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Hyper-sexualization and Risk in Dissenting Gender Identities: notes for the dissolution of chance

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Hyper-sexualization and Risk in Dissenting Gender Identities: notes for the dissolution of chance

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ABSTRACT

The present article refers to the media-image and symbolic construction of dissenting gender identities. Starting with sixty-five movies chosen along five years. Subsequently, a selection was made from each movie's characters, finally leading to two movies, which will be analyzed in this article. Based on the concepts of social construction of gender presented by Butler and Young, as well as Edgar Morin's projection-identification, this article intends to identify recurrent characteristics among the selected characters. The hypothesis is that the social construction of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual characters, commonly seen in these movies, frequently presents themes such as drugs, crime, homicide, diseases and sexual violence, as well as the hyper-sexualization of both bodies and practices. It is as if such individuals, when represented, were high-risk existences, always in danger, and as if this condition of risk was inherent to such sexual identities. It is possible that such recurrence is transformed into a device, used for conditioning and controlling the place and role of LGBTI individuals, keeping this part of the population on an eternal exclusion cycle. Among the objectives of this article are: to indicate the component aspects of the symbolic construction of gender that can interfere in individual gender identity; to identify on the characters of those narratives such characteristics and highlight the recurrent ones; to establish a connection between the symbolic construction of the analyzed characters and some of the sexual practices of the dissenting sexual identities; to review these recurrent narratives and envision possible alternatives. In addition to the bibliographic review, the selected movies were analyzed with a focus on the characters. Therefore, it was possible to examine the influence that this kind of product has over the construction of the collective imaginary regarding dissenting sexual identities and to approach new paths that contribute to the visibility and the effective participation of LGBT communities on the cultural and social-political processes.

KEYWORDS: communication, cinema, gender, masculinity, LGBTQIA+.

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1. CONTEXTUALIZATION

My text is dedicated to those who are much more than what they learned, who deserve to be and to have.

Time has come for us to stop, breathe and think carefully about the symbolical constructions made about dissent sexualities until now. Retrace steps and find, beginning with the stories that were told (but not limited to them), the key points that structure the behaviors and the lack of mobility that characterize the gender roles alternative to heteronormative standards, an essentially patriarchal system. The present article tells us not only about the historical and media-image construction of masculine dissenting sexualities, but also about the implications and what it unfolds, finishing with a political perspective of such identities in a new scenario, theoretically more open and more willing to absorb individuals and their particularities in "traditional" sectors of society. The main question of the present work is: Has cinema been an effective device of symbolical conditioning promoting the segregation of dissenting gender identities, particularly the male ones? Has such device been so effective to the point of assuring, if not aggravating, the life conditions of such subjects?

Researches in United States and Canada show us evidence that male homosexuals, bisexuals, and men who have sex with other men have a much higher risk in relation to health issues, and not only with infections and sexually transmitted diseases, as the judging from common sense, but also with cardiovascular diseases, asthma, cancer, depression, and problems related to alcohol and drug abuse. The group of men with dissenting sexual identities is more often affected by mental illness; much more than heterosexuals (men and women) and more than lesbians and bisexual women (Pakianathan, 2016)².

In fact, compared with heterosexuals, men who have sex with men are around 2.5 times more likely to experience a mental disorder at any point in their lifetime and six times more likely to have attempted suicide. Problematic alcohol use and recreational drug use and dependency are also higher (Pakianathan, 2016).

² Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27590481> Accessed in: April 4, 2017

Furthermore, research done by the Canadian Health agency says that the level of men who suffered sexual violence is 2.5 higher among gays and bisexuals in comparison with heterosexuals. The same research says that (varying in geographic, social and economics factors, but also with gender) between 10 and 40 % of LGBTQI+ individuals will tempt suicide at least once in their lifetime. The higher rates are among gay and bisexual men. In 2011, it is estimated that more gay men died by suicide than by HIV in Canada, and the suicide rates don't decrease with age, as in other groups. Such scenario is called Syndemic by health authorities – a landscape with a combination of physical and mental diseases (affecting specific groups) that worsen and magnify each other. This type of situation is hard to combat, and generally, it requires a holistic approach that includes prevention, education, and psychological support.

