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## Colonial Desires: Gilberto Freyre's erotic fantasy in Brazilian cinema

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## Abstract

This paper intends to discuss the notion of colonial desires in Brazilian cinema via a critical approach to the work of Gilberto Freyre. The point of departure is *Xica da Silva* (1976), by Cacá Diegues. If, in the film by the cinemanovista director, Freyre's erotic fantasy is activated in order to exalt the lust of the colonial period by the way of the sexualization of the black protagonist, in some feature films from the last decade (2010-2020), Freyre is mobilized both to illustrate the violence of colonization, as well as to allude to current racial tensions and inequalities, whether through fetishistic, sadistic or even non-violent scenes. *Vazante* (2017), by Daniela Thomas, *Açúcar* (2017), by Renata Pinheiro and Sergio Oliveira, *Joaquim* (2017) by Marcelo Gomes, *The good manners* (2017), by Juliana Rojas and Marco Dutra, and *The Cannibal Club* (2018), by Guto Parente, are some of the recent films that staged interracial sexual relations based on Freyre's erotic arsenal, although producing folds in this hegemonic narrative.

### Keywords

Brazilian cinema. Coloniality. Desire.

## Introduction: the erotic fantasy

The environment in which Brazilian life began was one of almost sexual intoxication. The European jumped on land slipping on naked India; the Society's own priests had to descend carefully, or else they would get stuck in the flesh. Many clerics, of the others, allowed themselves to be contaminated by debauchery. The women were the first to give themselves to the whites, the most ardent going to rub themselves against the legs of those who supposed gods. They gave themselves to the European for a comb or a shard of mirror (Freyre, 2006, p. 161).

The mixture of voluptuousness and voluntary servitude with which Gilberto Freyre describes indigenous women in the above passage of *Casa grande e senzala* reveals much of the fanciful aspect that we observe in his classic narrative about Brazilian cultural formation. From mild terms, such as "fraternization between winners and losers" (Freyre, 2006, p. 33), Freyre leads the reader to a positive interpretation of the European colonizer, above all, because it was up to the white colonizer to populate Brazilian lands, and faced with the scarcity of white women, he would then have to satisfy his desires and form a family with the indigenous and black women who lived here.

Denise Ferreira da Silva (2006), in a critical reading about the writing of the Brazilian national subject, points out that Freyre's erotic articulations, described in *Casa grande e senzala* through sexual relations between whites and non-whites, are all marked by a destructive desire. According to the author, the Freyrean erotic version promotes the mestizo as a modern subject, but its script is traced from the beginning as "an eschatological object" (Silva, 2006, p. 61). She argues that miscegenation is only proposed by Freyre as a positive factor of the modern Brazilian social constitution because "the excess it produces" is actually a "leftover", an unstable subject, who temporarily incorporates Brazilianness as a symbol of popular culture, but which is incapable of threatening the true subject of Freyre's story, the white colonizer, compromised with the other races (Silva, 2006, pp. 62-63).

However, according to Silva, Freyre's erotica is quite different from Bataille's classic text on eroticism. For him, erotic activity presupposes an expenditure, that is, it is contrary to regulated production. As we know, in the legal-economic context of colonialism, the white colonizer incorporated "his own regulation (legal and economic), as the sovereign ruler of the large estate, his wife, children, employees and slaves" (Silva, 2006, p.77). It is, above all, for this aspect that the author says that Freyre's erotica is not related to Bataille's erotica, because by appropriating the bodies of the enslaved, the masters would not be infringing the regulation.

From the beginning, Freyre's erotica belongs to the logic of regulated reproduction: the first rule, marriage, the alliance that underlies the social, but also the manor house as a juridical-economic unit; slavery, a mode of economic production in which the worker's body is legal property; and more importantly, the historical one, in which the absolute rights of patriarchy over the bodies of slaves also include the right to use the slave's body as a sexual instrument and the right to claim the children of these sexual unions as their own (Silva, 2006, p.78).

Still according to the author, the horizon of death that today presents itself to this "economically dispossessed Brazilian, the more or less mestizo" (ibidem, p. 63), a corollary of the destructive desire of the white, who resides, to a large extent, in controlled by militias and drug trafficking, and which is also the target of State extermination policies, is the expected materialization of the national hegemonic narrative, because it is based precisely on the disappearance of this social subject.

In Brazilian cinema, the narratives permeated by this Freyrean erotic version have a vast trajectory. In a diagnostic article on racial representation in Brazilian cinema, Orlando Senna (1979) points out that the ideas disseminated by Freyre had an influence on the production of films since the 1930s. "Cinema Mulato", the black was still framed within a "merely epidermal conception", especially the black woman,

“presented and offered as an object of pleasure” (Senna, 1979, p.215).

