

# FEAR OF THE TRANNIES

## On Filmic Phobia of Transvestism in the New Latin American Cinema

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*Abstract: The transvestite, as a figure that contests both heteronormativity and machismo, has remained in the cinema of Latin America, unlike its literature, a rather unexplored theme. Although some films have attempted to deal with such a figure, they have devoted very little diegetic time either to the process of physical and psychological transformation from man to woman or to showing transvestism as the externalization of the character's self-perceived gender identity. This article aims to show that the lack of on-screen transvestism in Arturo Ripstein's *El lugar sin límites* (1978), Miguel Barreda's *Simón, el gran varón* (2002), and Karim Aïnouz's *Madame Satã* (2002) is caused by a kind of heteronormative filmic fear to depict the fluidity of sexuality beyond the biologically oriented binary man-woman. I suggest that Latin American audiences do not respond positively to transvestitic images (i.e., the cinematic acknowledgment of transvestism) because they transgress the fixity of gender roles within heteronormativity.*

In Latin American popular culture (especially its literature), the transvestite has become a figure that functions to destabilize the heteropatriarchal system. He crosses the boundaries that divide the hegemonic constructs of femininity and masculinity; yet for him the act of crossdressing not only permits the transgression of heterosexual normativity but also allows for the intersection of other social and cultural discourses such as those of race, class, and politics. As Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui (2002, 10) rightly points out in his analysis of transvestism in Latin American literature, the figuration of the Latin American national subject "involves the selection of desirable fragments to compose 'identity.' Likewise, transvestism might involve picking and choosing desirable objects to create a gender effect." He observes that for the Latin American male subject, to make sense of his own persona, he must choose those aspects of the given culture that best fit his idea of the self in much the same way that transvestites articulate their own feminine persona through a collection of feminine elements that will re-create a sense of womanliness. The articulation of the transvestite character's feminine persona allows for questioning of the fixity of the sexual parameters with

which Latin American heteronormative societies regulate sexualized behavior.<sup>1</sup>

However, the problematization of the transvestite subject (i.e., of the contestation of Latin American heteronormativity under the ideas of machismo and *marianismo*) that Latin American literature commences is not carried forward by its cinematic counterpart. Whereas transvestite characters in many Latin American literary works set out to destabilize the notions of rigid normativity that accompany discourses of sex and sexuality on the continent, the transvestite characters presented in Latin American cinema have adhered more to the idea of a prescriptive heterosexuality in which crossdressing is not related to the individual's gender identity. This article intends to demonstrate that Latin American fictional film has subscribed to the idea of transvestism as a type of temporary crossdressing that has nothing to do with subverting gender systems. To this end, it will focus on Arturo Ripstein's *El lugar sin límites* (1978), Miguel Barreda's *Simón, el gran varón* (2002), and Karim Aïnouz's *Madame Satã* (2002) to demonstrate that these films have not offered a more informed reading of the issues concerning transvestism in Latin America that is in line with the research that has been carried out on the continent (Bejel 2001; Green 2000; Higgins and Coen 2000; Kulick 1998, 2002; Prieur 1998; Silva 1993; Schifter 1999). Although fictional films may not be obliged to offer accurate portrayals of sociological issues such as transvestism, it is undeniable that in Latin America, as Julianne Burton (1986, xi) suggests, filmmaking has become one of the best tools of dissent to "express 'national reality,' which they [film directors] believed to be hidden, distorted, or negated by the dominant sectors and the media they controlled." Latin American cinema should have a moral obligation and a commitment to social accuracy that still remains unseen in the films analyzed in this article. The lack of attention to the issues involving what Ekins (1995) and Ekins and King (1999) also call "male femaling" respond to an inner fear (of the film directors) to acknowledge the discomfort felt by the transvestitic individual whose body does not match his felt gender identity. This form of discomfort proves too problematic because it shows audiences the tensions undergone by the biologically gendered body the moment it is visually mutilated or modified by the crossdresser in his attempt to rectify it. This is a tension that, on the one hand, suggests that sexuality is fluid and multiple (Butler 1993; Otalvaro-Hormillosa 2000; Takagi 1996) and that the biological body does not function as guarantor of sexual identity and/or preference and, on the other hand, would ask Latin American audiences

1. It is important to remember that the Latin American culture places great emphasis on the individual's external behavior rather than his or her sexuality or on the object/subject of sexual attraction (see Balderston and Lancaster 1997; Cantú 2000; Gutmann 1997; Murray 1995).

to identify with characters that contravene the regulatory practices permitted within heteropatriarchy. To avoid the alienation of such audiences (by confronting them with a gender identity that disrupts the heteronormative binary division man-woman), the directors have decided against depicting such bodily transgressions, while also keeping to a minimum the time devoted to on-screen transvestism.<sup>2</sup>