Chemsex (the practice of anonymous sex under the influence of synthetic drugs for many subsequent days without the use of condoms) is already considered a health problem in England and is treated as such. There are many explanations for that: the criminalization of sex between men still happens in 75 countries and the hostility in countries where there's no criminalization still remains; masculinity itself that asks for virility, strength and sees any type of affection as a sign of weakness; the pressure of financial success, etc; these strengthen arguments like that of the minority stress. But, as told by Dr. Parkianathan in the article quoted above, generalizing explanations don't justify the higher and increasing quantity of death among male dissenting sex identities in relation to other groups. To get close to the biological, psychological, social and cultural motivations for this is the key factor to fight the problem. This article seeks to explore some cultural and symbolical determinants that, we believe, contribute to identities continuing to put themselves at risk and how this risk is used to perpetuate the segregation. We used to believe that auto-destructive and risky behaviors were viewed as intrinsic of dissenting sexual identities, especially male ones. The question here is up until what point is this fed and how is this kind of presumption useful. We believe that a watchful eye under the prism of communications studies this could be the first

step to reflect on the symbolic devices that strongly affect gay men, bisexuals, and men who practice sex with other men.

While researching in communication, we cast an eye over how people articulate the interpretation of reality – what are the material ways in which this interpretation circulates, what kind of symbolical resources are used to do it and the consequences of these factors. From government bodies going through research to scheduled production of communicational products itself, the research in communication has the potential of producing information that allows the coordination and social control (Jensen, 2008). Thus, this reflection seems relevant on the panorama of communication research not only because of the framing in its own purpose, but also because of the importance on the actual scenario, permeated by discussions about representativity and new engaged aesthetics that, in the end, reframes the social picture.

Therefore, we will talk about LGBTQI+ characters in cinema (at first, in a general way, based on information done on a *corpus* of 65 movies³), the aspects that build them and especially the recurrence of those aspects. Then, we'll discuss some concepts around gender which contribute to the analysis that was done so that we can then start narrowing our analysis context, targeting a determined male dissenting gender identity; we'll end the theoretical foundation by locating the concept of device in the present research. We'll focus our analysis on two characters of two selected movies, their construction and reverberations; we'll talk about the idea of control and symbolical conditioning (dissolving then the idea of chance), consequence of an interpretation by the public of such characters and only then, we'll discuss alternatives for this scenario.

2. THE OBJECT

We have chosen the study of male LGBTQI+ characters in cinema because we believe that film has a symbolical force capable of transforming and manipulating, positively and negatively, the collective imaginary about several questions. Here the film will be seen as group of devices and strategies

³ Link: https://www.dropbox.com/s/jn3r6ccuxe2tqdv/filmes_certo.xlsb?dl=0

intended to produce effects on the viewer – realizing that these strategies can be identified, isolated and related, like the characteristics that are highlighted and employed recurrently in the construction of LGBTIQ+ characters identified in our large *corpus*. Beginning with the effects, we can trace some strategies and from them, the media and resources used. Here we will see strictly the scenic resources (acting, scenario, costumes) and narrative resources (story, argument, plot), emphasizing the construction of the character.

From the point of view of their strategies, a film could be understood as a aesthetics composition if the effects have been about sensation (in general, experimental movies), or like a communicational composition if the effects are mostly about meaning (in general, movies that wants to transmit some message or point of view), or like poetry if the effects are essentially feelings and emotions (in general, movies with strong a dramatic component). Even though this kind of analysis could be applied to movies, it should be pointed out that could be applied to any piece of art (Penafria, 2009)⁴

Morin's concept (2014) of projection-identification will be fundamental for the development of this research, showing that the behavior in social life depends mostly on symbolical resources that are available. So, as is the case of Morin's theory, the projection-identification, affective participation, is the apparatus that makes cinema and the narratives about LGBTIQ+ characters an effective way of conditioning subjects of the dissenting gender identities – the subject tends to incorporate the characters on the screen into themselves because of the physical or moral similarities. We'll deepen understanding of this concept on the theoretical foundation topic.

