



Se Eu Fosse Você:
liminal spaces of
gender and sexuality
Se Eu Fosse Você:
espaços limiars de
gênero e sexualidade



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Abstract: The body swap comedy is a privileged genre for investigating norms related to gender and sexuality in popular culture. This article explores these norms through the close analysis of the film *Se eu fosse você* (Daniel Filho, 2006), using Mikhail Bakhtin's thesis on the carnivalesque and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Despite the film's overall strong conservative framework, it is argued that just as revealing as what the film tries to regulate is what it exposes: double standards, failures in the heteronormative matrix, and disruptive sex acts and gendered behavior.

Keywords: globochanchada; neochanchada; gender; sexuality; carnivalesque; performativity.

Resumo: O subgênero da troca de corpos na comédia é um *locus* privilegiado para a investigação de normas relacionadas a gênero e sexualidade na cultura popular. O presente artigo explora essas normas através da análise fílmica de *Se eu fosse você* (Daniel Filho, 2006), utilizando como embasamento teórico o carnavalesco de Mikhail Bakhtin e a teoria da performatividade de Judith Butler. Apesar de apresentar uma estrutura altamente conservadora, tão importante quanto o que o filme tenta regular é o que ele expõe: padrões duplos, falhas na matriz heteronormativa, e atos sexuais e comportamentos de gênero disruptivos.

Palavras-chave: globochanchada; neochanchada; gênero; sexualidade; carnavalesco; performatividade.

Introduction

In 1998, during the Revival of Brazilian Cinema (*Retomada*), the Globo conglomerate formed its film division, Globo Filmes. Less than a decade later, by 2006, Globo Filmes had co-produced and/or distributed all of the national top 20 grossing films since the *Retomada* (RÊGO; ROCHA, 2011, p. 56). In the last decades, the scenario has changed with the emergence of Record Network and its religious films, and independent producer companies specialised in local blockbusters, such as Total Entertainment and Diamond Back, but Globo Filmes historically represented a shift in the production of popular cinema in Brazil, moving from an almost artisanal mode of production towards a more refined and highly professionalised production.

Due to Globo's importance, once defined as "an economic, political and ideological institution" (SINCLAIR *et al. apud* RÊGO; ROCHA, 2011, p. 55), in 2009, director Guilherme de Almeida Prado coined the term *globochanchada* to refer to the comedies produced by Globo Filmes (ALPENDRE, 2009). In more recent years, the term *neochanchada* has also been used to refer to the new wave of comedy films in Brazilian cinema. As this article refers to specific films produced by Globo Filmes, the term used throughout will be *globochanchada*.

The concept of "carnavalesque" used for this analysis is based on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. In Robert Stam's definition,

carnival represented an alternative cosmovision characterized by the ludic undermining of all norms. The carnivalesque principle abolishes hierarchies, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions. [...] The principle of material body – hunger, thirst, defecation, copulation – becomes a positively corrosive force, and festive laughter enjoys a symbolic victory over death, over all that is held sacred, over all that oppresses and restricts. (STAM, 1989, p. 86)

The carnivalesque in Brazilian cinema has assumed a variety of forms, from its literal presence as subject, such as *Alô, Alô, Carnaval!* (Adhemar Gonzaga, 1936) and *Orfeu Negro* (Marcelo Camus, 1959), to the "parody of the extracarnival life," promoting "a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings" (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 11). Two other cycles of Brazilian popular cinema are also associated with the carnivalesque: the *chanchadas* of the 1950s and the *pomochochadas* of the 1970s².

² For a developed thesis on the cinematic tradition of the carnivalesque in Brazilian popular cinema, see Gregoli (2013).