However, rather than simply focus on directors and moral responsibility in relation to the depiction of transvestism in Latin America, the idea is to draw attention to problematic aspects of the representation of transvestism in the selected films and to how these can affect the audience's perception of transgender issues. Each section of the article will deal with different aspects of the transvestitic experience that have remained unexplored by the films in which they are present. *El lugar sin límites* will focus primarily on the failure of the power of address of the crossdresser, who desires to be read as a woman, as long as his external appearance corresponds to mainstream notions of masculinity. In other words, I argue that the transgender subject will not be able to be regarded as a woman as long as he appears dressed as a man (even if his behavior is very effeminate). Although certain feminine items of clothing might provide the transgender subject with a temporary feminine investment, such an investment will not be sufficient to erase the male image he has projected onto the people around him. *Simón, el gran varón* analyzes the importance of the mirrored image for the transvestite subject and how transvestism can be used as a sort of violent attack on femininity rather than an expression of an inwardly felt gender identity. The discussion then moves on to how transvestism is depicted as a short-term activity in which the subject engages but may not have anything to do with his desire to portray the gender identity that has been denied him by his biological gender. *Madame Satã* consolidates the ideas explored with the previous films, to then move on to the idea of transvestism depicted through a hypermasculine body that transgresses more normativity than heteronormativity. There is a return to the idea of transvestism as a parody of womanliness in which the subject holds phallic power because he has a penis, and although he may address himself as a "she," his external appearance and behavior contradict this self-labeling.

2. It is worth mentioning that, for the purpose of this article, transvestism will be viewed as a sexualized gender identity that is constructed and perfected through practice and performance, because male femalers use their bodies as erotic objects through which to construct a desired self. Ontologically speaking, the notion of practice indicates an awareness of repeating an activity until it is perfected. As such, the Latin American male femaler repeats his re-creation of femininity (body and behavior) to create a believable sociosexual subject. Only when the crossdresser undergoes a genital operation and modifies and changes his biological gender does his femaling cease to be a practice and become part of his permanent gender identity.

The transgender characters analyzed in this article seem to be subjects who do not deal with what Marjorie Garber, in her study of crossdressing and cultural anxiety in contemporary Western culture (1997, 120–121), defines as fetish envy, or the ownership of desire that is attained by both acknowledging the biological gender lack and attaining the social significance of such a lack through a transvestitic investment. More important, the temporary moment of identity crisis suffered by the transvestite during the process of femaling, the moment when he masquerades his masculinity, is never fully addressed. That key moment of “sublimation” when the transvestite embarks on the fixing of his external physiognomy so as to make his external appearance look like his own perception of the self is never addressed in these films. For Manuel González Astica, Simón, and João Francisco dos Santos (the transvestite protagonists of the three stories), becoming a woman, or rather emulating femaleness, seems to be completely unproblematic, and there is no reference to the moment when “the fetishist recognizes the reality of the lack but disavows it through an accumulation of other parts” (Pancrazio 2004, 18).

#### EL LUGAR SIN LÍMITES

In the Mexican film *El lugar sin límites*, La Manuela (Roberto Cobo) owns the only house standing in the way of Don Alejo’s (Fernando Soler) selling a whole village for a profit. The return of Pancho (Gonzálo Vega) to town causes La Manuela and his daughter La Japonesita (Ana Martín) to be drawn into a fight over his love. In the film version of José Donoso’s novel, La Manuela seems to self-identify as a woman from the very beginning of the film. However, the fact that he refers to himself as “una” does not necessarily make him a transvestite or even suggest to the audience that they are dealing with a man who believes himself to be a woman. Even though not only Manuel but also the people around him address him as La Manuela (as a way of acknowledging his alleged femininity), it could be argued that what they are really acknowledging is his homosexuality, and that by referring to him in the feminine they only reify the popular view that homosexuality and effeminism go hand in hand (Almaguer 1993; Gutmann 1997; Lancaster 1997; Murray, 1995). In addition, transferring Donoso’s novel from the original Chile to a macho-oriented Mexico (Gutmann 1997; Paz 1977; Rolando Andrade 1992) already ascribed the film within a hypermasculine context in which the idea of crossdressing almost violently opposes heteronormativity. Because La Manuela is presented not only as a transvestite but also as a prostitute, he<sup>3</sup> encapsulates

3. Despite the multiple feminine self-references to La Manuela as a womanlike figure, I will refer to the character as a man (*he*) because he never really engages in a believable male femaling.

all the negative aspects of femininity in stark contrast to the notion of *marianismo*—culturally regarded as the epitome of perfect womanhood (Collier 1986; Stevens 1973). La Manuela is, thus, presented as the ultimate marginal and transgressive character because his sexuality (homosexuality), his gender identity (femaler), and even his trade (prostitute) are regarded as subversive within heteronormativity.

La Manuela becomes a confusing figure because he is a crossdresser who spends the vast part of the film dressed as a man, an action that suggests a contradiction between his self-perceived gender identity and the externalization of such an identity. For instance, when he arrives at the brothel for the first time (dressed as a man), La Clotis (Hortensia Santoveña) remarks “pechillos no tienes, pero buen cutis sí” (“You have no breasts but you do have nice skin”), placing him again in a position in which his femaleness is put into question because he lacks one of the external attributes (women’s breasts) that would portray him as a woman. Furthermore, throughout the film, all the references to La Manuela’s femaleness remain at the level of speech but never appear to crystallize through his body. Although it appears that his ultimate goal is to be seen and read as a woman by the people who come in contact with him, he tries to do so always dressed as a man (a rather contradictory and illogical action). It could be argued that La Manuela’s process of femaling cannot be completed, because his red dress, which seems to work as his passport to femaleness, was torn into pieces. However, the protagonist’s eagerness to fix the dress, and to engage in femaling once again, appears to derive more from his attraction to Pancho than from a desire to emulate femininity as part of his gender identity. Even though the red dress supposedly functions as the object that destabilizes, or at least confuses, the gender status of the phallogentric symbolic order, the film never shows La Manuela’s process of femaling or even his female persona.