The lack of fluidity, stigmatization and social exclusion are consequences of a strong identification between subjects and characters; since there is little

⁴ Do ponto de vista da sua estratégia, um filme pode ser entendido como uma composição estética se os seus efeitos forem da ordem da sensação (em geral, filmes experimentais), ou como uma composição comunicacional se os efeitos forem sobretudo de sentido (em geral, filmes com um forte argumento que pretendem transmitir uma determinada mensagem/ponto de vista sobre determinado tema), ou como composição poética se os efeitos que produzem são, essencialmente, sentimentos e emoções (em geral, filmes com forte componente dramática). Ainda que este tipo de análise se aplique a filmes, convém notar que pode ser aplicada à contemplação de qualquer outra obra de arte (Penafria, 2009).

existing representativeness and its homogeneity cause great a impact on the public. Since those recurrent narratives often have negatives characteristics, those are naturalized and incorporated by the subject that ends up being (and feeling) a mirror of such recurrences – drugs, madness, illness, criminality, hyper-sexualization and risky sexual practices.

3. METHOD

First of all, even before the total understanding of the idea presented on this paper, a previous quantitative inventory was conducted which told me about gender fluidity and alternative sexualities. Sixty-five movies were selected, they were produced between 1930 and the present year. The main characters or the narratives as a whole, focuses on gender ideas, fluid and/or alternative sexualities. And, as this inventory was taking shape, we could see a recurrence of some characteristics of LGBTQI+ characters. In 35 movies the main character was related to drug abuse; in 37 movies, they experienced a violent episode; 40 of them have some kind of mental disease and 56 of the 65 characters were hyper-sexualized. This merely quantitative survey originated concerns that moved the present paper to a qualitative character.

In the end, two films were selected, to proceed in the analysis of the characters, but all the data collected in the general sample contribute to arguments here. The characters' profiles were selected according to the presence of 3 or more characteristics that we identified having great recurrence: drug use, physical or sexual violence, physical or psychiatric diseases, hipersexualization, risky sexual practices or risky behavior. Hyper-sexualization appears most frequently, followed by mental illness and drug use. Physical illness is constant in male characters, mostly linked to HIV or another sexually transmitted disease, reinforcing the stereotype that men with dissenting sexual behavior inevitably will be affected by some disease linked to their sexuality, like some kind of inevitable punishment that can't be escaped.

After this film inventory, a bibliographic review focused on the LGBTIQ+ context was made to finding data that justified the questions brought here, it was

possible to confirm the necessity of the present reflection about the influence of the cinema on the systemic risky behavior and self-destruction common in the male dissenting gender identities. In this way, it was possible to problematize the phenomenon, build a research problem, and make use of some hypothesis. We brought together the presented data to gender and sexuality concepts that support our perception of gender construction, reconstruction and performance, not only as a tool to express sexuality but also as a way to be positioned in the world, make decisions and absorb all experiences.

To choose and and limit the object to be studied, we make use of the conceptualization of cinema as a symbolical force as well as the projection-identification theory to comprehend how the recurrences found in cinema characters influence the individuals and, as a consequence, the social framework. This paper also makes use of filmic analysis; we will use moving image analysis to absorb the necessary information about the characters. Considering that the audiovisual means are a complex set of senses, images, techniques, scene composition, we will count on the complex nature of the object, as an ally and evidence that we will not work with a single text and that, like the characters, our analysis will not end with this text (Rose, 2015). Our goal is just to open the way to new incursions about the influence of cinema and its symbolical force on the imaginary about dissenting gender identities.