The 2006 film *Se eu fosse você* (2006) is the epitome of the *globochanchada*. Directed by Daniel Filho, who has stated that “[my] project is Globo Filmes. I am Globo Filmes,”³ *Se eu fosse você* had 3.6 million spectators and its sequel, *Se eu fosse você 2* (Daniel Filho, 2009), attracted over six million people. The plot revolves around a wealthy married couple, Helena (Glória Pires) and Cláudio (Tony Ramos), and their dissatisfaction with their individual lives: Helena finds her life as a stay-at-home mother unfulfilling – in her words, “an empty life of malls and gyms” – and Cláudio is on the verge of losing his advertising firm. During a fight, they each accuse the other of having an easy ride, and in unison say the sentence that gives title to the movie (*If I were you*), and triggers a bodyswap.

The body switch genre is a privileged site for analysing the articulation of the perceived nature of sex and gender in popular culture. In contrast to Hollywood films of the same kind, the Brazilian movie is rather innovative. In a genre that already privileges the body, the carnivalesque celebration of the flesh makes it more lenient in relation to sexuality, and enables it to further explore the homosexual subtext contained in the genre’s premise. Even when reproducing the generic formula, the fact that they dedicate equal time to the portrayal of both sexes is also original. Finally, the separation of body and soul in this film has concrete consequences derived from the relation between class and capitalism, manifested in *Se Eu Fosse Você* as light-hearted class tensions.

The Body Swap Genre

While *Se eu fosse você* inaugurates this sub-genre in Brazil, the body swap, also known as body switch, is a cinematic sub-genre of comedy known to Hollywood for decades. The sub-genre originates from literature with the novel *Freaky Friday* (Mary Rodgers, 1972), which inspired a homonymous Disney picture directed by Gary Nelson in 1976. Other examples in Anglophone literature include the 1882 novel *Vice Versa: A lesson to fathers* by F. Anstey, a body swap between son and father, and Thomas Mann’s 1940 novella *The transposed heads*, a switch between two brothers. The premise has provided fertile material for Hollywood as dozens of movies of the kind have been produced since the inaugural *Freaky Friday*⁴.

³ Daniel Filho cited in Rêgo and Rocha (2011, p. 59).

⁴ *Freaky Friday* alone has had two remakes, one in 1995 directed by Melanie Mayron and one in 2003 directed by Mark Waters.

The genre encompasses a range of creative possibilities in comedy⁵: the body switching can be ‘intra-gender’⁶, interclass and/or interracial⁷, and the ‘single swap’ or ‘age swap’ films⁸, premised on the idea of the same person inhabiting the body of a younger or older version of herself/himself⁹. Far less common in Hollywood is the body swap across genders. The plot usually features characters whose dissatisfaction with their own lives leads them to idealize the life of another, or their own at a different age. The narratives develop until mutual understanding is reached, be it intergenerational, interclass or intergender, when, crucially, characters revert to their original bodies and the *status quo* is reattained.

The body switch sub-genre is therefore essentially about social regulation and personal conformity; it presumes and establishes a norm to which individuals should conform as well as appreciate. It is thus not surprising that the film considered to have inaugurated the genre in Hollywood was created by Disney, a well-known manufacturer of gender role models. The climatic resolution of these movies usually consists of a chaotic sequence as a consequence of some event that requires a physical ability specific to one of the bodies. Such privilege of body over mind makes it a particularly carnivalesque genre, and it is arguably one of the few Hollywood genres of comedy that still relies heavily on slapstick.

Intergender body swaps are a relative recent development of this sub-genre. This category fosters greater potential for gender and sexual subversion, which is perhaps why films of this kind only became more common in Hollywood in the 2000s, with the emergence of identity politics and the emphasis on gender

⁵ Due to the genre’s obvious inclination toward the metaphysical, it has been largely used in sci-fi movies such as *Looper* (Rian Johnson, 2012) and episodes of the *Star Trek* series (“Turnabout intruder” in 1969 and “Vis à vis” in 1998). As the list of body swap appearances in the media is too extensive, examples used here will be drawn from comedies only, as it is the focus of this study.