Ripstein seems to suggest that because La Manuela is gay, his desire to crossdress (even sporadically) comes only naturally as part of his homosexuality, and that the fact that the people around him regard and address him as if he were a woman, without the need to look like one, responds to the intrinsic femininity that is attached to male same-sex desire. Despite the emphasis placed on the red dress, this, nor any other feminine garment, is ever used as the instrument that permits him to experience and attain a self-perceived femininity. The film suggests that the protagonist’s crossdressing is not intended to externalize his felt gender identity but rather his sexual orientation, as well as to serve as a bait to attract men to engage sexually with him with the false promise of straight sex or sex with a “chick with a dick” (Taylor and Rupp 2004). La Manuela becomes the sort of crossdresser who uses transvestism to entice other men to sleep with him by making them feel that they are pursuing a “real” woman. This idea follows the work of Anne Prieur (1998), who points out in her

research on transvestism in Mexico City that there is a tacit negotiation between the transvestite and the *mayate* (a heterosexual man who has sex with men). The transvestite will try to play the part of a real woman, as accurately as possible, to lure the *mayate* within a supposedly heterosexual orchestration of straight seduction, and the *mayate* allows himself to be seduced as long as the seduction is kept within the limits of a pretended heterosexuality. As Prieur states:

to a certain extent, the *mayates* can have sex with men without ever being aware of it. Many *vestidas* [transvestites] look completely like women, even with their clothes off. If they do not let the man touch their intimate parts, they are often capable of having sex without his discovering that he has had anal instead of vaginal intercourse. But what is probably more common is for the men to fool themselves, rather than being fooled. (1998, 189)

In *El lugar sin límites*, although La Manuela dressed as a woman (as diegetically suggested by the flashback sequence) has seduced Pancho, the people who come into contact with both men cannot forget, and remind the latter, that the former is a gay man who is also seen dressed always as a man, and this action disavows his supposedly femaleness. The illusion of the feminine that La Manuela is trying to convey becomes unnatural, or at least artificial, to the people around him who cannot forget what he looks like as a man, regardless of how effeminate he may be.

La Manuela is also portrayed as the sort of character whose sexuality can be manipulated by the person interested in him and not by his real sexual desires. For example, during the flashback sequence, La Japonesa (Lucha Villa) seduces him to have sex with her (although she has an ulterior motive, as she has bet to make a "real" man of him to win the house where the brothel is). As La Japonesa sits on the bed in only her underwear, La Manuela cannot stop looking at her seminaked body. When they finally lie in bed, the medium shot of La Japonesa caressing her lover's body and the reddish chiaroscuro in the bedroom give an erotic tone to a situation that should have been rather traumatic for the transvestite protagonist. Moreover, the process of defemaling that La Manuela undergoes at the hands of La Japonesa, not only transgresses the latter's assumed gender identity and sexual identity as a gay man (by making him perform as a heterosexual man and have sex with her), but also implies to the audience that, deep inside (subconsciously), La Manuela could never be a woman because his penis will always prevail as the organ that controls his sexual desire. This decision to show La Manuela being undressed and seduced by a woman to bring his heterosexual desires to the forefront responds to a heteronormative interest to show the conversion from socially unacceptable to socially acceptable. Because machismo still operates as the regulatory force that controls and seizes gender relations in Latin

America, it is only natural that its cinema (especially in the 1970s) would have adhered to the idea of a male gaze for which cinematic images are built and shaped. The film's heavy reliance on the melodramatic genre, which in Latin America and especially in Mexican cinema (De la Mora 1993, 2006; Hershfield 1996; Wood 2001) is quintessentially patriarchal, as it shows strong men and weak women and the tangles of their love relations, further supports the idea that the film responds to the anxieties of an audience that is naturalized as heterosexual and for whom the transgression of the very nature of heterosexuality constitutes a threat to the stability of the heteronormative order.