The incidence of this use of the black body grows geometrically from the chanchada of Atlântida to the pornochanchada of the 1970s, which occurs at the same time that the "mulataria industry" organizes itself and increases its profits. In a whole line of comedy, the black woman is seen in a situation of slave quarters, always serving a Lord, satisfying his lust, cleaning the house and cooking (...) sexual - this part of Brazilian cinema evokes and confirms the pejorative meaning of the word mulatto (which comes from mule). (Senna, 1979, p.215)

Senna points to another phase called “black/people”, which corresponded to the Cinema Novo films. For him, these films were distinguished from the Mulato Cinema phase because they denounced the exploitation of blacks, "but without stopping at a racial analysis, since the black is included in the multiracial mass of the poor and oppressed" (Senna, 1979, p. 216). He elaborates on a certain tendency of films "concerned with an investigation of Black Culture as a substantive factor" (Senna, 1979, p. 222) from 1976, when Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Tent of Milagres* and Cacá Diegues's *Xica da Silva* are also launched. Both works, focused on the national-popular theme and reconciled with the myth of racial democracy, had repercussions on the cultural scene of the time. Some critics even accuse the works of endorsing miscegenation and reproducing rude stereotypes about black people.

More than forty years later, Freyre's erotic fantasy is still alive in Brazilian cinema and in the imagination of whiteness,<sup>1</sup> consolidating itself as a tradition,<sup>2</sup> but at the same time being updated in some interesting ways. *Vazante* (2017, Daniela Thomas), *Açúcar* (2017, Renata Pinheiro and Sergio Oliveira), *Joaquim* (2017, Marcelo Gomes), *The Good Manners* (2017, Juliana Rojas and Marco Dutra) and *The Cannibal Club* (2018, Guto Parente) are some of the many recent films that have staged interracial sexual relations from the Freyrean erotic arsenal. However, some of these works appropriated Freyre's erotica not only to endorse it, but also to allude to racial tensions and inequalities in the country. Next, we will seek to map the trajectory of this desire that persists, and that has been taking on increasingly complex forms.

## 2. Xica da Silva: sex symbol

*Xica da Silva* is undoubtedly a landmark in Brazilian cinematography. A box office success at the time (3 million spectators), the film sought to portray the story of the freed woman Chica da Silva, a historical character who lived in Arraial do Tejuco during the 18th century. The environment of "sexual intoxication" described by Freyre in *Casa grande e Senzala* seems to inspire the approach of director Cacá Diegues. The Freyrean narrative is endorsed, mainly, through the characterization of the protagonist, who is represented as a libertine and sensual woman, influential for her sexual gifts. Because of these attributes and the wild personality<sup>3</sup> – as the director himself states in his biograph book –, *Xica da Silva* (Zezé Motta) wins the heart of general contractor João Fernandes de Oliveira (Walmor Chagas), and soon after her liberation.

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<sup>1</sup> Whiteness is understood here as a construction based on the meaning of being white, a place “in which subjects who occupy this position were systematically privileged in terms of access to material and symbolic resources, initially generated by colonialism and imperialism, and which are maintained and preserved in contemporary times” (Shucman, 2012, p.23).

<sup>2</sup> Here we take into account a series of films, mainly those that relied on the archetype of the “Mulata Boazuda” (Rodrigues, 2011), such as *O Cortiço* (1945/1978), *Como é boa nossa empregada* (1973), *Uma mulata para todos* (1975), *A Gostosa da Gafieira* (1981), among others.

<sup>3</sup> Cacá Diegues, in his autobiographical book, talks about the characterization of Xica's character, in a comment about the choice of the actor who would play the hirer: “Walmor (Chagas) was my first and only option to play the hirer. I needed his elegance and discretion, his serenity in contrast to a wild and baroque Xica” (Diegues, 2014, p.382).

In the first scene where Xica appears, she is on her back in the backyard of a house, next to some chickens. Zezé (Stepan Nercessian), son of the district's sergeant-major, appears on the porch of the house eating corn. He throws the food in the direction of the chickens and calls out to the woman, imitating the animals (Xic, xic, xica). Xica gets up and says: "Ah! Not today", however, he does not find the boy. In a surprise appearance, he opens a door that leads to the backyard, goes to the protagonist and puts his head between her buttocks. Xica scolds him, walks away. The young man continues his pursuit, manages to remove the top of her dress, which runs away again. However, she stops, looks in the boy's direction and smiles. Then he enters a room in the house and whistles. He celebrates when he realizes that Xica has accepted his sex appeal. From then on, sexual intercourse is suggested through sound, as the shot continues to frame only the outside door of the house. The scene ends with a scream from the boy. In this brief presentation of the protagonist, we notice a vestige of the white's destructive desire, as Silva (2006) points out. The association with chickens is an attempt to demean the character, to direct attention to flamboyant personality traits.

This animalistic mimesis<sup>4</sup> returns in other moments of the film, especially in Xica's rites of conquest and sexual encounters. She howls and whistles both in the sex scenes with João Fernandes and with the quilombola leader Teodoro (Marcus Vinicius). In the sequence of the African banquet with the Count of Valadares (José Wilker), she also makes sounds before the sexual act, but the curious thing is the action of the count, who, bodily destabilized, moves his arms imitating a chicken. João Fernandes screams every time he goes to bed with Xica. This choice of presenting the sexual act based on sounds (howls, whistles and screams), according to Liv Sovik, refers the work as pertaining to the genre of "buffoon comedy" (Sovik, 2014, p. 241).

