



Transcestrality, Travestiland, Traviarchy: the stage and gender dissidences in Brazil

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ABSTRACT – Transcestrality, Travestiland, Traviarchy: the stage and gender dissidences in Brazil –

This article aims to put into historical perspective the relationship between the arts (especially performing arts) and travestilities in Brazil since the beginning of the 20th century. Based on a literature review that included both academic works and non-academic documents, the study identifies three patterns (or paradigms) experienced by travesti artists in what refers to their insertion in society: *transcestrality*, *travestiland*, and, more recently, *traviarchy*. This allows a better interpretation and understanding of the role played by the current generation of these artists: if on the one hand they fuel social change with a work which is both artistic and political, on the other this role can only be understood as the result of a historical process, in which the importance and contribution of artists from the other two paradigms must be also recognized.

Keywords: **Travestis. Performing Arts. Sociocultural Mediation. Gender Dissidences.**

RÉSUMÉ – Transcentralité, Travestiland, Traviarchie : la scène et la dissidence de genre au Brésil – Cet

article vise à mettre en perspective historique les relations entre les arts (notamment les arts du spectacle) et les identités ‘travestis’ au Brésil depuis le XXe siècle. S’appuyant sur une revue de la littérature incluant à la fois des travaux académiques et des documents non académiques, l’étude identifie trois modèles (ou paradigmes) d’insertion dans la société vécus par les artistes ‘travestis’ : la *transcestralité*, le *travestiland* et, plus récemment, la *traviarchie*. Cette distinction permet de mieux interpréter et comprendre le rôle social joué par la génération actuelle de ces artistes : si d’un côté elles alimentent le changement social avec leur travail à la fois artistique et politique, de l’autre ce rôle ne peut être compris que comme le résultat d’un processus historique, dans lequel l’importance et la contribution des artistes des deux autres paradigmes doivent également être reconnues.

Mots-clés: **Travestis. Arts du Spectacle. Médiation Socioculturelle. Dissidence de Genre.**

RESUMO – Transcestralidade, Travestilândia, Traviarcado: o palco e as dissidências de gênero no Brasil

– Este artigo tem como objetivo colocar em perspectiva histórica a relação entre as artes (sobretudo cênicas) e as travestilidades no Brasil a partir do início do século XX. Com base em uma revisão de literatura que incluiu tanto trabalhos acadêmicos como documentos não acadêmicos, o estudo distingue três padrões (ou paradigmas) de inserção na sociedade experimentados por artistas travestis: a *transcestralidade*, a *travestilândia* e, mais recentemente, o *traviarcado*. Essa distinção permite interpretar e compreender melhor o papel da atual geração dessas artistas: se de um lado elas alimentam a mudança social com seu trabalho ao mesmo tempo artístico e político, de outro esse papel só pode ser entendido como resultado de um processo histórico, em que a importância e a contribuição de artistas dos outros dois paradigmas devem ser igualmente reconhecidas.

Palavras-chave: **Travestis. Artes Cênicas. Mediação Sociocultural. Dissidências de Gênero.**

Introduction

The aim of this article is to put into historical perspective the relationship between the arts (especially theatre) and travestilities in Brazil in the 20th and 21st centuries. The analysis builds on previous work by Meneses and Jayo (2018), in which a periodisation was presented, distinguishing a *prehistory* and four *phases*, or *generations*, for travesti art on the Brazilian stage. Here, unlike that work, the main focus is not chronological. What I intend to do is distinguish, partly on the basis of that history, the paradigms or patterns of insertion into society experienced by travesti artists from the beginning of the 20th century onwards, in order to better understand the role of contemporary travesti subjectivities.

This analysis does not aim to historicise the origin or evolution of the travesti presence in the arts. We know that the term travesti itself has been used with different meanings in different contexts and historical moments (Platero, 2017). We can, however, reflect on how the term self-proclaimed travesti, in the past used as a violent form of exclusion, has been used in contemporary times as a form of affirmation in the political and social struggle for respect and rights for this vast population. Far from wanting to analyse a homogeneous or unique phenomenon that spans different eras, the aim here is to bring to light the presence of these artists at different moments in history, contributing to the construction of affirmation, identity(ies) and travesti memory.