⁶ Usually intergenerational, e.g. *Dream a Little Dream* (Marc Rocco, 1989), and most often in the same family (mother and daughter, sisters, father and son, grandfather and grandson), e.g. *Like Father Like Son* (Rod Daniel, 1987), *Vice Versa* (Brian Gilbert, 1988), *18 Again!* (Paul Flaherty, 1988), *Wish Upon a Star* (Blair Treu, 1996), *Sister Switch* (Torrance Colvin, 2009).

⁷ *All of me* (Carl Reiner, 1984), where a female millionaire inhabits the body of a male middle-class lawyer, and the famous *Trading places* (John Landis, 1984), where a black con artist played by Eddie Murphy trades places (but significantly not bodies, hinting at potential racial anxieties) with white millionaire Dan Ackroyd. Their release coincides with the first years of the Reagan administration, and they indeed reflect the value of the individual over class allegiances, a rhetoric used in the Reagan era to justify, among other things, the dismantling of the welfare system.

⁸ A precursor of this variety is *Monkey business* (Howard Hawks, 1952), where a scientist played by Cary Grant creates a youth formula that makes him act like a 20-year-old.

⁹ Usually a man, as seen in the popular *Big* (Penny Marshall, 1988) and also in *17 again* (Burr Steers, 2009). More recently, *13 going on 30* (Gary Winick, 2004) featured a female protagonist.

and sexuality in the individual's identity. An early example of this variety, *All of Me* (Carl Reiner, 1984), shows a female millionaire coexisting¹⁰ in the body of a middle-class lawyer played by Steve Martin. *Switch* (Blake Edwards, 1991), by the same director as *Victor Victoria* (1982), is the most transgressive of its kind in Hollywood and shows a womanizer turned into a woman¹¹. Examples in the 2000s include *The Hot Chick* (Tom Brady, 2002) and *It's a Boy Girl Thing* (Nick Hurran, 2006). Most of these films focus on only one of the bodies (male in *All of Me* and *The Hot Chick*, and female in *Switch*). The latter shows a "masculine" woman, which seems to be far less subversive than an "effeminate" man. A certain taboo in showing effeminate men is also suggested by *The hot chick*, where spectators practically do not see the male protagonist living in a female body. In the only popular film¹² where equal importance is given to the two bodies – *It's a boy girl thing* –, the fact that both protagonists are androgynous-looking teenagers offsets the destabilization of gender norms and heteronormativity. The fact that *It's a boy girl thing* was released eleven months after *Se eu fosse você*¹³ underscores the Brazilian film's innovative nature, despite its appropriation of a Hollywood sub-genre.

Body vs. mind and the pseudo-carnavalesque

The body swap sub-genre is founded on the Cartesian divide between interiority and exteriority, which are seen as discrete, separable dimensions of a naturally unified being. Mikhail Bakhtin too seems to base his theory on this fundamental split¹⁴, notwithstanding the fact that he inverts the hierarchical valuation of the body-mind dichotomy. Nonetheless, Bakhtin's disintegration of bodily

¹⁰ Interestingly, in the only example of intergender swap in the 1980s, the male character does not give up all power over his body.

¹¹ Another example in the 1990s is *Prelude to a kiss* (Norman René, 1992). With art-house pretensions, this drama portrays Meg Ryan trading bodies with a dying elderly man. The film focuses on the generational conflict (leading to the female protagonist's appreciation of life and its finitude) rather than on gender, but spectators nonetheless get to see Alec Baldwin kissing an elderly man on the lips.

¹² Less popular films with a double inter-gender body swap include *A saintly switch* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1999), a made-for-TV comedy about a black couple who switch bodies, and *All screwed up* (Neil Stephens, 2009), about the swap of two high school students, a white male and a black female teenager.

¹³ *It's a boy girl thing's* date of release was December 26th, 2006 and *Se eu fosse você's* was January 6th, 2006.