We will merge some film methodology analysis in way to find an appropriate approach for this work. Previously, we proceeded with a choice of a bigger *corpus* based on the thematic and how the films treats this thematic. In order to choose just two films, we made a clipping based on certain characteristics of the main characters. We'll work with a type of external analysis, treating the film as part of a bigger system and like a symbolical device of control. However, a great part of our analysis will happen using the poetic method of filmic analysis, considering the filmic experience (sense, sensations, feelings) we will go through scenic factors (scenario, costume design, photography, direction) and narratives (plot, characters, argument) establishing then a relation between those elements to get to the supposed strategies used to produce certain effects on the viewer.

4. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The first step forward in this work regarding identity, is to explain the gender definition discussed here. First, it is understood that the binary gender is conceivable only if conditioned to a supposed tendency to heterosexuality, configuring itself in a moral and economic control imposed to ensure a, also supposed, social order. In other words, a polarized and heterocentric division of the gender identities do not go beyond a bodies's training to gender notions that are purely fabricated (Molina, 2014). The gender and sexuality, for this work, will be seen as a way to be in the world, abstract, fluid and without exaggerated categorizations or genitalizations. In Butler's perception (2010), that sees gender as performance, as well as in Young (2004), that sees gender as a sequence of behaviors conditioned on demand and temporary, support the concept that gender is something changeable, reconfigured along one's life and vulnerable to external factors. In this way, it is lined up with the hypothesis that the self-destructive behavior supposedly natural in male dissenting identities, in reality, could have been slowly forged by symbolical conditioning. In the same way, we hope, it can be diluted in case such devices are no longer applied as strongly over the new generations.

Corroborating with this perspective, we brought Edgar Morin's concept about the power of cinema as this symbolical determinant. The dynamic "projection-identification" as per Morin, happens in our everyday life and is part of our process of reality awareness. This process, in relation to the film and its characters is, above all, another manifestation of the projection-identification or emotional participation. A process that starts (in the case of cinema) with the projection that allows us to identify a mere set of light and shadow as living beings of the real world. So, the projection-identification is at the origin of the cinematographic perception. The lack of reality of the fiction work and the total awareness of this absence is compensated by the subjectivity and feelings

(inherent to all aesthetic works), in other words, emotional participation. Even in the face of a fiction work, the viewer feels like part of something bigger, immersed in this work. A true energetic field allows the projection-identification of the author to be rectified and intensified in the public. The camera techniques, time artifices, photography and duration of actors are some of techniques that are used to get the maximum intensity in cinematography. The emotional intensity achieved tends to immerse the viewer in the film and the film in the viewer. Thus, the film ends up producing a new subjectivity, guiding the viewer's subjectivity. Morin also says that it is visible that the viewer tends to embody himself and embody the characters in him based on physical and moral similarities that he finds. The viewer seeks some kind of evasion from reality and, at the same time, a representativeness in cinema. This drives LGBTI people to mirror themselves on the only representations of them that emerge on the screen. Far from the Star System, those subjects end up reproducing negative aspects, frequently portrayed in LGBTQI+ characters.

Still as theoretical foundation, we bring the notion of dispositif in Foucault. The device is a set of heterogenic strategies that incorporate the "said" as well as the "unsaid". The device is an answer to a demand, many times, of system maintenance, even though this system is more effective due to its dynamic and mutable nature. Agamben completes this definition saying that the device is anything that has, in any way, the capacity to guide, determine, shape or ensure the gesture, conduct, opinion or discourse of human beings (Agamben, 2009). So, for us, the film will be a device capable of undertaking a symbolical conditioning over the viewers, shaping their conduct and their choices.

5. SELECTED FILMS

The two productions selected were chosen with another criteria: for being filmed by non American directors, although one of them is a world renowned director.

