and filmmakers of colour.

Brazilian filmmakers have become increasingly reliant on foreign funding, which requires mastery of foreign languages, connections, or means to attend coproduction markets and so on, or access to privately raised capital, which implies belonging to such elites. These methods of securing film production accentuate preexisting problems of diversity and representation politics, described by Oliveira as follows:

> Signalling "I care"—emotional blackmail—as a hiring policy. Curators, financiers, festivals and distributors are inclined to favour the signs of the racial agenda without, however, contracting great debts: white guilt is awarded, and black experimentation quashed. An appeal to racial sensibility is maintained by an imagination limited by the narrowness of form. Style, that is, technique and imagination, are necessarily secondary qualities. What matters is that they are "our stories." The commitment to widening the experimental horizon can be delayed in the name of a petty levelling. (2022, translation my own).

Although he is talking about a moment that is posterior to *Boi Neon's* release, Oliveira detects which progressive vision of Brazil appeals to Western audiences: one that, by focusing on gender norm discussions, does not implicate colonial powers and therefore does not generate discomfort abroad. To counter this "petty levelling", Oliveira encourages more viewership of Brazilian indigenous filmmakers (such as the collectively authored productions of the Xavantes, Kaiowas, Kuikuros, Maxakalis tribes), who have diverged formally far more and, not surprisingly, circulate way less internationally.

Figure 3: "Neon Bull Q&A/Gabriel Mascaro and Rachel Elis/New Directors, New Films 2016": https://www.filmlinc.org/daily/watch-gabriel-mascaro-neon-bull/

Unclashing as it is, Mascaro's formal style appeals to most audiences. In the Q&A following *Boi Neon's* American premiere at *New Directors, New Films* (Film at Lincoln Center, 2016) Dennis Lim posits two main points, blending style and content: that the *vaquejada* circuit becomes spectacularised and that Mascaro's film has a documentary calibre, which causes an estrangement with the introduction of a cowboy who wants to be a fashion designer, and other such gender bending. Mascaro calmly affirms that it was never his intention to merely reverse gender roles but to expand these categories, exemplified, for instance, by the fact that Galega fixes a truck one minute and buys provocative lingerie the next. In addition to encouraging his audience to leave binary conceptions behind, he also demands that they disengage from trying to make sense of a world necessarily distant from theirs, that of the Brazilian backlands.

> Iremar cultivates a desire for that factory; to him, it is almost a temple. It is precisely where fabric is cut on a large scale, fabric that will be used to cover bodies, that's where they disrobe. Women in the Northeast are closely associated with sanctitude and purity. Many cowboys won't even touch a pregnant woman. In addition, like any other woman, she has a situation of desire, choice, bodily autonomy, and the film tries to normalize that, past a first moment of shock, so one dips in and out of the scene and this thing which Iremar and Geise are living, but the scene gives you time for this. So you can leave behind the "why?" and join this shared experience (Film at Lincoln Center, 2016).

An audience that has no prior knowledge of the mores of the region might read a film like *Boi Neon* along very different lines. What does this speculative configuration of Brazil that is unencumbered by restrictive stereotypes have to offer? And how does this fluctuating engagement of attention, encouraged by the director, enable an encounter with a potentially discomforting way to shoot a sex scene?

Carrying the tension inherent to the world premiere at the Venice Film Festival, which is bound to kickstart this film's distribution career, Mascaro phrases a taut and tweetable statement showing how apt he is in positioning his film, his commodity, to attract the interest of international distributors. In a deliberate, rhythmic intonation, Mascaro declares that this is a film about human landscapes, bodies in *contradiction, coexistence and conflict* with their surroundings. Note the alliterative triad he uses. Mascaro, like any filmmaker in the current distribution market, does well to optimise his film's exposure by being aware of his mediatic performance in audience engagement events.

This changes at the far more mellow, low-stakes festival in Tromsø, Norway (2016), which Mascaro attended having already secured a Norwegian distributor. Conversations yielded an engaging and relaxed dialogue, which warrants my commenting on these more significant answers in greater depth.

Figure 4: "Filmprat/Film Talks: Regissør Gabriel Mascaro om "Neon Bull"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hh5mdu0iSw&ab_channel=Mtages

Instead of being starkly on display on a stage, Mascaro chats with Karsten Meinich (*Montages*, 2016) at a bar stool, albeit in front of a camera and small audience, but at ease. Meinich is clearly a seasoned facilitator, familiar with Mascaro's filmography, who has medidated upon *Boi Neon.* He takes an earnest interest in its propositions without needing to give the filmmaker a

platform to shine his 'selling points,' so to speak. Mascaro's answers in this event become anecdotal, unguarded, and the back and forth between them flows effortlessly.