¹⁴ "[Bakhtin] takes the human subject for granted as an irreducible unit, as well as capable of free will and characterized by the classical mind/body split. [...] [The] members of the [Bakhtin] Circle do seem to subscribe to something called 'human nature' – not a fixed or static essence, but an historically-mutable and socially-embedded complex of qualities, capacities and powers" (THOMSON, 1993, p. 223).

boundaries¹⁵ paves the way for the blurring of the inner/outer divide between the metaphysical and the material.

The Bakhtinian notion of no interiority prefigures Judith Butler's position of gender occurring on the surface of the body¹⁶. Butler's ground-breaking formulation of gender identity as an illusion of interiority does not find an echo in *Se eu fosse você*. By postulating the split between body and mind/soul¹⁷, *Se eu fosse você* furthers the unquestioned premise that these are two separate dimensions of the being, and that the body contains the soul. The film also subscribes to the heteronormative view of human beings as naturally cisgender¹⁸. Furthermore, it is clearly positioned within the "battle of the sexes" framework, as an introductory sequence in outer space, with the voice-over announcement of the alignment of Mars and Venus, hints at the fundamental and abysmal differences between men and women. The perception of men and women as diametrically opposed and in competition is widely spread in popular culture¹⁹. This framework is problematic to the extent that it distorts feminism as a competitive battle for superiority instead of a struggle for equality. Moreover, *Se eu fosse você* relies largely on gender stereotypes: Helena, her mother (Glória Menezes) and female colleagues do not have jobs; among the few women who are seen working, one is a secretary (Cibele, played by Danielle Winits), who openly uses her sexuality to further the firm's business (the film also naturalizes sexual harassment in the workplace); women are frequently seen shopping and having beauty treatments while men are usually talking about women and football. It is precisely because the film is strongly based on this traditional view of gender and sexuality that disruptive moments are noteworthy.

¹⁵ "[The] grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and complete phenomenon. The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs. The outward and the inward features are also merged into one" (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 318).

¹⁶ Butler argues that "[if] the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (BUTLER, 1999, p. 186).

¹⁷ While there are obvious differences – and consequences – to the use of the concepts of mind and soul, the two are fused in their counterposition to the body in the traditional dichotomies body vs. mind/body vs. soul. The two will be used according to the discourse on which they are inserted (religious or medical, for example).

¹⁸ The term "cisgender" refers to a person whose self-perception of gender corresponds to the social expectations related to their anatomical sex, as assigned at birth. The term is usually used in opposition to "transgender" (BRUBAKER; HARPER; SINGH, 2011, p. 50).

¹⁹ For example, the self-help book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (John Gray, 2012). Even in science, Richard Dawkins influential *The selfish gene*, considered a watershed in evolutionary biology theory, has a chapter entitled "Battle of the Sexes" (DAWKINS, 1989, p. 140-165).

While the divide between body and mind is maintained in body swap films, they conform but also confound the Cartesian split on which they are based, precisely because comicality derives from the incongruous corporeal acts resulting from the mind switch. Like Butler argues in relation to drag, these destabilising acts underscore gender as performance by making spectators hyperconscious of gender-specific bodily codes. Imputing physical attributes to the mind serves a very concrete purpose in these films; despite the context of the body swap, what spectators effectively see on screen is a man running “like a woman” during a football match or a woman initiating sex “like a man,” for example. These moments serve a regulatory function by exposing as ridicule that which does not conform squarely to the social expectations of cisgenderism and heteronormativity. Nonetheless, the disruption caused by this type of representation could explain why Hollywood has recoiled from portraying intergender body swaps for nearly three decades.



Figure 1: With a “masculine mind,” Helena forcefully initiates sex “like a man”.

The clear dissociation of body and soul promoted by the body swap genre is also relevant as it enables the location of gender identity. A clear example is the sequence where Cláudio (in Helena’s body) wears Helena’s nightgown.



Figure 2: A woman's body is not sexualised when it is inhabited by a man.