The Pedro Almodóvar movie “Todo sobre mi madre” was filmed in 1999 and tells the story of Manuela, a mom that loses her young son in a tragic accident and goes to find the father that had never known about him. After this beginning, the story develops into a web of secrets and surprises, ending with the meeting of Manuela and Lola, the father, and a interesting, almost posthumous, crossroads. In the end, Manuela becomes the adoptive mother of Lola’s second son’s, who receives the birth mother’s name. The movie won an Oscar for best foreign movie in 1999 and also the Golden Globe, Goya prize, Cesar Prize and best director award in Cannes. It was a success to the specialized press but not a blockbuster – and is considered a classic of Queer Cinema.



"Todo Sobre mi Madre" (1999) scene: Lola meeting her son.

The second movie chosen was “Elvis e Madona” by Marcelo Lafitte. Filmed in 2010, the movie is unknown by the majority of the public, but like the former, it was awarded by critics. It was chosen the best movie at the Brazilian Movie Festival of Paris, end GLS Cinema Festival in Oslo. The plot revolves around the relationship between the transvestite Madona and the lesbian Elvis, on a extremely optimist game of gender, sexuality and affection that brings lightness to the movie, despite the context of drugs, violence, criminality and corruption of Rio de Janeiro nightlife where everything happens.



"Elvis e Madona" (2010): what a couple!

The cutout was made from the profile of the two characters: Lola and Madona who have homosexual identities, dress like women (but aren't transsexuals). Yet, they present nuances that makes them stand out from characters of the others films on our list. That profile seems relevant because it lets us see a series of stigmas fixated on the male dissenting gender identities and it reveals a kind of, at least partial, redemption, which we will talk about later.

6. THE CHARACTERS AND THEIR AFFECTIONS

The films analyzed had as main characteristic for being chosen, the fact of being about transvestite characters that are, by themselves, a gender identity that transposes any classification and which, generally, calls themselves "bonecas"⁵ to build an artificial female body while keeping the male genitalia.

Bonecas are Marseille's Devil incarnation in Tarot; the exacerbation of a total sexuality, capable of seducing and satisfying men and women. Manuela, describing Lola, said that she had the worse of a man and the worse of a woman. The genitalized androgynous from the most varied narratives speak as a

⁵ as they are called in Brazil, this can be translated as "dolls".

tormented and unhappy people that have difficulty in accepting their condition in this world (MOLINA, 2015). The two film's characters are willing, unsatisfied, dreamers and, sometimes, cruel. Also about transvestites, they identify themselves as being out of the norms:

the travesties generally will say that they are not man or women either, but a third gender, a non gender, a blend of both: man and women. Or simply travesty. But the travesty's gender role remains female, in other words, they generally will keep presenting themselves and, wondering to be treated, as female. What is not a "written on rocks" rule, cause in reference to human identities, nothing is fixed.⁶

Both have an affective and sexual relationship with women (that take them out of what could be expected for gender identities like that) and deal with family issues, more specifically children born from the relationship with those women. But also, referring to the categories previously compiled, they are characters directly linked with nightlife, prostitution, pornography, drugs, violence and HIV.

Madona and Lola are transvestites (female gestures, dressed as women, breasts, had relationships with men) but they are emotionally and sexually involved with women. From this relationship and from the paradoxical nature of their affections, came the plot of the two films, which culminates in a behavior and attitude change for life (however, without dropping the transvestite identity) with the birth or the knowledge of the child's existence.

