

Constructing Transgressive Sexuality in Screenwriting

LJ Theo

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The *Feiticeiro/a* as Character

With a Foreword by Lindsay Clowes

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LJ Theo
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FOREWORD

This volume draws on and pulls together theorising from a range of disciplines to consider the possibilities and constraints of writing screenplays involving complex and compelling characters who challenge (rather than re-inscribe) sexual stereotypes, characters who are able to provoke audiences into recognising and thinking critically about heteronormative understandings. In making a contribution to scholarship theorising possibilities for developing complex filmic characters and sexualities, the volume represents an important contribution to what Nancy Fraser might describe as transformative (rather than affirmative) practices/scholarship.

The text has something to offer students of film as well as academics in a range of disciplines because the questions it raises can be asked of more than simply the representation of sexualised identities. It represents, therefore, the opening of an important conversation about what it means to be human—and how this might be represented more fully on screen—in ways that point to the significance of marginalised voices and marginalised cultures and histories.

In drawing on theorising emerging out of a wide range of contemporary scholarship to challenge the dominance of Western heteronormativity, the book represents an important contribution to a developing conversation around writing transgressive characters. While it leaves writers with no clear guidelines about how to develop characters with

transgressive sexualities, it surfaces key assumptions that currently underpin such characterisations, thus providing space for responses emerging out of what are currently subordinated contexts.

Lindsay Clowes Ph.D.
Associate Professor & Chairperson
Women's & Gender Studies Department
Deputy Dean, Teaching and Learning
Faculty of Arts, University of the Western Cape

PREFACE

IMPETUS, CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION AND METHODOLOGY

The impetus for this volume comes from a fascination with stories about the interstices of society: stories of people who live beyond the mainstream and who do things that most others find uninterestingly odd or even distasteful. Unfortunately, such marginality is too often specularised for shock value in fiction films that emulate the *Jerry Springer* or the *Ripley's Believe it or Not* lineage of chat-show and documentary fare. Although undoubtedly eminently saleable, the stereotypes to which such material speaks, not to mention the material itself, often end up not only offensive, but also—more damningly—as simply boring in their refusal to acknowledge the nuances of unusual people as quirky subjectivities playing in unusual contexts.

If professional screenwriters are to be aided in constructing characters as more than merely superficially shocking people who do ‘weird’ things, mechanisms should be found to approach character construction in a different way. It seems self-evident (albeit not incontrovertible) from a post-anthropocentric, non-binary perspective that such characters are best phrased in terms of existential meaning and phenomenal experience.¹ In the context of films about sexuality it seems similarly self-evident that these characters should at the same time refuse simple replications of the stereotypes that have arbitrarily sedimented in popular consciousness from historic precedents formed by dominant conservative discourses. Unfortunately, such a framing as an antidote to narrative

vacuity is not easily distillable from the most obvious first port of call for interrogating characterological marginality: the wealth of film theory based in critical discourse analyses of past cinematographic representations through a focus on the medium of film. Nor is it immediately apparent in the Hollywood ‘how to’ screenwriting manuals that peddle overly simplistic renditions of the classical mythopoetic paradigm as a solution to questions around building characters. This implies, amongst other things, an as-yet unrealised opportunity to revise the premises for the construction of ‘perverse’ characters, a construction that is perhaps most obviously comprehensible in terms of a combination of ‘character identity’ and ‘characterisation’.

The volume aims to contribute to epistemologies intended to encourage stories that avoid stereotypes, by applying to sexually ‘perverse’ characters an engagement with challenges to consensus notions of gender and sexual orientation, more than with arguments based in critical film analysis as are usually forged through forensic investigations of stereotyping discourses. In attempting to engage this enterprise, the volume is intended as a philosophically focused teasing-out of an episteme that might productively inspire more interesting representations of transgressive sexuality in screenwriting.