Although the film wastes no time in disavowing the very idea that La Manuela should be regarded as a woman rather than as the biological man he appears to be, Pancho needs to read him as such to locate his desire within a model that would not destabilize heteronormativity. La Manuela becomes the ultimate woman because she can not only be the receiver of his *hombría* (or "manliness") but also provide him with anal pleasure. Toward the end of the film, La Manuela, with the red dress in hand, goes into hiding after Pancho arrives drunk at the brothel (his fear highlighted by a low-angle zoom-in that shows his terrified face). However, it is also evident that the dress has the power to provide him with a phallic power to make a "real" woman out of him. The moment La Manuela puts the red dress on, he becomes a strong woman who possesses, as Garber (1997, 120) calls it, "the ownership of desire." This is further evidenced by the long shot of La Manuela leaning against the door in a very seductive pose as she enters the room where Pancho is about to rape La Japonesa. Once again the red dress becomes the catalyst of the protagonist's assumed gender identity and what Entwistle (2001, 44), in her analysis of the social function of dress, calls "epidermis of self-awareness," because it is only through its presence and investment that the character is aware of the limits, boundaries, and power of his own gendered body. The red dress constitutes the vehicle that allows for bodily explorations beyond the comfortable binarity established by heteronormativity. However, if dress is a bodily practice, as suggested by Entwistle, then it is difficult to understand why La Manuela insists on living his "female" life dressed in masculine items of clothing. It appears that La Manuela is not a transvestite, but a man who dresses temporarily as a woman, because he finds that the embodiment of a specific item of clothing (the red dress as leitmotif of the movie) allows his sexual advances to be read as socially permissible. In other words, as long as La Manuela wears the red dress, Pancho will allow his advances and will be thrilled by them because he looks like a woman (although just barely). However, the issues around the "politics of pleasure," as suggested by Higgins and Coen (2000)—that is to say, the moment of transformation (the modification of biological gender into an

illusory gender) and in which most transvestites “talk about how they physically and emotionally feel themselves change as they go through the makeover process” (162)—is not explored in this sequence or in the film as a whole.

Ripstein’s perception of *La Manuela* as a queer character seems to follow that of Bernhardt Roland Schulz, who suggests in his analysis of Donoso’s novel that “the character sees himself as a woman because it lacks a sociological model that integrates his masculine biology and his sexual orientation” (1989, 226). However, such an assertion proves too reductive for trying to understand *La Manuela* as a transgender subject because it suggests that Latin American gay men see themselves as women because they cannot engage with notions of butch gay and it rejects the transgender model that *La Manuela* tries to identify with. Although it cannot be denied that the film was radical in its portrayal of homosexuality at the time of its release (De la Mora 1993, 2006; Foster 2003), it is not as sexually daring as it seems at first glance because its central character is first heteronormalized by his refusal to dress as a woman despite his continuous self-identification as such and then eradicated for subverting the status quo of the gendered symbolic order. *La Manuela*’s fate follows that of the classic *femme fatale* who, according to Mary Ann Doane (1991, 2), “is situated as evil and frequently punished or killed. Her textual eradication involves a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject. Hence, it would be a mistake to see her as some kind of heroine of modernity.” In other words, *La Manuela* is a radical character because he lives at the margin of society, sexuality, and gender, yet it is clear that the destabilization of heteronormativity occurs only at the level of speech, as such transvestitic images are barely shown in the film. If, as Percio de Castro (2004, 116) suggests, “el travestismo de este personaje [*La Manuela*] funciona como elemento centralizador del relato” (“the transvestism of this character functions as the central element of the story”), then Ripstein’s unwillingness to show *La Manuela* as a woman undermines the character’s gender identity.

#### *SIMÓN, EL GRAN VARÓN*

A Mexican film by director Miguel Barreda, *Simón, el gran varón* is perhaps the most disappointing of the three films in terms of its depictions of transvestite issues from an original text that was overtly articulated around notions of male femaling. The film is based loosely on Willie Colón’s hit song from the 1980s of the same name. Although the writing credits of the movie acknowledge the lyrics of Colón’s song as the source of the story, apart from the name of the main male characters—Simón (Gibrán González) and Don Andrés (Alberto Estrella)—nothing else in the film remains faithful to the lyrics. The film departs from the story in the



song and focuses on the problems faced by Simón growing up on his dad's ranch in Mexico. After leaving the parental home, he begins to crossdress in a bar where he finds a job and ends up having sex with his boss (Fernando Sieber), who turns out to be his half-brother. After discovering the truth about his sibling, Simón falls ill and dies alone in a hospital.

However, it is interesting to note how the director not only moves the story from an urban setting to a rural one, a decision that can be directly linked to the importance of the charro, or "cowboy," as a hypermasculine figure in Mexican folklore (Nájera-Ramírez 1994), but also disregards the idea of transvestism as a foreign vice and, more important, as a gender identity rather than just a practice (as pointed out in Colón's lyrics).<sup>4</sup> Besides the flaws in the story line, the film also fails to deliver what promises to be "a gender bender threatening traditional machismo attitudes" (Vanguard Cinema 2002). To begin with, the film addresses homosexuality in a *telenovela*, or "soap opera" fashion while it rejects some of the most characteristic notions of crossdressing and transvestism as the manifestation of a repressed gender identity. The film also plays heavily with the notions of homosexual identity formation (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 74–77) in which the boy regards his mother not as the object of desire but as the object to imitate. For instance, in the childhood scenes, Simón is depicted as the stereotypical *mariquita*, or "faggot," who enjoys playing with dolls and engages in traditional girly activities. By presenting Simón as a girly boy, the director is preparing the terrain for the public not to question the protagonist's first crossdressing experience and his eventual transvestism. In one of the film's key sequences, the young Simón (aged eight or nine) sneaks into his mother's bedroom and sits at the dresser. As a medium close-up shows his face reflected on the mirror, he takes his mother's makeup and starts applying it. While doing so, the grin on his face becomes bigger and bigger, as he is obviously deriving pleasure from seeing for the first time his real (self-perceived) self projected onto the mirror. At this point one could wonder what it is that such a young Simón sees in the mirror: is it a boy being naughty for doing something forbidden, or is it the girl he feels lives inside of him but remains castrated by society's expectations of his gendered body?