⁶ as travestis geralmente vão dizer que não são nem homens e nem mulheres, mas um terceiro gênero, um não gênero, uma mistura de ambos os gêneros: homem e mulher, ou simplesmente travesti. Mas o papel de gênero das travestis continua sendo feminino, ou seja, elas geralmente vão continuar se apresentando e querendo ser tratadas no feminino, ou de acordo com aquilo que a sociedade considera feminino. O que não é uma regra escrita na pedra pois, em se tratando de identidades humanas, nada é fixo. Link: (<http://www.naomekahlo.com/single-post/2015/04/18/Cis-Trans-Travesti-o-que-significa>)



Lola versus Madonna

Lola is evil's personification; a violent man, and manipulative woman. She betrays her wife, her best friend, even getting a nun pregnant; then simply vanishing, while remaining a smooth, threatening and constant presence in the story. The character is built through the eyes and narrative of others and then, at the end of the film she shows herself as a strong figure with male posture and outfit, body and gestures unreasonably feminine. From the visual aspect perspective, Lola and Madonna are very close - strong and manly male bodies contrasting with female outfits and make-up - however, with personas built extremely different. Madonna is kindness in the flesh, a person that, despite the bad luck, is optimistic, honest and a fighter, with her love for Elvis exacerbating all those qualities. Madonna, in the end, betrays the girlfriend by returning to pornographic scene as an actress, which reinforces the recurrence of dissenting identities on error. The outcomes for the two characters are completely different: Lola (the evil one) dies from HIV and Madonna (the good one) lives happily ever after with Elvis and the baby.

In this way, the characters are built in a typical manner, like the most of LGBTQI+ characters, without a family and sentimental structure. In this case, this structure came through a child. A child that here represents not only redemption from the previous life as a way to, despite the exaggerated femininity, reassure

the masculinity through the capacity of “making a child”. This not only shows us a patriarchal moral implicit in the narratives, but also a kind of rescue from a non regular existence through the offspring. The fact that the characters didn't abandon their transvestite identities is useful to bring color to the film and even to eroticize and hyper-sexualize, once more, those characters that, for having such a strong sexuality, just couldn't help maintaining sexual relations “even with women”.

7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The identification that happens on several levels and as consequence of several strategies used by the cinema. This is due to the fact that we see on the screen a mirror of ourselves and of the world (Turner, 1997). The paradoxical construction of the characters Madona and Lola granted us with concrete examples that lead us to a LGBTQI+ face in a world that still preserves conservative values and manifests it even in supposedly subversive narratives.

On the characters analyzed here we could see the criminal transvestite stereotype remitted by the birth of a son and the discovery of a father role. Lola and Madona are “Bonecas” that discover themselves as “males” being responsible for the offspring. Cinema here has the role of reaffirming the negative aspects of the male dissenting identities as well as enhancing the idea that only the establishment of a traditional family can rescue those people from, addiction, crime, and illness. Elvis and Madona have a happy ending almost like a heterosexual family. Lola dies but leaves the son as a key missing link and a scientific hope, since the baby is mysteriously cured from HIV. Then, as most of the movies selected on the major *corpus*, the characters that have no regrets and don't “change”, pay a high price. Even remitted, a lot of characters bore the burden of their condition, reaffirming that being a LGBTQI+ person is a blind alley, bad luck and a way to establish an inevitable link to the dark side of existence. The cinematographic narratives contribute to a perpetuation of marginal conditions to the dissenting gender identities and, despite apparently performing a representation of an established gay culture, contribute to keep the

LGBTQI+ population at risk, vulnerable and subservient. The only way is obscurity, remaining in ghettos and making a home, since the in world of "normal people" there isn't any room for them.

It has been a priority keep these men to have sex with men free of HIV and that is survival; survival is just keeping the heart beating, the lungs breathing. When Bell Hooks talks to us about the lack of love that forge black women's way of love, she points the difference between surviving and living fully. An important part of living fully is dreaming. LGBTQI+ people don't dream. They are not allowed to wish, aim, want something different, recognize their own potential, being them intellectual, professional, as well as affective ones. The mirror that was given for them already comes printed and marked. But we can think of a world where those subjects don't need to be concerned about surviving, a world where they can live fully. One of the final lines of "Todo sobre mi madre" says that you are more authentic the more you resemble what you've dreamed of being. So, for this, we should be allowed to dream.

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