Mariana Queen (2017) also comments on certain influences in the director's *mise en scène*. As the author describes, the scene (Figure 1) in which Xica appears naked for the first time in full body, in which she invades the meeting between the contractor João Fernandes, the intendant (Altair Lima) and the district's sergeant-major (Rodolfo Arena), is inspired by the technique of monumentalization (Queen, 2017, p.51). As soon as she takes off her clothes, all the characters are immobile - just like in the Italian commedia dell'arte. According to Queen, this "monumentalization technique also highlights João Fernandes' first visual contact not only with his future companion, but also with her naked body, explicitly an attractive and impacting sexual factor at first sight" (Queen, 2017, p. 51).

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<sup>4</sup> In the animal kingdom, some species emit sounds and noises with the aim of enticing their mates for mating. Koalas and Amazonian birds are examples of this. Before mating, the males of these species sing songs to the females that can reach 125 decibels, as is the case with the sound of the "araponga-da-Amazônia", which can be heard more than 1.5 km in the forest. Retrieved May 20, 2020 from <<https://url.gratis/dxu9B>>

Screenshot 1 - Sequence in which Xica da Silva invades the meeting



Source: Xica da Silva (Cacá Diegues, 1976)

Xica, when undressing, bets that her bodily exuberance will upset the contractor. The conquest is part of the strategy to be manumitted and to ascend socially. She understands the power of seduction she has, so much so that in the last part of the film, she seeks to seduce the character of the Count of Valadares in order to get around the complicated situation with João Fernandes. This erotic articulation, as described above, structures the entire plot of the work, and it was as a result of this bet on the sexualization of the character that the film became the target of controversy.

In the issue 206 of the newspaper *Opinião*, published on 10/15/1976, a series of intellectuals commented on the feature film. In the article entitled "Copying common sense", Carlos Hasenbalg points out that "among the multiple possibilities of making a free adaptation of the original story, the director chose the most ambiguous version, and the one that condenses, in the main character, all the prejudices about the black woman" (Hasenbalg, 1976, p.19). The author also says that the film resumes the mystifying and romantic literary tradition by bringing together the most stereotyped aspects of black people in Brazilian culture, and emphasizes that Xica's vitality in the work is based on Diegues' infantilization of her emotional structure, when portraying her through spontaneous actions devoid of reason.

Beatriz Nascimento, historian and icon of the Brazilian black movement, also writes in this same issue of *Opinião*. In her review entitled "A senzala vista da casa grande", she comments that the director approached the history of the freed slave from the myth of open sexuality that developed in four centuries of Portuguese domination and exploitation of black women.

Then Xica da Silva turns into an animal stultified by weakness and irrationality. Her eroticism does not even legitimize her power in fact. It's inconsequential, even in that. When she thought, just for a moment in the film (in the "African banquet"), Mr. Diegues arranged a sterile and banal scene for her. The only moment in which he allows the audience to witness a sexual scene by Xica da Silva is not a woman who introduces herself, but a metallic and animalistic image, idiotized in the action itself.



Once again, the old western understanding of Africa and the African appears, as a primitive, a savage (Nascimento, 1976, p.21).

Also, according to the author, Diegues' film is "the impoverished projection of Casa Grande e Senzala" (Nascimento, 1976, p. 20), above all because it represents the Portuguese in a sentimental and complacent way. For Nascimento, this humanity of the whites defines the ethos of the colonizer in the work, in a portrait of slavery that, according to her, is pleasant and fun (Nascimento, 1976, p.20). The author adds that Xica da Silva "has reinforced the stereotype of the passive black, docile and intellectually incapable, dependent on the white to think" (Nascimento, 1976, p.21). Despite agreeing with the author on several points of her criticism, we believe it is important to consider this topic of the representation of Portuguese as sentimental and complacent. She is right if she only takes into account the contractor João Fernandes, however, we cannot say the same about the Count of Valadares, nor about the Intendente and the Intendente's wife. Like these three characters, other whites treat Xica with disdain and disgust, and this can be seen most acutely in the sequence in which she finds herself on the boat while the whites watch her ride with disapproval, as well as in the final sequence, in which she is chased out of the village, being stoned by children.

In general, Xica da Silva sedimented in the Brazilian imagination an idea of the historical character linked to sexuality, configuring itself as an erotic matrix of Brazilian cinema. Zezé Motta, the actress who played Xica, posed nude for a magazine and became recognized as a sex symbol. The construction of the character within the archetype of the "sensual mulatto", according to Sovik (2017), also had an influence on the cultural dynamics of racial and gender violence. The actuality of this violence, more specifically for a prank call carried out at UFMG (Figure 2), in which a white student chained a black student and made her carry a poster that said "Caloura Chica da Silva." For Sovik, this violence attests to the latency of the racist and patriarchal paradigm, as we regularly see narratives triggering seduction and sex as the only possible strategies for the social prestige of black women (Sovik, 2017, p.19).

Screenshot 2 - 2013 UFMG Law class prank call



Source: Veja, 2013. Available in: (<https://veja.abril.com.br/educacao/ufmg-investiga-trote-com-teor-racista/>). Accessed in: 05/02/2022

### 3.Vazante and Joaquim: Frustrated desires

Everyday situations structure the narrative of two recent films that sought to give historical

legibility to slavery through the point of view of white characters. *Vazante*, by Daniela Thomas, and *Joaquim*, by Marcelo Gomes, are works that, in addition to being woven in the form of a chronicle, show the journeys of troops in search of gold in Minas Gerais and stage sexual relations between whites and blacks. Films that come together not only for their majestic and wild landscapes, but for rape scenes and the resentment of the male protagonists. However, although there are many similarities between the works, we recognize a fundamental difference, which is expressed in the unfolding of this male resentment, in what these white characters do with their frustrated desires.