4. However, Colón's song should not be regarded as a pro-gay or pro-transgender text. In fact, *El gran varón* only served to reify the idea that homosexuality, and its "logical" transgender manifestation, was an orientation that could be acquired in foreign lands away from the protective eyes of Latin American heteronormativity (i.e. "al extranjero se fue Simón / pero de casa se le olvidó aquel sermón / cambió la forma de caminar / usaba falda, lápiz labial y un carterón; "Simón went abroad / but he forgot what he had been preached on at home / he changed the way he walked / started wearing a skirt, lipstick and a big bag"). Furthermore, the song also worked to reinforce the popular belief that AIDS was a disease only to affect and be found among gay men, because, in the end, Simón dies of "una extraña enfermedad" ("a strange illness").

In his smile (maybe the best-acted part of the whole film) the young Simón shows, as Bueno and Caesar (1998, 65) point out in their analysis of Latin American popular culture, "that the mirror is a sign of self reflection, as well as a window to an imaginary space." Immediately after, the camera pans up to show him fully dressed in his mother's clothes, high heels and all, with large quantities of makeup on; yet this pleasurable activity is interrupted by his father bursting violently into the room. A medium shot, then, shows both Simón and his father reflected in the same mirror, though this time the mirror becomes the instrument through which to confront the status of the heteromale symbolic order. As we see the reflection of both in the mirror, we are also aware of two distinctive images that confront and repel each other. On the one hand, Simón is concealing his male traits by the masquerading of femininity he attains through his mother's dress and makeup, an act that allows him to play out on his own body the battle between his gendered body and his felt gender orientation. On the other hand, Don Andrés is presented as the epitome of the Mexican macho, with a *bigote*, or "moustache," and sombrero, who feels betrayed by his son's actions and thinks that the only way to rectify his son's behavior is by physically punishing him. Unfortunately, the film seems more preoccupied with criticizing machismo than with exploring the transvestite desires of the protagonist. It is clear that the film is inviting the audience to repel Don Andrés's behavior, but it forgets to question the experience itself. *Simón* then follows what Teresa de Lauretis (1985, 141), in her analysis of representations in cinema, calls "the movement of narrative discourse," in which the movie "specifies and even produces the male position as that of the mythical subject and the female position as mythical obstacle." A situation that chimes with that depicted in Alain Berliner's *Ma vie en rose* (1997) and about which Michael Schiavi (2004, 3) points out "the sadistic antagonist is less a male subject than a male discourse that exists precisely to annihilate non-male boys." In other words, Simón's transvestite tendencies, or early experimentations, prove the failure of the patriarchal system embedded in the figure of the macho and, more important, prove the failure of Don Andrés as guarantor of the perpetuation of such a system.

Although the aforementioned sequence ends up with Simón being beaten up by his father, it appears that this episode has not provoked any kind of trauma in him, as later on in the film he seems more than willing to jump at the opportunity to crossdress. The memory and eventual trauma of such a violent childhood episode has not left any marks in Simón's life, or at least no mark strong enough to make him hesitate about crossdressing. If we are to consider that this is the very first time Simón has crossdressed since the childhood episode, it seems strange that he can engage in such a practice so readily. Simón's transvestism occurs by pure chance, as he is replacing a transvestite who has, unfortunately, had an ac-

cident. In this way, transvestism becomes a job rather than an expression of a felt gender identity, an idea that is further reinforced by the fact that he is depicted as a cheap copy of a woman. This cheap representation of womanhood supports Carole-Anne Tyler's (1991, 37–40) idea that the drag queen (the closest category that can be assigned to Simón's representation of femaleness) may be labeled as misogynist because what he is trying to do is not emulate femaleness but ridicule it. Simón's transvestism does not introduce the idea, as Marjorie Garber (1997, 11) suggests, of a third sex that "questions binary thinking and introduces crisis—a crisis that is symptomized by both the overestimation and underestimation of cross-dressing." However, in the film, Simón never introduces a new category of sex or gender; he simply happens to be a man who ends up dressing as a woman without really engaging in the psychosexual complexities of male femaling. Simón's production of the self seems incongruous with his "desire" to emulate femininity. If, as Helio Silva (1993, 122) suggests, for the transvestite "tudo deve ser 'femininamente' acabado" ("everything has to be femininely finished"), then it is rather incongruous that, for example, when he engages sexually with his boss, the spectators discover that under the dress and suspenders, he is wearing boxer shorts. By wearing such an item of clothing, Simón obliterates the whole notion of femaling that implies "un aprendizado em que roupas, gestos, posturas, expressões, maneiras de andar, formas de pegar vão sendo testados e readaptados" ("a learning process in which clothes, gestures, postures, expressions, way of walking and act are being tested and readapted"; Silva 1993, 123) to create a believable woman for himself and the world around him. In other words, Simón's reluctance to wear women's underwear, as well as to act and look more feminine, shows his lack of engagement with the idea of femaling. As a result, the movie suggests that Simón's transvestitic body is an empty recipient of a failed masculinity that would not procure, in its attainment of any kind of femininity, a way to project his self-perceived gender identity.