The scene, in which the camera shows Glória Pires's face in slow motion, is followed by a close-up shot of Cláudio/Helena touching his/her²⁰ own breasts with curiosity and appreciation. This image is best understood in the long tradition of transvestism in comedy, which allows men to appropriate the female body²¹. As the association with transvestism suggests, Cláudio's enjoyment of his female body also indicates that, in the film, bodies are seen as clothing²² and the mind is construed as the primary *locus* of gender identity. This is a significant departure from the carnivalesque tradition and its fundamental privilege of the body over the mind. All other bodily acts, from mannerisms to skills such as playing football, fighting and

²⁰ The extent to which language is gendered is revealed when describing disruptive bodies. As happens in the case of transsexuals, language becomes insufficient.

²¹ However, the opposite – i.e., Helena appreciating Cláudio's body – is never shown, indicating the disruptive potential in the idea of a woman enjoying phallic power.

²² Reflecting a religious view of the soul as perennial substance that travels through bodies, as is the case of religions based on reincarnation (e.g., Buddhism and Spiritism, a vastly popular doctrine among the Brazilian *classe média*), or through time (as evidenced by the idea of the Last Judgment in the Christian tradition), gender identity is given by a supposedly timeless interior. However, the idea that the body rules the mind, or that the mind – not the physical brain but a metaphysical essence of consciousness – is naturally and fundamentally gendered entails a contradiction, having seen that for the same religions the soul is considered gender-neutral. In religions that involve reincarnation, for example, the same soul can incarnate either female or male bodies and the soul as genderless is present in the founding idea of the Holy Trinity in the figure of the Holy Spirit. This contradiction is never fully addressed in the film, or any of the genre, sustaining the idea of gender as naturally imprinted on one's soul. The role of contradictions at moments such as this is significant, as they represent temporary disruptions.

dancing, are seen not only as gendered but also as directed by the mind. As Cláudio explains in *Se eu fosse você*:

Cláudio (Glória Pires): Men are stronger, Helena.
Helena (Tony Ramos): It depends on what you call strength.
Cláudio: I'm talking about muscles.
Helena: Did you forget your muscles are now mine?
Cláudio: Actually, muscles alone don't mean a thing. The important thing is knowing how to use them.
[He proceeds to apply a karate move to prove his point]

The privilege of mind over body as well as the trivialization of the body – ultimately seen as clothing – is not the only element that departs from the carnivalesque tradition. While carnivalesque moments and characters are still present, they function as superficial ancillaries to entertain audiences rather than to promote systematic inversions in a Bakhtinian world *à l'envers*. There are very few examples in *Se eu fosse você* where the body takes precedence over the mind, and significantly these are mostly related to woman-specific corporeal experience, namely when Cláudio (in Helena's body) cannot work due to menstrual cramps in *Se eu fosse você*, and when s/he experiences morning sickness in *Se eu fosse você 2* (2009), also from Daniel Filho. In relation to the male body, the only instance where, in a typical carnivalesque way, the body takes precedence over the mind is associated with the urge to urinate. In both films, Helena's struggle to urinate with a penis combines elements of transgression (the appropriation of phallic power) and backlash (women's supposed inability to, quite literally, handle it).

However, in the confusion between mind and body significant contradictions emerge. Although Helena's doctor friend attests that "everything is normal, your sexual chromatin is correct: the XX is with her and the XY is with you," Cláudio is portrayed as more sexually active and the initiator of their sexual activity, despite the fact that he is inhabiting her body. This arrangement conforms to the patriarchal notion that men are more sexually driven than women, but opposes some evolutionary biology theories according to which human sexual behaviour can be explained by hormones, chromosomes or a supposedly hardwired ancestral division of labour. Construing what is popularly perceived as inherently bodily attributes (genetically passed on through natural selection) as transcending the body²³, the film creates a

²³ This framework also echoes outdated view of transexuality as a woman's mind trapped in a man's body or vice-versa. Positing gender identity to the mind allows it to be seen as a medical condition that requires both surgical intervention and psychological treatment. The alignment with this discourse then justifies the medicalization of bodies and the pathologization of deviations from the norm.

contradiction for which it does not account, thus constituting one of the disruptive liminal moments that indirectly open up space for change.