The character who embodies resentment in *Vazante* is the Portuguese Antônio (Adriano Carvalho), owner of a huge decadent manor house, who, in the first part of the film, loses his wife and heir in a complicated delivery. After learning of the death of family members, the man sets out on a solitary journey through the confines of the Minas Gerais backlands. He only returns to his property sometime later, with the help of an African slave (Toumany Kouyaté). Back at the big house, the drover starts to occupy his time between the fields and the hammock on the porch, in an evident acedia. In the next part of the film, after having married the young Beatriz (Luana Nastas), still a child, Antônio remains indolent in the hammock, waiting for the young wife to menstruate in order to provide him with children. Every now and then he rapes the enslaved Feliciano (Jai Batista), mother of the boy Virgílio (Vinicius dos Anjos), who is close in age to Beatriz. The two young people, little by little, are getting closer and, without Antônio realizing it, venturing into hidden places. The Portuguese's second frustration is related to this young man's adventure, and is only revealed in the final sequence, when he sees the child that Beatriz had just given birth to. Antônio realizes that the child is not his. The effect of this discovery is an angry action on the part of the drover, who kills the bastard baby, and then Virgílio and Feliciano.

Screenshot 3 – Antônio standing and Virgílio and Feliciano's bodies on the floor



Fonte: Vazante (Daniela Thomas, 2017)

Actions of extreme violence, such as Antônio's, are a constant theme in Judith Butler's critical work. According to the author, we are vulnerable from the beginning of our lives, since "even before individualization itself, and due to physical demands", we are handed over to people we are not old enough to know and judge (Butler, 2019, p. 51) Therefore, from the beginning, we are vulnerable to violence, and this implies the possibility of someone eradicating us (Butler, 2019, p.51). Developing furthermore this idea, the author says that both violence and abandonment result from a process of non-recognition of the other. In general terms, Butler states that there are cultural norms and contours defining who counts and who does not count as human around us (Butler, 2019, p.52).

If even today the norms and cultural frameworks of the West do not fully recognize the humanity



of the black person, in the context of slavery they were even worse. The outcome of *Vazante* illustrates well which lives mattered at the time. Antônio frees his young wife and punishes Virgílio and Feliciana because the two enslaved are something to him, lives that do not count, that should not be mourned - as he himself insists on communicating, when he shouts to others in the locality, that the bodies will be exposed to vultures. *Vazante* thus frames colonial violence, the exercise of productive regulation by the white colonizer. Its illustrative form, full of beautiful compositions, promotes a sterile contemplation, a spectacle of horror and resignation<sup>5</sup>.

The picture of humanity in *Joaquim* is somewhat different, at least from the perspective of the heroicized character such as Tiradentes (Júlio Machado). Marcelo Gomes' film shows the ensign's awareness of a series of frustrations with the Portuguese Crown, which lead him to a resentful condition. But it is the protagonist's relationship with Preta (Isabél Zuaa), a slave of another black man, that best outlines the difference in approach with *Vazante*, especially since Joaquim is passionate about her (Figure 4), and this implies the recognition of the enslaved woman as a subject.

Screenshot 4 - Joaquim kisses Preta



Source: Joaquim (Marcelo Gomes, 2017)

At the beginning of the film, after Preta picks up lice in his hair, the ensign appears performing oral sex on her. This action of the protagonist partially transposes the Freyrean erotic version<sup>6</sup>, since, in the patriarchal and slave society of the time, it was up to the woman to give pleasure to the man, and not the other way around. The practice, quite unusual, demonstrates to some extent how the relationship of the two characters had something exceptional. In return for the ensign's gesture, Preta masturbates him and tells him that his owner, the black man Benedito, is forcing him to sleep with other men. Joaquim says that his promotion is near and that he will make an offer to Benedito. The ensign even tries to persuade the man to sell his slave, but does not convince him.

After being violated by the administrator, Preta stabs her owner and runs away. This action of the enslaved character marks a fundamental difference between her and Xica da Silva. If, in Diegues' work,

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<sup>5</sup> The film was surrounded by intense controversy upon its release at the 2017 Brasília festival, following in a very emphatic way the racial debate in Brazilian cinema. In addition to heated criticism throughout the festival, the film raised a series of texts that rejected this supposedly historical representation of slavery.

<sup>6</sup> In the following quote, the role that the enslaved black woman played for Freyre is evident: "in everything that is a sincere expression of life, we bear the mark of African influence: of the slave or mistress who held us, who breastfed us, who fed us, after softening the food in her mouth; of the old black woman who told us the first horror stories; of the mulatto woman who treated us and who initiated us in physical love and gave us, on the noisy mattress of air, the first sensation of masculinity" (Freyre, 2006, p.367).

the protagonist bets on a conciliation with the white person to conquer manumission and rise socially, in Joaquim, the action of the black character is opposite. Although in the first part of the work, Preta cultivates the ensign's passion, his trajectory in the film is one of insurgency against the white world.