Meinich starts with a brief introduction in Norwegian, saying he hopes to be pronouncing the director's name properly, then "I'll switch to English now because Norwegian wouldn't be so easy, and Portuguese wouldn't be so easy either." He acknowledges his ignorance (of Portuguese pronunciation) and puts both languages Norwegian and Portuguese on equal footing, as not easily accessible to most. A small gesture that encourages horizontality.

The conversation opens with Meinich talking about the patchwork family formation that, according to him, extends beyond the trio of Iremar, Galega and Cacá but also includes close contact with the animals they care for. He compliments Mascaro for contrasting the grit and sweat of the *vaquejada* labour, with the flamboyancy of perfumes and elaborate costumes. Mascaro responds with slight variation in earlier answers, affirming that his interest rests in macho bravery and sensibility inhabiting the same body.

Next, there is a palpable mix of surprise and contentment in Meinich's expression because, in this film, although the characters have dreams, they seem to be leading ordinary happy lives. Arguably, he first expected to see impoverished, hunger-stricken Brazilians, the subject of marginality fetishism, defined by such privations, and his surprise comes not from seeing challenges to gender identity but from suddenly seeing such characters having decent lives. However, this was not a speculative but a verifiable vison of Brazil in 2015.[2]

[2] For more on how Lula's presidency removed Brazil from the UN's hunger map and improved the overall quality of life of the population, see Montambeault and Ducatenzeiler (2014).

Meinich found the title of the film very endearing, going as far as to compare Iremar to the neon-coloured bull before the rodeo show—a colourful creature, not like the others. Mascaro clarifies that, to him, the title alludes to a third entity, one that results from modernity—represented by the neon paint—combined with the brute force of the bull to speak of a world that has transformed far too rapidly, much like the *sertão* itself.

Of course, the sex scene is not off the hook. Meinich clumsily tries to phrase a more direct or eloquent question, coyly ending up by blurting out: "I don't know what my question is, but can you just talk a bit about shooting this scene?" The mediator's curiosity and prudish demeanour are met by the filmmaker with a generous, unfolding answer. Having read the script and being aware of Mascaro's background in documentary film, the actors expected the scene to be intense, "but not *that* intense," he grins. Juliano Cazarré (Iremar) was seemingly so stressed about the scene with the pregnant Geise that he forgot to discuss the scene where his character must masturbate a purebred racehorse to sell its semen on the black market, a valuable commodity in the rodeo circuit. When shooting the masturbation scene, Cazarré was stunned that there were no prosthetics involved and refused to go forward.

Although Mascaro's English falters here or there, he still displays a good sense of punchy storytelling, relishing the description of their long negotiation, until finally, Cazarré said he would shoot the scene on the condition that Mascaro masturbated the horse first. Meinich is quick to dispel any uneasiness around this revelation by swerving the conversation into this scene's naturalism, taking away any sentiment of shock or horror for the viewer. The masturbation scene also preps the viewer for the couple's sex scene, he claims. We know that, in this dramatic world,

the camera will not avert discomfiting sights. The horse scene is shot at a similar medium length, not allowing our gaze to ease up from the man/animal contact but holding long enough for such discomfort to play itself out in duration. We no longer wonder how cattle workers perform this task; now we know, there is an instructive dimension to this scene. Mascaro remarked that a quick snippet of this action would produce humour but that his main tool to politicize a film is to use duration to break expectations and allow other layers and different dimensions to develop.[3]

The last question concerns working with the Hubert Bals Fund (HBF), an institution that tends to predispose Meinich's interest in a film. Having phrased the question thusly, he puts Mascaro in a tight spot, should the latter have anything less than flattering to say about his collaboration with the HBF. Mascaro's *Ventos de Agosto* (*August Winds*, 2014) premiered at Rotterdam, giving him an opening towards the associated fund. This involvement with the HBF resulted in having a DoP from Mexico, a producer and a location sound recordist from Uruguay, while most of the postproduction was performed in the Netherlands. Mascaro acknowledges the "intercultural impact" of the film and concludes that this was a positive experience.

Even in the relatively unguarded space of an intimate, generous interview in a festival bar space, we can see how these two men still perform certain roles, which the circumstance demands of them. Meinich is a conscientious, attentive facilitator who has a background in film editing, and this shows in the interview. Mascaro follows his lead and branches beyond his basic repertoire in Norway, willing to expose potentially compromising production backstories.

[3] Perhaps he is helped here by Diego Garcia, the DoP Mascaro shares with Apitchatpong Weerasethakul, whom Meinich also associates with lingering shots.

Having already secured a distributor gives him the luxury of a sole obligation to be charming and usher Norwegians into a Brazil that they might not expect but which they are willing to contend with.