Consumerism and the exploitation of bodies

In addition to the distancing from the carnivalesque tradition, the clear privilege given to the mind as the body becomes a mere receptacle has yet another consequence, one which enables the exploitation of bodies intrinsic to capitalism. Roberto DaMatta argues that the division between body and soul enables the exploitation of subaltern bodies observed in Brazilian society. According to DaMatta,

the public is separated from the private and the exploitation of the employee's body has nothing to do with their soul, which, for the exploiters, has a guaranteed place in Heaven. Therefore, the body can be bashed in the works of underpaid labour, but the soul is cultivated and nourished with consideration and respect. These are, in sum, the fundamental ingredients of patrimonialism and patronage, in a sophisticated dialectics of exploitation and respect, dishonour and consideration. (DAMATTA, 1997, p. 175-176, my translation, emphasis in the original).

Se eu fosse você offers material for the analysis of the exploitation described by DaMatta. As many Brazilian telenovelas, it portrays a wealthy couple who owns all the traditional material symbols of status: a mansion with a swimming pool, two brand new cars, and – with an air of triviality – discuss whether or not they should send their daughter to study in Europe. In this context, the maid is seen as part of the package of status-laden commodities of a desirable lifestyle.

The maid Cida (played by Maria Gladys) is exemplary of the mechanism described by DaMatta, whereby the family's close and informal relationship with her does not preclude the exploitation of her work. Instead of the celebration of the body promoted by the carnivalesque, the separation between body and soul implied in the film's premise allows for the dialectics of exploitation to take place. *Se eu fosse você* goes as far as enacting subtle class tensions, as Cida defies Helena when asked to wear a uniform for a social function.



Figure 3: Abiding by the telenovela standard of the superrich, the image of idyllic familial harmony involves an ever-present servant.



Figure 4: Cida resists the depersonalisation imposed by Helena through the use of a uniform.

Although Cida resists it, her depersonalization is structurally replicated in the film, as she is often shown in long shots – literally mingling with the scenario – and her body is portrayed as yet another commodity in the background.

The unequal treatment of domestic workers was in fact sanctioned by the Brazilian Constitution, which ensured reasonable working conditions to all workers, but explicitly exempted domestic workers, thus constitutionally legitimising exploitation. In 2010, a constitutional amendment was formulated to guarantee equal rights to domestic workers. The law, which became popularly known as *PEC das Domésticas* was approved in 2013, and was index of real positive change taking place in the early 2010s for this category of workers.

As a result, Cida's insistence on her individuality and her refusal to be commodified, which was seen as endearing in 2006, was perhaps considered more serious by 2009, the year of release of *Se eu fosse você 2*. Precisely at the point when domestic workers finally started to be regarded as legal subjects (*sujeitos de direito*) by the Brazilian Constitution, in *Se eu fosse você 2* the character of Cida loses her relative importance as a secondary plotline, and is symptomatically and definitely sent off to the background. The evolution of the topic in the two films shows that, in reactionary humor, when class tensions become real, they are no longer joke material.

The exploitation of bodies is irrevocably linked with capitalism, and indeed consumerism is unashamedly promoted by the two films. In the beginning of the first *Se eu fosse você*, Helena's existential crisis (in her words, "vida vazia de salão, de academia, de shopping") hints at the emptiness of a culture that is geared by the search to satisfy the unlimited needs and desires it creates. The connection between capitalism and patriarchy is widely acknowledged²⁴, as the film itself suggests in a dialogue between Helena and her mother:

Vivian: Women were made to go shopping, not to go to therapy. [...]

Helena: Please, mom. You just uttered a pearl of sexism.

Vivian: No, I am just defending women's right to shop.