In the last part of the film, when Joaquim seeks to return to the place where he found precious stones, he is kidnapped by a group of black people, who take him to a quilombo. There he comes across Preta, who no longer recognizes that name and forces him to call her Zua. Conveying the message of the quilombo leaders, she threatens to kill him if he does not tell where the troops are. He replies saying that he doesn't have any troops, but she threatens him again. That's when he challenges her: "Kill me! Kill me at once!" After looking at him for a while, she says something to her quilombola companion and leaves the tent, where Joaquim remains trapped. In this scene, we once again recognize a dimension of common vulnerability, and a possibility of a non-violent outcome, as Butler proposes, even on the part of those who have historically been oppressed.

According to the author, before the other, we are always questioned (Butler, 2019). There is a "face" that summons us, that launches a moral demand that is impossible to reject, even if we have not asked for it. This notion of the face - borrowed from Lévinas - grounds much of Butler's argument in his ethical proposal of non-violence. As she points out, the face does not speak properly, but conveys the idea contained in the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" (Butler, 2019, p.162). It is a kind of "wordless vocalization of suffering", which can only be understood if we are aware of the precariousness of the other's life and the precariousness of life in general (Butler, 2019, p.163-164).

What results after the scene described above is the release of the prisoner, which, in Butler's terms, would most likely be the result of "listening to the face" by the black character. The next day, Zua appears at the tent to free Joaquim without the other quilombolas. He still tries to grab her, but she threatens him with a knife and says: "If you touch me, I'll kill you. No white man will ever touch me again!". Although the action is threatening, the aggression does not occur. Zua allows Joaquim to live, but distant from her. The erotic fantasy ends there, triggering a little more openness in the protagonist in relation to the contour of the human.

Upon returning to the village and being asked by his slave João (Welket Bungué) if he agrees to free him, the ensign relents. This is yet another point that separates *Joaquim* from *Vazante*, due to the possibility of emancipation, even if tiny, of the black characters. Furthermore, the dramatic sequence of actions seems to put the very representation of colonizer versus colonized in crisis, which we usually find in the form of conciliated liberation or suppressive violence. Joaquim seems to dodge this dilemma, leaving it open, while *Vazante*, with its pessimistic outcome, takes it to the extreme by eliminating the other.

#### 4. Açúcar and The Good manners: gendered desires

In this section, we analyze two films that update colonial desire without substantially triggering gender violence, as we have seen in the works analyzed above. *Açúcar* and *The Good Manners (As boas maneiras)*, launched in the same year and directed by duos (Renata Pinheiro and Sérgio Oliveira / Juliana Rojas and Marco Dutra), invest in situations between employers and employees, which, in some way, give visibility to the colonialist legacy in contemporary Brazil. However, what makes us glimpse the colonial heritage does not come exactly from the sexual relations between the characters of different races and classes, but from the exploratory load of the work, and from other nuances that we will not address here. In both films, there is a kind of twist of Freyrean eroticism, since the desire represented does not fit as patriarchal.

Who desires in these films are the female characters, above all, the mistresses. Another factor that corroborates the twist in Freyre's erotic version is that sexual relations are not properly heteronormative.

One is a lesbian, the other involves two women and a man. Furthermore, white characters<sup>7</sup> take possession of the bodies of black characters with an apparent consent, albeit in atypical circumstances and in altered states of consciousness. Ana (Marjorie Estiano), the boss of *The Good Manners*, finds herself sleepwalking in the kitchen when she kisses the maid Clara (Isabél Zuaa) for the first time. The action takes place right after she devours a piece of raw meat in the fridge. The nanny initially reacts to the kiss with strangeness, but then she gropes her mistress and kisses her with an expression of pleasure. Clara only pushes Ana away when she bites<sup>8</sup> her lip and scratches her shoulder.

Screenshot 5 – White mistress Ana kisses black nanny Clara



Source: *The Good Manners* (Juliana Rojas e Marco Dutra, 2017)

In *Açúcar*, Bethania (Maeve Jinkings), heiress of the sugar mill, enjoys<sup>9</sup> the body of Zé Neguinho (Zé Maria) after a drunken spree with her godmother Branca (Magali Biff). Through a secret passage in the big house, they arrive in a forest that gives access to a water stream in a dark and dammed place. There, the former employee of the mill, now leader of the quilombola cultural association, appears to entertain them. In the scene he shows himself to be quite comfortable, having his body worshipped by the women,

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<sup>7</sup> The character of Bethania, protagonist of *Açúcar*, carries the characteristic ambiguity of many Brazilians. Her brown skin color gives her an identification of a non-white person in some regions of the country, but in other parts, especially in the Northeast, she can be read as a white person. The film, which takes place in a northeastern location, triggers this ambiguity as one of its narrative strategies. At the beginning of the plot, Bethânia is characterized as white (smoothed hair is one of the whitening marks, in addition to make-up and costumes, of course), but in the end, she claims a mestizo identity (which is symbolized, mainly, by the frizzy hair and by a series of brutalized body gestures and movements – a dangerous and stereotyped association that is regularly observed in performances about blacks). However, our reading is that during most of the work she is characterized as a white person or "whitened" - which converges with Munanga's reading of miscegenation and national identity: "In Brazil, the perception of color and other Negroid traits is "Gestaltic", depending, to a large extent, on the awareness of them by the observer, on the context of non-racial elements (social, cultural, psychological, economic) and that are associated - manners, systematic education, professional training, style and standard of living -, all of this obviously linked to class position, economic power and the resulting socialization" (Munanga, 2019, p.89)

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, we understand Ana's bite and scratch as violent gestures, but we do not classify such actions as gender violence because, in addition to being practiced by a woman, she was sleepwalking when she hurt another character. Also, in the following encounters with Clara, Ana does not hurt her again.