Conclusion

I started this discussion of *Boi Neon* by weighing in on whether Mascaro's utopian vision was pandering to transnational ideations and what might be underwriting his speculative dramatic universe. The more interesting exercise, however, might be to shift the conversation to the question posed earlier by Adam Phillips: what does the audience of *Boi Neon* want this utopian vision to do for them? Dos Reis has put it at the service of market demands, whereas Andrade prefers to cast it as an exercise in autonomy and dissensus.

Dos Reis concludes his review of *Boi Neon* as follows:

> It is easy to legitimise Boi Neon for all that is perfectly legitimisable within it (its themes, its visual empathy, its success), just as it's equally convenient to delegitimise it, with a more sulking gaze, for being a film that adroitly responds—consciously?—to the prescriptions of the "auteur cinema" market in international festivals, following in the trail of other films—Brazilian or not—which have previously occupied this place with more mediatic fanfare (2016, translation my own).

He connects three key points that I have contended with in my analysis: mediatic fanfare (Geise and Iremar's sex scene over-examined in the media and in reception), the auteur cinema incumbency to represent the region, and a kernel of legitimacy even as it portrays a utopian

Brazil. The sex scene presents two subjects who eroticise a space that is home to neither but which they traverse in employment (Geise) or in fantasy (Iremar). The fanfare it receives, as Reis contends (2022), promotes this film as an encapsulation of the Brazilian narrative of itself, comprised of boundless libido and seamless potentiality. Mascaro may have meant to stage "bodies in *contradiction, coexistence and conflict* with their surroundings" in production, but in transnational readership, it still lands as compelling exotica. Daniela Berghahn's association of the exotic to "a time or place where intensity of feeling was possible" (2019, p. 48) enables an understanding of *Boi Neon* that reaffirms Brazil as a provider of exoticism, causing observers such as Meinich to blush with its lengthy, real-time, sex scenes.

This export factor does not invalidate Andrade's statement that *Boi Neon* displaces drama from the intranarrative sphere onto constituting the in-between space bridging film and audience, where the evocative question is often "what will you, spectator, make of this proposition?" as a political gesture demanding singular responses. Perhaps what gave this film traction is less of a pandering and more of its resonance with the current spectatorial demand for more of a dialogue rather than a passive reception of content. Mascaro's formal rigour invites spectators to go beyond a Barthesian punctum and into an elliptical reckoning, as they dip in and out of their personal echo chamber and the film. The foremost example of this is how sex and performance become less of a titillation and more of a confrontation.

While *Boi Neon* may be read to provide exotic rewards, it exempts itself from explaining the region in more didactic servitude. This is verified by the absence of explanations of the geographic and human topography of the *sertão*, something that potentially only the northern

Brazilians would be qualified to explain. Mascaro presents as a subject, not as a Brazilian, spotlighting universal affects (creative drive, carnality, parental disposition), which are the main conduits of his film.

By backhandedly presenting alternative familial formations and recreational sex between willing equals without overt dramatic fuss, Mascaro has produced a work that is true to the sense of possibility experienced in Brazil during the Lula years. Speculating new realities becomes the ultimate fertilising gesture. While Brazil was not living a proper revolution, the sentiment that transformation was possible was peaking, especially for a sector of the population that had been routinely left out. Mascaro's speculations reflect as much and give that sector visibility, as *Bye, Bye, Brazil* and *Central do Brasil* also did. Mascaro goes a step further in endowing these characters with finer, unexpected facets, normalising finer affects to labourers as he expands them beyond bare subsistence.

While Mascaro's speculations have no real sway in the art-house market—which will continue to applaud curiously indexical titles such as *Argentina, 1985* (Mitre, 2022) and *Chile '76* (Martinelli, 2023)—neither did it prove to be a career game changer such as *Amores Perros (2000)* for Alejandro Gonzalez Iñarritu. Mascaro's speculative cinema and defining trait as auteur remains, as I see it, that he concocts an alternate reality, without tragic consequences in attendance of such social shifts. He is not rallying troops, militating as *Cinema Novo* did; he is resolutely inviting us to contemplate that certain values, which we hold as unchangeable, might be subtracted without any great harm.

To circle back to the motifs of the nursery rhyme *Boi da Cara Preta*, a grimace presents a new configuration of a face. This body part metonymically stands for identity and can often be seen as threatening by less skilled onlookers. The child becomes scared because it perceives this facial change as a malevolent distortion. Bulls are also present in Brazilian vernacular in the expression *boi de piranha* (piranha bull), a sacrificial bull sent ahead so one can cross a piranha riverbed in peace. Arguably there is an echo of this expression in Mascaro's film, one that invites biting criticism to hopefully make way for a new post-gender era. Given that conservative forces will never stop projecting fear of social dissolution caused by gender reconfigurations, it becomes even more important to join Mascaro's exercise of speculating a utopia of Brazil that might exist, rendering the *sertões* as greener pastures and giving their *bois* more room to roam.

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