Throughout the film, spectators are reminded that Cláudio is the provider of the household, squarely reproducing traditional gender roles within the family. As Maggie Günsberg explains in relation to Italian cinema, "[with] bourgeois ownership of capital and a readily available servant class came the status symbol of the leisured, non-working wife, soon to become stereotypically associated with a form of parasitic consumption which drained her productive husband's assets" (GÜNSBERG, 2005, p. 68)²⁵. As illustrated by the dialogue, a classist neoliberal model reduces rights to the superficial act of purchasing high-status commodities. A fundamental concept for any real struggle for equality, the concept of "right" is symbolically co-opted by an empty, yet alluring, rhetoric of consumerism as equating empowerment.

²⁴ In Maggie Günsberg's words: "One basic locus for the production of gender relations is that of relations of production and consumption. A decisive shift took place during early capitalism's move away from cottage industry, when masculinity became associated with production outside the home, and femininity with (re)production and consumption inside the home" (GÜNSBERG, 2005, p. 68).

²⁵ The non-working wife, as Günsberg explains, is parasitic not only of her husband, but also on the working class woman who frees her from housework. This relationship is also presented in *Se eu fosse você*, as Helena's existential crisis is vastly enabled by Cida's labour.

Masculinity in crisis: feminization

Whereas conspicuous consumption has been largely associated with women since the *chanchadas*, the body swap in *Se eu fosse você 2* promotes a temporary inversion as much emphasis is given to the shopping spree of the male protagonist (Helena in Cláudio's body). As these films operate in a strictly cisgender framework, the only alternative for gender disruption is to link it with homosexuality. In other words, feminine-coded behaviour is immediately associated with homosexuality, and indeed an acquaintance of Cláudio's has no doubt he is gay, apparently due to his mannerisms and his keenness on shopping.



Figure 5: Feminine-coded behavior equals homosexuality in *Se Eu Fosse Você 2*.

Despite the overlap between gender and sexual orientation, the body swap in *Se eu fosse você* and *Se eu fosse você 2* is extraordinary as it enables a degree of gender experimentation that is rarely seen in Brazilian popular cinema.



Figure 6: Cláudio (Tony Ramos) depicted as a vulnerable, feminized men.

Although Cláudio's comic performance is loud and grandiloquent in general, it is only when he inhabits Helena's body that he is called "out of control". The use of the adjective in the feminine form (*descontrolada*) is revealing of a common double standard. Histrionic outbursts are embraced and accepted as funny when related to men, but not tolerated when related to women – indeed, it seems to require regulation ("more control")²⁶. The abundance of examples of men portrayed as out of control in Brazilian cinema (lacking control of their bodily functions and also infantilized, hysterical and feminized) underscores the fact that this is recurrent trope used to deal with the perception that masculinity is in crisis²⁷.

Liminality and the horizon of expectations

By separating body and mind, not only does *Se eu fosse você* promote a separation between gender and sex, it also gives way to transgressive sexual practices. The subtext of homosexuality is disruptive as it threatens to expose heteronormativity as a fictional norm, as argued by Butler:

²⁶ Furthermore, Helena is generally portrayed as demure, and part of the spectatorial pleasure is supposedly derived from seeing Cláudio's usual corporeal expansiveness contained by Helena's mind.

²⁷ For a detailed analysis on the trope of masculinity in crisis in the *chanchadas*, see Gregoli (2018).

When the disorganization and the disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force. That regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe. (BUTLER, 1999, p. 185)

Although the film does not go as far as to challenge the heteronormative framework, the homosexual subtext is constantly suggested, as the dialogue below from *Se eu fosse você* illustrates:

Cláudio (in Helena's body): At least there's one silver lining. I was never as secure of my sexuality.
Helena (in Cláudio's body): It's funny, right? If we love somebody, we love them inside and out. It's crazy that I love another woman. And so I love my own body as it were another's.
Cláudio: Please don't get me started. I never liked male bodies.
Helena: Cláudio, you should take the opportunity that you're with my body and see how it works²⁸.