<sup>9</sup> The sequence shows the three characters having sex, but the last shot, in which Bethania appears alone in the rapids of water, suggests that the sex with Branca and Zé Neguinho was a daydream of the protagonist.

who, slowly, are touching him from the feet to other parts. These erotic articulations are a little closer to Bataille's version than the films that we had previously covered, since the sexual relations described above are not "authorized" transgressions, that is, they are not based on the logic of the regulated production that was practiced by the planters.

However, even though Freyre's erotica has a reduced latency in *Açúcar* and *The Good Manners*, we believe that it is important to locate its remnants in the works. The first one concerns the atmosphere in which desires emerge, which somehow reveal part of the colonialist legacy. Although they work with a certain realism, both films have a strong presence of supernatural elements. This shuffling of reality and fantasy, to different degrees, produces dark climates that link the employers' desires to an obscure and dangerous idea, so much so that the scenes of sexual excitement occur in low light situations and with the white characters in altered states of consciousness. When they emerge in this dark mode, the scenes of lust in the films end up going back to colonial times, because sex between planters and slaves took place in such obscure conditions, which also needed to be repressed. In *Açúcar*, this process of repression takes place in an integral way, and it is what moves the film's plot, with Bethania's character trying to withhold some ghosts from the past, and becoming uneasy as this strange familiar <sup>10</sup>returns, especially in the form of an attraction. On the other hand, in *The Good Manners*, the repression is operated by Clara, a black character, who was conscious at the moment of the sleepwalking mistress's kiss. The next day after Ana has grabbed her in the kitchen, she asks her mistress if she slept well. The young farmer says she had a strange dream, but does not reveal the contents. Then she says she didn't see the maid arrive. Supposedly with the intention of preserving her job, Clara hides information about what had happened between the two. But the next night, after waking up from a dream, Ana kisses the nanny again, and has sex with her consentingly. From then on, Ana and Clara begin to develop an affective bond, without, however, easing the workload of the maid, who, let us remember, had been hired as a nanny, but who started to perform all kinds of services, from cooking to painting the apartment.

The second remnant of Freyre's erotic version concerns the fetishization<sup>11</sup> of the black person, a symbolic operation that reduces his/her existence to the body. For Fanon, this process is part of the colonial situation that forges the white as a universal subject, endowed with reason, and the black as a mere animalized body. Also, according to him, "the white man is convinced that the black man is an animal, if it is not the length of the penis, it is the sexual potency that impresses him" (Fanon, 2008, p. 147). Briefly, the argument of Fanon is that the body of the black, hyper-sexualized by the white, seen as a creature of primitive impulses, disrupts the body schema of the white himself, who starts to act in a dynamic of attraction and repulsion<sup>12</sup>.

In *Açúcar*, we see Bethania behaving in a very similar way to the character of Clara. In the first scene with Zé Neguinho, she refuses his help when she arrives at the big house. After another situation with the boy, in which she mocks a proposal to sell land, she is the one who starts looking for him. First, he goes with a lamp through the bush until he stops next to a tree and sees the remaining quilombolas in the terreiro of the cultural association. When she notices Zé Neguinho's gaze in her direction, she tries to hide, but she can't. The following night, Bethania goes to the association's headquarters to talk to him,

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<sup>10</sup> The notion of "familiar stranger" is based on the ambiguity of the word "Heimlich", which means familiar, but which also connotes something secret and hidden. This contradiction brings the word closer to its opposition, "Unheimlich", which in some translations of Freud appears as "disquieting." According to the author, "Unheimlich would be everything that should remain secret, hidden, but appeared" (Freud, 2010, p.338).

<sup>11</sup> In *Casa grande e senzala*, especially in the chapter dedicated to blacks, Freyre elaborates on this key of fetishization when he emphasizes the characteristics of sensuality and licentiousness of black people and, especially, when he emphasizes his importance in Brazilian sexual life.

<sup>12</sup> This sexual dialectic of attraction and repulsion also supports the racist ideas of Count Gobineau, precursor of European racial theory, which influenced Hitler in his Nazi project (Young, 2005, p.120).

asks for help to turn the light back on. Back at the big house, in the dark, she shines her flashlight over the boy's body while he makes the electrical repairs. The gesture is the first sign of the protagonist's attraction to the character. He, at the end of the job, also has a slight body hesitation, he looks at her seductively. Zé Neguinho only returns to the big house after the arrival of Bethania's godmother, Dona Branca. It is she who invites him in. In this scene, Bethania is quite uncomfortable with his presence, especially with the things he says, which relate to the history and culture of the enslaved people. But in the next scene, they meet in the rapids of water, and this time the bodies touch. Although the sex scene is a product of the protagonist's unconscious, it fills the circuit of attraction and repulsion between Bethania and Zé Neguinho in the plot, and, more than that, materializes the process of fetishization of black people, which we located above as part of the Freyre's erotica. The way the directors illuminate and frame the scene, with silhouetted and counter-plongée shots, reinforces the objectification of the boy's black body, above all, because he appears occupying a central strip of the frame, on a much larger scale than the white characters.