#### MADAME SATĀ

It has been previously suggested that for most crossdressers their bodies become the sites in which a self-perceived femininity is brought to the foreground. The dressed body constitutes the locus at which repression and resistance are played out, as it becomes the crucial signifier of the individual's gender identity. As Entwistle (2001, 45) points out, "when getting dressed one orientates oneself/body to the situation, acting in particular ways upon the surfaces of the body which are likely to fit within the established norms of the situation." However, in the Brazilian-French coproduction *Madame Satā* (a film that offers a loose portrait of some key moments in the life of João Francisco do Santos, a thief and transvestite

who lived in the Lapa region of Rio de Janeiro in the 1930s, and who was also known by the name title of the film), dress as a bodily practice is ambivalent as João's (Lázaro Ramos) body is always presented as a hypermasculine entity that crossdresses temporarily and without engaging in what Kulick (1998) regards in his study of Brazilian transvestism as "becoming a travesti." For Kulick, transvestites long "to permanently acquire the physical features that they define as hallmarks of femininity—features they desire to make them attractive in the eyes of the men that they depend on to make them feel like 'total women'" (1998, 46–47). If this is the case, then the spectator realizes that the film prefers to leave any theorization of transgender identity out of the picture. This is all the more incoherent because all the literature on the real-life character suggests that he abided to the active/passive sexual binary prevalent at the time, and that he regarded himself as a *bicha*, the Brazilian term for an effeminate, passive homosexual (Green 2000, 2003; Shaw 2007).

In the film, João's transvestism is not preoccupied with creating the illusion of femininity, although it is implied that this is his ultimate intention, as he disavows the gendered symbolic dress. Most crossdressers are fully aware that their clothed bodies will not, as suggested by Eicher and Roach-Higgin (1992, 17) "provide a visually economical way to reinforce that fact that wearers have the sex organs that are primary physical distinctions between the sexes." If anything, they try to conceal their "lack" by manipulating properties of the body that are read through clothing and with which people communicate personal characteristics, including the important distinction of gender. Unfortunately, João's body is presented from a hypermasculine and phallogocentric point of view that seems to respond to what Teresa de Lauretis (1985) calls "a circuit of violence" in which the body, and the clothes on it, become weapons of cultural and sexual transgression. By modifying his body through very ambivalent and androgynous clothing, João creates a significant symbol that confuses gender specifications, yet he is presented as a crossdresser who is neither a man nor a woman. Even though some may see such an androgynous presentation as one of the many strengths of the film, it is undeniable that such a polysexualized depiction of the character responds more to the director's intention to offer an ambivalent reading of the character rather than an accurate portrayal of the protagonist. Ainouz's androgynous depiction of Satã seems to contradict Green (2003, 216) when he points out that "ele alterou as sobrancelhas para sugerir uma aparência feminina . . . ele percebeu bem sua identificação com a vida nas ruas dos travestis cariocas, na medida em que conseguia se mover no vocabulário típico com sua voz 'alterada'" ("he shaped his eyebrows to suggest a more feminine appearance. . . . He perceived well his sexual identification with the life of the street Carioca transvestites inasmuch as he could use the typical lingo with his "altered" voice). In fact, Green suggests that the "polyvalent" na-

ture of Satã's persona did not reside in the androgyny of his physical appearance but the fact that his ability to wield a knife and fight with his bare hands was not a behavior associated with that of the bichas (210).

Although João shows signs of a desire to emulate femininity through his external appearance, as suggested by the sequences in which he dresses in his mistress's clothes, it is most interesting that the first time he appears crossdressed onstage, his body is heavily "troped" as if he were a kind of mythological animal. He becomes the Brazilian alternative to the Minotaur, a muscular man who is also part beast and whose image responds to a male-centered fantasy of masculinity and animal, sexual prowess. His hypermasculine image is presented as part of a parodic moment in which he seems to be mocking femininity through his own ridiculed version of transvestism. Although João's sexuality transgresses the moral codes of heteropatriarchal society, his crossdressing is presented from a heterosexual stand, so as to avoid the alienation of a heterosexual audience (both within and even outside the film). This idea chimes with that of Lancaster (1997, 9–11) when he suggests that within heteronormativity, heterosexual men are allowed to push the boundaries that control the fixity of sexuality as long as they do so as part of a moment of sexual parody. It could be argued that João's crossdressing helps to problematize transvestism as a nonfixed notion in which gender identity and sexual orientation are not necessarily one and the same; yet it seems paradoxical that a self-asserted bicha would offer such an extremely masculine performance of his gendered self. During this first public appearance as Madame Satã, the way he is dressed, with his naked, muscular torso exposed while the camera zooms in on his crotch and legs to highlight his masculine attributes, does little to conceal his biological gender and create the illusion of a real woman, or at least, of some sort of womanliness. Neither João's audience nor the film's are to read him as a man who feels any kind of discomfort with his body. The way his seminaked, muscular body is worshiped by the camera at all times leaves very little space to think of him as a transvestite subject. Even though it could also be argued that João is, perhaps, feminized through the objectification of "being-looked-at-ness" provided by the camera, such a hypermasculine body disavows any feminine reading of his sexual persona. The film is reluctant to present João as a woman who is trapped in the wrong biological gender, and instead presents the protagonist as the sort of hypermasculine subject who can crossdress without putting into question his own masculinity (although his homosexuality is never questioned or concealed in the film).