By considering characters as instances of Judith Butler’s construct of performativity, and therefore as capable of being ‘played’ in a multitude of ways,² the volume engages a ‘queer’ conception of character construction that supports assumptions that representations are always appropriately subject to contestation, and, through contestation, to subsequent rephrasing. This ‘queer’ conception of character implicitly refuses an inevitable and irreversible dominance of heteropatriarchal discourses. It thereby enacts the critique of identity politics suggested by Sedgwick, who notes that the idea of ‘difference’ as a description of unusual sexual identities problematically incorporates varied forms that are illogically and carelessly lumped together under the heading ‘sexual orientation’.³

The volume further pries open opportunities for ‘perverse’ character constructions as a product of ‘querying/queering’ critical analyses of the tropes of ‘perversion’ as a construct of social practice rather than of literary fiction. This analysis thereby engages with a ‘queer’ antipathy to binaries, in particular through proposing a (re)description of an alternative episteme that refuses to merely replace inaccurate yet purportedly definitive framings for sexually motivated characters (in this instance ‘*the* pervert’) with positively framed alternatives (such as ‘*the* perverse

character’) based in historical filmic exemplars, which would almost certainly be partial and flawed. It therefore intentionally stops short of proposing, in a definitive or declarative way, an easily replicable and applicable new conceptual paradigm for ‘perversion’ in screenwriting, although one might eventually be extrapolated.

Instead, an alternative underlying epistemic field is suggested in the form of the *Feiticeiro/a* as character; not as an identity ‘type’, but as a suitable epistemic replacement for largely unchallenged historically sedimented epistemologies. This field is premised on challenges to the notion of sexuality as a pragmatic and simplistic way of differentiating between people, while at the same time foregrounding more logical and true-to-life differences that transcend sexuality and gender categories.⁴ It thereby highlights Sedgwick’s insistence that experiences, bodies, sexual acts and sexual objects mean different things to different people, even within the same sexual identity ‘category’.⁵ In a twofold demarcation, it does this by proposing the *Feiticeiro/a* character as a fluid and indeterminate conceptual alternative to foundationalist descriptions of ‘perversity’ and therefore as a different way of thinking about sexually motivated characters: as subjectivities.

On this basis, professional screenwriters might perhaps productively build complex and interesting sexual characters across a range of genres, styles and modes of film production. Although not aimed at these writers directly, it is hoped that the volume might challenge teachers and scholars of screenwriting to approach characterisation with a focus on subjectivities rather than types, so that writers might be influenced to represent characters as complex people who live in the interstices of society and whose subjective experiences across contexts are valuable, interesting and meaningful to a wider audience.

VOLUME STRUCTURE

The volume is divided into three sections that approach screenplays as the text-based blueprints for films, with particular attention paid to (semiotic) form, which is useful to screenwriters as the generators of empirical units of meaning. The framing for this is the construct of communications described by Barthes in terms of a tri-tiered notion: the invisible (mythological) layer, the suggested (connotative) layer and the explicit (denotative) layer.⁶ From this basis, the notion of ‘perversion’ is considered from the perspective that ‘[t]he project of myth analysis

lies in articulating the relationship between all aspects of a sign system that constructs meaning around cultural assumptions embedded in the form'.⁷

The volume considers a materially focused underpinning to screenwriting from a post-anthropocentric, existential notion of being, moving from a consideration of the dominant discourses of 'perversion' to an alternative episteme founded in 'fetishism' for the *Feiticeiro/a* as character. Based in the importance of materiality that is a *sine qua non* of screenwriting (as the description of material people in identifiable spaces in material relations with objects and other people), the volume locates what a 'pervert' is *qua* 'fetishist' and the form he/she might take on screen. This allows a clearer exploration and therefore expression of what counts as 'perverse' character identity and (visual) form beyond reductionist and foundationalist stereotypes that inappropriately ascribe essentialist characteristics to 'perverse' people and determinist outcomes to 'perverse' behaviours.

Part I: Myth—From the Absent, Invisible 'Pervert' to the 'Is-ness' of the Feiticeiro/a

In order to begin the analysis, Part I proposes 'a recognition of an ideological objection or an awareness that the sign system carries assumptions that appear natural but are actually historical'.⁸ This serves as a background to a discussion of the myth of 'the fetishist pervert'—not as a person in a real-world environment, but as an epistemological framing for 'pervert' characters as is found in the discourses of psychiatry, which powerfully influence how people are perceived in popular contexts and are therefore important source material for screenwriters. As an instance of 'perversion', the notion of the 'fetish' is particularly important as an entry-point to a (re)phrasing of character construction. As opposed to bondage, discipline and sadomasochism (BDSM), which are equally understood as 'fetishes', a focus on 'fetishism' as inherently object-oriented rather than primarily behavioural narrows the discussion from woolly purely discursive constructs that incorporate both identities and practices to a discussion of what a 'pervert' *is* in relation to 'the fetish', which at base is a material concept: an object, not a practice. Contrary to implications lodged in nineteenth-century sexological epistemologies, the 'is-ness' of the 'fetishist' is to be found in the etymological and anthropological forebear to the notion of perversion: the *'feitiço'*, which reveals interesting possibilities for a renewed episteme for the *Feiticeiro/a* as character.