Screenshot 6 - Sex scene between Bethania, Zé Neguinho and Dona Branca



Source: Açúcar (Renata Pinheiro e Sergio Oliveira, 2017)

Açúcar's erotic fantasy reaches its climax in this scene, projecting, at the level of the fetish, the same connection between the black man and his sexual potency - which is reiterated in Casa grande e senzala - and, somehow, easing the tensions that established there between Bethania and Zé Neguinho, and which will be appeased in the redemptive outcome of the protagonist, in her "rediscovery" of identity.

## 5.The Cannibal Club: contemporary sadism

among the useful things – the raw material – that the slaves produced was the mestizo, an object condemned to consumption, an excess only necessary because the Portuguese lacked physical attributes indispensable to the construction of a civilization in the tropics. Now, however, as global economic structures and processes require less and less human labor, as less raw material is needed to reproduce wealth, excess has finally reached the fate that utilitarian logic provides, it has become a waste” (Silva, 2006, p. 82).



The trajectory of annihilation of the Brazilian national subject - raw material transformed into waste, as Silva describes in this passage above - is re-enacted in an almost literal way in *The Cannibal Club (O Clube dos Canibais)*, a feature film by Guto Parente. In a clear allusion to the current sadism of white elites, the film shows sexual relations that result in the deaths of black and mestizo characters. In search of extreme pleasure, Otávio (Tavinho Teixeira) and Gilda (Ana Luiza Rios), owners of a mansion on the edge of a beach, hire employees to devour them. The woman is the one who seduces and has sex with them. At the moment of enjoyment, Otávio enters the room through a hidden door and kills the men. Cannibalism is also practiced by a kind of sect (to which Otávio belongs), in which wealthy white men get together to see sex and the extermination of black bodies in a kind of Roman arena. After the barbaric rite, white supremacist men eat these bodies.

The film's cycle of murders and cannibalistic practices obviously takes us back to the stories of the Marquis de Sade, which Bataille discusses in *The Eroticism*. According to the author, "the transition from the normal attitude to desire is a fundamental fascination for death" (Bataille, 2014, p.42). It is because of this enchantment that Sade understands murder as the height of erotic excitement, because he believes that the victim, when sacrificed, can make the brutality of death sensitive. However, according to Bataille, "in eroticism, even less than in reproduction, discontinuous life is not condemned, in spite of Sade, to disappear: it is only questioned" (Bataille, 2014, p.42), having to be disordered to the extreme, but without necessarily ceasing to exist.

In this sense, Bataille understands sadism within the domain of sovereignty, a world in which the limits of death have been abandoned, in which the constant exercise is that of absolute expenditure. The activity of sadists has as its principle precisely excess, it aims to lead the body to its paroxysm, to the greatest possible excitement in the face of the suffering and annihilation of the other, which implies an "anti-economy", an irreversible expense. Like Bataille, who articulates death to the notions of sovereignty and politics, Achille Mbembe predominantly posits sovereignty "as the right to kill" (Mbembe, 2018, p.16). In his approach to necropolitics, he states that in colonial experiences the exercise of power was always outside the law.

There, the sovereign can kill at any time or in any way. Colonial warfare is not subject to legal and institutional norms. It is not a legally coded activity. Instead, colonial terror constantly intertwines with colonially generated fantasies, characterized by wild lands, death and fictions to create an effect of the real. (Mbembe, 2018, p.36)

Also, according to Mbembe, this colonial project was carried out from the process of "territorialization", which inscribed "a new set of social and spatial relations" over dominated areas (Mbembe, 2018, pp.38-39). For the author, these colonial occupations dismantled local production systems, extracted resources, classified people in a hierarchical manner, and, in addition, produced "a vast reserve of cultural imaginaries" (Mbembe, 2018, p.39). Today, according to him, the wars of the globalization era no longer have the conquest and acquisition of territories as a priority. What they aim at is "to force the enemy into submission, regardless of immediate consequences, secondary effects and "collateral damage" of military actions" (Mbembe, 2018, p.51). However, for Mbembe, states no longer exercise a monopoly on the right to kill and "the 'regular army' is no longer the only means of carrying out these functions" (Mbembe, 2018, p.52). Currently, according to the author, "urban militias, private armies, armies of regional lords, private security and state armies all proclaim the right to exercise violence or kill" (Mbembe, 2018, p. 53).

In general, the forms of necropower have been updated in "war machines", groups of armed men who are divided and mixed, combining a plurality of functions (Mbembe, 2018, p.54-55). These war machines have "the characteristics of a political organization and a mercantile enterprise" (Mbembe, 2018, p.55). Many of them enjoy complex relationships with state agents (Mbembe, 2018, p.54), such

as the militia of *The Cannibal Club*, of which Otávio is a part, and which has a federal deputy among its members.