Even though at the beginning of the film João shows signs of a sort of fetishist envy toward females (a point discussed later), he then proceeds to use his own body as an instrument through which to externalize his social anger rather than his inner femininity, as his body disrupts the conventions of heteronormativity at the level of his sexual orientation rather

than his gender identity. Even his voice suffers no change during this process of crossdressing. It is obvious that rather than being a transvestite, João's performance corresponds more with notions of drag queen (as with the previous film) in which, as Carole-Anne Tyler (1991, 44) points out, "the humor in drag shows is aggressive and depends on such distancing effects, which are achieved by the reconfiguration of the positions of subject/object, active/passive, and even voyeur/exhibitionist as the woman is revealed to be phallic." Yet João is phallic not only because he has a penis but also because he does not respond to stereotypical notions of bichas. As James Green (2000, 88) asserts, Madame Satã became a mythical figure who "subverted the popular image of the passive and helpless homosexual." Although he self-identified as a bicha (Green 2000, 2003), the difference between João and other bichas resided in the fact that he was feared by many for his outbursts of violence and his ability to kill those who attacked him.

The film is so preoccupied with offering a hypermasculine protagonist that it contradicts not only the diegetic information provided about him but also the historical facts surrounding the real character. For example, in the opening sequence João is being charged for being a "passive pederast," yet the only sex scene in the whole film shows João having sex with his lover. This image becomes rather contradictory if we consider that João has always behaved in a feminine and subservient way around Renatinho (Felipe Marquez), thus reaffirming his position as the bicha in the relationship. The tension between the faithful portrayal of the historical character and the director's intention not to contravene the audience's expectation is further revealed when Green (2000, 90) declares that "Satã was proud of his ability to wield a knife and win a fight, two marks of a *malandro's* bravery and virility. Yet he openly admitted that he liked to be anally penetrated, a sexual desire that was socially stigmatized and the antithesis of manliness represented by the penetrating knife blade." This incongruence between his assumed gendered identity and his role during sex is also evidenced in the conversation João and his lover have upon the latter's first arrival in the former's flat, and in which João asks Renatinho if he is looking for "uma moça como eu" ("a woman like me"). By referring to himself in the feminine, he ratifies his position as a woman, or at least to be regarded as such, and yet he obliterates this transvestitic femininity through his decision to play the active role in the sexual act. It is as if every attempt on João's part to become a woman is annihilated by his hypermasculine body, a body that exercises control over his own sexual persona and that Aïnouz is reluctant to show as a passive/submissive recipient of desire or even as an entity that tries to emulate femaleness. It is evident that the director is adamant to show him as a transgender figure, as Lisa Shaw (2007, 96) points out, "the director's desired effect was that of an 'enigmatic figure that plays with masculinity and femininity,' and

not a drag queen or a transvestite. He sought to depict a man whose identity could not be defined in conventional terms," though there is no clear evidence that Satã ultimately offered such an ambivalent portrayal of his own gendered self, especially because, as previously pointed out, he never saw himself as anything but a bicha.

Even when João tries to imitate the femaleness of his mistress (in the cabaret where he has a temporary job), he fails to behave in a believable womanlike fashion. João's fascination with Vitória (Renata Sorrah) diverts attention from his own desires to become a woman and places more emphasis on his desire to become a star. João's voyeuristic pleasure seems to derive more from seeing Vitória onstage and imitating her rather than from embracing his self-perceived sexuality. Once again the audience is left to wonder whether it is the flamboyance and glitziness of Vitória's performance that fascinates João, in which glamorized images are falsified to heighten or even to idealize those who depict such images by playing with the desires of the spectator, because as Homi Bhabha (1994, 179) suggests, "beauty and sexuality are desirable exactly to the extent that they are idealised and unattainable." His voyeuristic fascination continues later on in the film when, after the show, he helps Vitória undress, and as she takes her necklaces and makeup off, we see him kneeling beside her in a position of both submission and jealous admiration, further stressed by a low-angle camera, because she possesses what he lacks: a vagina. In this way João participates in a jealous and voyeuristic act of admiring Vitória getting rid of the very elements that would be pivotal to construct his own femaleness, and it is what incites a type of vaginal envy, because she does not need such elements to ratify her femaleness. João fails to embrace the type of transvestism that, as Garber (1997, 16) points out introduces a category crisis in which there is "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another."