Part 2: Connotation—The Philosophical Constitution of the Feiticeiro/a

Part 2 discusses the epistemic constitution of the *Feiticeiro/a* character, through the prism of Barthes's construct of connotation as an inexplicit element of communication, comprehensible 'in the way described by Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev as a system of associative, secondary meanings built upon a system of primary meanings'.⁹ If screenwriting is to be seen as an exemplar of literary realism that brings meaning through representations of people in places engaging in actions, it can be acknowledged as more than merely 'the movement from literary codes to a sensory experience of reality'.¹⁰ Connotation in screenplays in this context thereby serves as 'a movement between texts, between codes and different practices of codes', whereby it is not a mere "association of ideas" which is a "system of the subject".¹¹ This implies that connotation is not mere 'relationships between the text and experience separate from it, untouched, as it were, by the laws of discourse', but is instead "a correlation immanent in the text, or texts; or again, one may say ... an association made by the text-as-subject within its own system".¹² On this basis, Part 2 suggests that screenwriters might, through their character constructions, elicit, or at least encourage, an alternative set of connotations for their 'pervert' characters *qua Feiticeiro/a* to those of ineffable 'badness', 'madness' or 'sadness'.

Part 3: Denotation—The Form of the Feiticeiro/a

Part 3 approaches the forms the *Feiticeiro/a* might take on screen as articulations that eventually become comprehensible through *mise en scène* and actions performed by actors, through signifiers placed in a screenplay in each scene and sequence. Such an enterprise comes alive in Barthes's framing that places 'denotations' as 'more neutral and more widely accepted meanings than connotations':

For example, 'home,' which denotes a 'house, apartment, or other place of residence,' becomes in connotation 'a place of warmth, comfort, and affection.' Denotation is the support of connotation. For Hjelmslev and for Barthes, the signified and signifier of denotation (that is, the whole term) together form the signifier of connotation, thus permitting the formation of a second signified or 'meaning' that is suggested but not universally agreed upon.¹³

Using this basis as a way to understand the visible enunciations of character form (secondary characters, objects and actions), it becomes possible to rephrase the *Feiticeiro/a* character as a person with explicitly visible characteristics, some of which might be transgressive and some of which might not.

The Chapters

Each chapter of the volume is derived from a core idea and makes an argument that, together with the others in sequence, serves to propose a more holistic episteme for ‘pervert’ characters *qua* instances of the *Feiticeiro/a* by challenging epistemic assumptions and proposing more suitable alternatives.

Chapter 1 contextualises the argument around an epistemic framing for ‘pervert’ characters as ‘involving and disturbing’ (and therefore successful) to audiences. This argument is a concern especially pertinent to screenwriting as an enterprise aimed at describing materialised instances and expressions of personhood.

Chapter 2 challenges nineteenth-century sexological discourses on ‘perversion’ founded in the notion that, in Freud’s view:

the fetish originated with the male child’s horror of female castration. Confronted with the mother’s lack of a penis, the child represses this lack and finds some object to stand in for and substitute for the missing penis, thus relieving the anxiety and restoring in a displaced way the erotic attachment to the female. The act involves not only finding a substitute object, but also a subsequent act of forgetting the act of substitution.¹⁴

The chapter discusses how this framing epistemologically absents the ‘fetishist pervert’, amongst other things by inappropriately failing discursively to ascribe to him/her a sense of agency, which is a central elements to the ‘is-ness’ of people.

Chapter 3 deals with an associated concern based in Freud’s assertion that:

sexuality is the key to the problem of the psychoneuroses and of the neuroses in general. No one who disdains the key will ever be able to unlock the door.¹⁵

If unpacked, this assumption unhelpfully suggests that the ‘fetishist pervert’ is rendered invisible as a result of epistemically mandated definitional comparisons.