Screenshot 7 - Cannibal sect dinner scene



Source: *The Cannibal Club* (Guto Parente, 2018)

Borges (Pedro Domingues) is the character that mimics a large portion of Brazil's current politicians. In addition to legislating in public office, he dictates the orders in the cannibal sect. He is also the character who most allows for non-normative sexual transgressions, as he relates to other men clandestinely. The discovery of these transgressions (Gilda sees the deputy having sex with security guard Lucivaldo during a party) produces a fold in the plot, which starts to revolve around this event. Otávio's wife, at first, tries to talk to Borges about what happened, but he acts cynically, pretending not to understand what she says. The deputy's attitude makes Gilda report the situation to her husband, who despairs. Otávio tells his wife that Borges will come after them, because he could not bear to have the secret revealed among his peers. As a public man, representative of morals and good customs, he could never have that kind of relationship. Having sex with another man would be an unacceptable transgression for club members. This can be seen both in Otávio's moralistic speech - when he replies to Gilda that he is not a man to "give the ass" - and in Borges's cynical speech - when at the cannibal sect's dinner, he tells his colleagues that it is necessary to defend the values of the family and fight against pederast enemies. Keeping up appearances, in Borges' terms, would eliminate the protagonist couple.

The first attempt occurs at dawn, in which hooded men kill Otávio's security guard and then enter the house. With the help of a new "housekeeper", Otávio manages to kill Borges' men. Jonas (Zé Maria) is the character who helps him and who appears to destabilize the narrative. In the registration interview with Otávio's security company, he gives some clues about his trajectory and, when asked about the time he has been unemployed, replies that the situation is difficult. Having no vacancy for security, Jonas accepts to be a caretaker. As soon as he takes up the job at Gilda and Otávio's house, he realizes that he was hired for functions that are excessive to the position – as in *The Good Manners*. Demands that come from both the boss (defense of the territory) and the boss (sexual practices). After helping Otávio in the attempt to assassinate Borges' henchmen, he is assigned a new mission: to kill the deputy in an ambush. The ax blow that leads Borges to his death is carried out by the boy, who becomes even more suspicious of the protagonist couple. Knowing the labyrinths of the house and attentive to the movements of Gilda and Otávio, Jonas escapes the trap that the bosses set for him. In a self-defense action, in full sex with Gilda, he dodges an ax blow from the protagonist. The blow hits the woman, who dies at the height of pleasure. Otávio, in a state of shock, doesn't have the strength to react. Jonas shoots the boss, who falls dying on the bed, thus aborting the couple's plan that aimed at his annihilation. The film ends with a zenith shot of

the corpses, in a somewhat obvious (but perhaps necessary in these times) response that the exercise of violence is also directed against those who practice it.

Although the main characters of white supremacy have been punished with this outcome, we know that the horizon of death for Jonas will not disappear, just like for poor Brazilian workers, especially those who are regularly racialized. Today, more and more, with the collapse of formal political institutions and the emergence of war machines, the scripts of these subjects have been configured as a trajectory towards disappearance.

*The Cannibal Club* updates the sadism of the sovereign heirs seeking deviations from the pornographic, establishing a certain distance from the violence that the characters of the elite's practice. Guto Parente's *mise en scène* privileges the erotic games between Gilda and the employees (the body movements and hesitations, the seductive looks, without necessarily fetishizing the black and mestizo bodies), as well as the moments that precede the violent actions and gestures of the characters. Even if the horror is materialized, through the exposure of dead bodies and the physical suppression of limbs and other parts of the human body, fatal acts of violence are framed with certain restrictions. The first is that the functional cutout (shot and back shot) avoids showing the complete action, with the presence of the aggressor and the victim on the same plane. The second is that the director avoids the abundant hyperclozes that today characterize the aesthetics of the pornographic industry. And the third concerns the duration of the shots, which, as they are longer than most audiovisual works today, offer the viewer greater temporality to apprehend the images and think about what is seen.

## 6. Final remarks

In this brief mapping of colonial desire in Brazilian cinema, we see how Freyrean eroticism played a fundamental role, especially in the characterizations of black characters and in the dynamics of attraction and repulsion of whites. Although there are twists and deviations from patriarchal desires, as well as non-violent sexual relationships, what these works sketched, in general, was a panorama of the imaginary of whiteness, above all, because what was put on the scene is understood within the desires of white characters.

As some authors have pointed out (Silva, 2006; Almeida, 2018), the structural racism that still manifests itself today is due to our inability to perceive how cultural treaties and historical narratives softened the relations of the white colonizers with the indigenous peoples and with the enslaved blacks. If, on the one hand, the films showed the processes of subordination of blacks and mestizos, on the other hand, they revealed the privileges of whites, and consequently, their fetishes and obsessions.

The privileged Brazilian subject, the white sovereign - the one who lived in the mansions and today inhabits the condominiums and mansions - does not hesitate to show his weapons in libidinal activity (*The Cannibal Club*), nor when frustrated (*Vazante*). As Mbembe points out, "the social distinction between those who have weapons and those who do not" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 59) seems to be the central cleavage of today. In contemporary Brazil, this split seems increasingly clear.

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