Earlier in the movie, Helena's friend²⁹ asks whether she had ever been curious to have sex with a woman, and entices her to take advantage of the situation to experiment. Female homosexuality is clearly mentioned while male homosexuality is readily dismissed, as seen in the previous dialogue. Helena and Cláudio eventually do have sex, and although effectively enacted, male homosexuality remains unspoken, suggesting that it is more taboo than lesbianism. This exposes the normative aspect of the movie as part of a conservative media institution.

The fact that sexual intercourse is presented at all in the film is exceptional in relation to the Hollywood films of the same kind. Indeed, of all movies mentioned here, it is the only where consensual sex between the couple takes place³⁰. The sex scene is in fact key to the development of the narrative, as it is the turning point that marks the body reversal back to the *status quo*. By approaching the sex act between the

²⁸ My translation.

²⁹ Helena's doctor friend, whom we see briefly in the first *Se eu fosse você* disappears in the sequel while Cláudio lives a "bromance". As in *De pernas pro ar* and as already suggested in the first *Se eu fosse você*, the sequel leaves no room for doubt that a woman's only true friends are within her nuclear family – her mother and daughter.

³⁰ Unconsensual sex takes place in *Switch*, with Steve Brooks (as Amanda) having sex with his best friend Walter, after a drunk night out. The sexual act is never shown and is followed by a long argument in which Amanda calls Walter a rapist.

swapped bodies in a relatively untroubled way, the Brazilian film exposes Brazilian cinema's traditional leniency in relation to sexual experimentation.

The sex scene also indirectly exposes heterosexuality as a fiction – indirectly because male homosexuality remains unarticulated. In *Se eu fosse você 2*, when they decide to have sex as an attempt to swap their bodies back to normal, as in the previous film, spectators are reminded that this takes place between a heterosexual, married couple:

Helena (Tony Ramos): I feel like a slut.
Cláudio (Glória Pires): Come on, Helena, don't overreact.
You're not doing it with anybody. It's me, your husband
Cláudio, remember?

Although “[behavior] and identity are more complex in messy reality” (MURRAY, 1995, p. 51) than the unproblematic division between male-active and female/effeminate-passive, such complexity only emerges as the concept of “gay” as an identity becomes consolidated, and despite the fact that this is increasingly the case in Brazil, spectators surely hear the echo of the *cliché* of the “macho man” (given by his ability to penetrate and never be penetrated) when Cláudio says “I never liked this male body”. The irony, of course, is that moments later he does have sex with one – with Helena in his body. In fact, not only does he have sex with a man, he is also penetrated, which further transgresses traditional views on manhood. In the movie, the sex scene is intercut with a scene of planets aligning, as the plot justifies the body swap as a result of a cosmic event. This ellipsis helps deflect anxieties around male homosexuality, together with the fact that Tony Ramos is a heterosexual male star, famous for his copious amounts of body hair (apparently a sign of manhood). The fact that the sex scene is not portrayed also offsets the potential disruption caused by the homosexual subtext, thus avoiding the exploration of the dissolution of boundaries timidly introduced by the movie.

Conclusion

At the core of the body swap genre is social transgression because the body switching takes place due to the dissatisfaction experienced by the protagonists. A highly regulatory genre, it reveals the normative mechanisms of social conformity. As the analysis of *Se eu fosse você* shows, various legitimising discourses (medical, religious, scientific) can be mobilized to reinforce traditional cultural norms, often contradicting and disavowing each other. Just as revealing as what these films regulate

is what they expose: double standards, failures in the heteronormative matrix, disruptive gender behaviors and sex acts – which are unseen in their Hollywood generic counterparts. These liminal transgressive acts confound boundaries, which may open the way for change. In these borderline, marginal spaces, new – albeit timid – possibilities of representation emerge, despite the film’s overall strong conservative framework.

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