Chapter 4 explores the notion that

[i]ncreasingly, we have also come to appreciate the fluidity and instability of the (multiple) ontological boundaries which separate thinglike from nonthinglike entities (persons, animals, relations, concepts), in a growing discomfort about the traditional hierarchies which separated subjects from objects, cultures from natures, and humans from nonhumans.¹⁶

From this perspective, the chapter approaches the etymological forebear of ‘fetishism’ as the *‘feitiço’*, suggesting an alternative epistemic construction to the ‘fetishist’ in the form of the *Feiticeiro/a* character: as ‘sorcerer’/‘sorceress’. Such a character might thereby productively be acknowledged as epistemically present, visibilised and endowed with agency in similar ways to witches and warlocks who purportedly have the capacity to manipulate their material environments so as to exert control over both supernatural and natural realms.

Chapter 5 approaches the notion of the ‘fetish’ as:

an idea-thing which brings with it, from the beginning—when it ‘was god,’ so to speak—into the present, the trace residue of its etymology: What is left, active and powerful, is the word itself—enigmatically incomplete.¹⁷

From this it becomes possible to consider the *Feiticeiro/a* as ‘[j]ust the signifier’, that is ‘bereft of its erased significations gathered and dissipated through the mists of trade, religion, witchcraft, slavery, and what has come to be called science—... whereby the signifier depends upon yet erases its signification’.¹⁸ Perhaps counter-intuitively, this helpfully clears the way to a more substantive and value-neutral description of the constitution of the *Feiticeiro/a* character than is ordinarily available in the dominant discourses of ‘perversion’ such as those found in the epistemologies of psychiatry.

Chapter 6 approaches the notion that:

[c]lassificatory end-products to which the word ‘fetish’ has been applied cannot be understood simply as special kinds of objects, or defined in terms of their generic functional attributes. Neither do they reflect a particular mental condition. Rather, they reveal a variable combination of three universal underlying features of categorisation and representation: concretisation, animation or anthropomorphisation; conflation of signifier with signified; and an ambiguous relationship of control between person and object.¹⁹

The chapter suggests an alternative rephrasing of the *Feiticeiro/a* character, through acknowledgement that ‘[a]ll [features] lie on a processual continuum which begins with identification of categories, relationships and phenomena, and proceeds—via reification and iconification—to their personification’.²⁰ This enables a view of ‘perverse’ characters as constituted in ways other than in terms of the ordinary Cartesian binaries that inform the dominant discourses that so deeply inform the practices of mainstream screenwriting.

Chapter 7 considers alternative framings for the *Feiticeiro/a* character as a subject, not an object, which becomes possible if ‘fetishism’ is reclaimed and reconceived from a past in which it ‘used to be a question of gods’.²¹ This possibility derives from the view that

[n]ow fetishism seems to be a question of the gods’ disappearance, in more than one sense a crisis of faith. The fetish commemorates the crisis, marking the space of this disappearance.²²

In considering alternatives from the launching point of such binaries of presence/absence and space, the chapter approaches a phenomenological framing of ‘being’ based on a non-foundationalist version of ‘thing-ness’.

Chapter 8 works from the premise that

[p]ersons who respond only or primarily to objects which are remote from the sexual partner, or remote from the overt sexual activities with a partner, are not rare in the population.²³

On this basis, the chapter suggests that the *Feiticeiro/a* character might productively be approached in terms that acknowledge how bodies, minds and society interact to form indicators of meaning that become visible to onlookers.

Chapter 9 follows with a discussion on the material engagements of the *Feiticeiro/a*, based in the notion that:

[a]lthough research data on their incidence and prevalence are not available, in practice there are relatively few patients (or physicians), who do not engage in some sexual act that others would view as unusual.²⁴

In ways useful for screenwriting, this suggests paradigmatic framings for the *Feiticeiro/a* character that recognise that people and their activities are not different depending on their roles within the social system.

Chapter 10 follows with a consideration of Heidegger's notion of the meaning of 'being' as both co-existing and co-appearing:

[T]he givenness of being, the givenness that is given with the very fact that we understand something (whatever it may be and however confused) when we say 'being' ... can be summarized as follows: being itself is given to us as meaning. Being does not *have* meaning, but being itself, the phenomenon of being, is meaning.²⁵

This is considered in the context of characters' actions as something not sufficiently determined by independent choice, but instead by dialectical relationships, which suggests interesting approaches to how *Feiticeiro/a* characters engage with the material world.

Chapter 11 discusses a framing for the relationship between complex characters and complex audiences as they experience (transgressive) filmic products. Although this chapter does not lock down a positive conceptual paradigm for the *Feiticeiro/a* character, it does suggest a theoretical framing for the complex dynamics between characters and audiences, on the basis of which writers might make productive decisions in their character constructions.

NOTES

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