The film fails to offer in João a transvestitic subject whose body fully erases his masculine traits to create a copy of a feminine original that would allow him to be read and regarded as a woman. Instead, he creates an androgynous presentation of the protagonist that does not respond to the idea of the *travesti*, or at least of bicha, understood in Brazilian culture (Kulick 1998; Parker 1998; Silva 1993) and to which he openly subscribed. Although transvestism is by no means a fixed notion and there are many different ways in which transvestites express their perceived gender identity (see Butler 1993; Fernández 2004; Suthrell 2004), it is obvious that Aïnouz finds it hard to allow his male protagonist to look too ambivalent, as it is for the audience to wonder what the real nature of his gender identity is. If the historical character's ambivalence lies in the contradiction between his presentation of the self and his social attitude, bicha versus *malandro*, then it is striking and rather incongruous that, as

Shaw points out, "on screen, however, we see only a macho and virile active man who anally penetrates his lover" (2007, 95). Although Shaw also sees in João a man who "can confidently adopt an alternative feminized identity, thus representing a fluid notion of sexual identity that transcends the contemporary 'real' man/fresco (fairy) paradigm" (95), this ability to show the fluidity of the protagonist's gender identity remains unscreened in the film. João's gender fluidity is contrived by Aïnouz in the way he masculinizes his protagonist, as evidenced by the choice of costume worn by João in his second public appearance as Satã because, as Shaw highlights, "Aïnouz . . . rejected an earlier version of this costume, which featured a feminine, midriff-revealing top of the type favoured by Carmen Miranda in her musicals" (96). What is striking is that, if the director set out to present a character whose gender identity was fluid and multiple and that broke with the established norms of heteronormativity, why does he always need to use João's muscular and masculine body to achieve these aims? It is undeniable that the director accurately presents João as a figure who is conscious of his own effort to become an icon. However, his iconicity fails to fulfill any transgender expectations associated with the real character, in spite of all the references by him and those around him to his feminine persona, and instead offers what Yvonne Tasker in her work on Hollywood action heroes regards as a "parodic performance of 'masculinity', which both enacts and calls into question the quality they [muscular protagonists] embody" (1993, 111).<sup>5</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The idea of the femaling ritual, whether it be just applying makeup, wrapping bodies with foam and rubber to create feminine protuberances, pumping silicone or injecting oil into the person's body, or ultimately cutting the penis off (sex change) is not only a commonplace of stories for most transgender people but also is the moment when they finally attain, to a lesser or greater extent, the feminine qualities their bodies have denied them. However, none of the films discussed in this article seems preoccupied with exploring the psychological processes experienced by the transvestite protagonists as a result of their desire to create a believable feminine persona. Furthermore, the fashioning of the body, or the concealment of all masculine traits through the acquisition and/or re-creation of female traits, and that which both Prieur (1998) and Parker (1998) describe as an essential part of the process of femaling, never materializes in these films, as the presentation of the self for the protagonist cross-

5. Although in contemporary cinema, and with the increasing number of films dealing with antiheroes as protagonists, this idea could be easily applied to any muscular film protagonist such as the one in *Madame Satã*.



dressers always allows for their masculine traits to show through their alleged female personae. It is clear that the directors feel the need to justify crossdressing practices outside any discourse of gender inconformity and believe that audiences will more readily accept such practices if they evoke femaleness as part of an onstage performance. In other words, although all the protagonists identify as homosexual and even self-identify as females, their incursion into crossdressing responds more to a necessity to offer a laughable and/or entertaining version of femininity as part of an onstage performance. Therefore, these subjects perform a performance of gender—that is, their performance of femaleness is read by the people around them as the satirized imitation of womanliness from a man who does not see himself as a woman (regardless of his sexual orientation)—thus their crossdressing does not have the ultimate intention of externalizing an inner-felt gender identity.

Another issue that remains unaddressed by the three directors is the problem of the disfigured mirror stage (with all its Lacanian resonance) when the transvestite realizes that he is the lack. As Pancrazio suggests, “the figure that appears in the mirror is not only the other, but it is the other who becomes the self” (2004, 17); yet for the transvestite to attain this self, he must see his body mutilated by lipstick and other cosmetics that will help to conceal the masculine self and allow a feminine one to emerge. None of the films makes any direct references to this part of the femaling process or analyzes the female sexual persona of the transvestites. It is clear that the film directors, in an attempt to avoid destabilizing the basis of Latin American sexuality, present transvestism from a *machista* point of view; that is, the transvestitic practices shown in their films mock the desire to emulate femininity by presenting crossdressers as cheap copies of womanliness. If, as Foster suggests, the body of lesbian-gay Latin American films (of which the ones analyzed in this article form part) intends to raise a voice for “those gay lives [that] were told despite homophobic restrictions in the form of official, casual, and self-imposed censorship and . . . have accomplished in large measure the destruction of the codes of silence” (2003, xii), then the work of these directors is disappointing in its portrayal of accurate transvestitic Latin American experiences as it has been extensively researched by Silva (1993), Parker (1998), Prieur (1998), Kulick (1998, 2002), and Schifter (1999), among others. In short, a close look at such characters fails to offer these transvestites as sexual subjects for whom “los actos corporales reprimidos, en cuanto perversos y transgresores, adquieren dimensiones significativas, no sólo por ofrecer oposición a las domesticaciones y vigilancias del poder domesticador, sino por abrirles nuevos caminos a los centrípedos y nómadas deseos que expresan un mundo muy diferente” (“repressed corporal acts, as long as they are perverse and transgressive, acquire meaningful dimensions not only because they oppose the rules and vigilant watch of the domestic

power, but also because they open new paths to the centripode and nomadic desires that express a very different world") (Díaz 2003, 31).

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