One starting point is to understand, as Weiss (2002) points out, that art is an important means of political expression and discussion of problems that require a broader and more critical analysis by society and that art activisms, or *artivism*s (Colling, 2019; Richard, 2013) of gender dissidence, broaden the notions of affirmation of transidentities for cisnormative society¹.

Not many academic studies have looked in depth at travesti artists and their role in the political struggle for visibility and social affirmation of dissident gender identities. Most of the research on the travesti and trans population to be found through systematic keyword searches in article databases and repositories of theses and dissertations connects travesti experiences to themes such as HIV/AIDS, prostitution, the impossibility of enter-

ing the formal labour market and expulsion from school (or a more comfortable term: school dropout), as well as treating trans and travesti bodies from a binary logic and cis-medical understanding. This reinforces the need for discussions aimed at denaturalising exotification.

On the other hand, through a non-systematic search, it was possible to gather a number of significant works resulting from academic research, such as those by Delgado (2013), Leal (2021), Leal and Denny (2018), Leal and Rosa (2020), Lion (2016, 2015), Rodrigues (2016), Silva (2011), Silva Junior (2017), Vergueiro (2019), among others, as well as relevant non-academic references, such as Nunes (2015), Paschoal (2016) and Camarero and Oliveira (2021), whose review and analysis formed the methodological basis of this study.

Travesti artists and sociocultural mediation

In Brazil, at least since the 1950s, different generations of travesti artists have gained national prominence playing the role of socio-cultural mediators of gender dissidence with varying degrees of intensity. Perhaps the most famous example is Rogéria (1943-2017), who, with a long career that began in the 1960s in the theatre and then on television, ended up becoming a beloved figure among the general public, becoming the “travesti of the Brazilian family” (Paschoal, 2016), a nickname she was known by at the end of her life. Other lesser-known historical examples include Ivaná, who was active in revue theatre in the 1950s and represented a generation before Rogéria, and Cláudia Wonder, from a later generation in the 1980s.

These historical examples are joined more recently by a contemporary generation, which emerged at the beginning of the 21st century and confronts the imposition of gender roles in society by producing militant and political art, an *artivism* of gender dissidence. In this way, they seek what Preciado (2014, p. 22) calls the “systematic deconstruction of the naturalisation of sexual practices and the gender system”.

In creating their works, many of these contemporary travesti activist artists do so as a way of mediating gender dissidence aimed at cis audiences, thus acting as socio-cultural mediators.

The concept of socio-cultural mediation has its origins in cultural mediation, which is present in academic discussions and professional practices



in the fields of Communication, Education, Museology and the Performing Arts (Perrotti, 2016; Aboudrar; Mairesse, 2016; Perrotti; Pierruccini, 2014; Desgranges, 2006). For Aboudrar and Mairesse (2016), cultural mediation is a process whereby, thanks to the action of an intermediary (the mediator), individuals or social groups assimilate a certain proposition – be it cultural, aesthetic, political, etc. – with which they would not otherwise come into contact. The mediator acts as a formative agent, facilitating contact and the construction of social knowledge in relation to a given topic or proposition.

Oliveira and Galego (2005) broaden the notion by adding the prefix *socio* to the term *cultural*. Socio-cultural mediation can be seen as a communicational process for transforming the social and re-qualifying social relations in areas where it is necessary to reinforce the dimension of diversity, interculturality and social cohesion. Therefore, sociocultural mediation processes play a role as conflict resolution and intervention strategies in problems of integration in and with society. Consistent with this idea, for Desgranges, mediations achieved on stage “can bring urgent issues of social life to the surface” (Desgranges, 2017, p. 47). In the case of the artists who are the focus of this analysis, mediations help to create a new relationship with their own trans lives in society and with issues that are pertinent to a large part of cisgender society, which in general does not see the legitimacy of trans and travesti lives and bodies.

The artivisms of dissidence have recently attracted the attention of research communities. Some international studies, such as that by Alonso-Sanz and Alfonso (2003), refer to processes of *public pedagogy*, defining this concept as pedagogy in the broadest sense, which aims to educate in the public sphere, beyond school institutions. The concept refers to educating the public in a way that is very similar to that contemplated by sociocultural mediation. Biesta (2012) even refers to an *arts-based public pedagogy*. Despite the similarities, in order for this study to join the community of people researching the subject in Portuguese, we prefer to use the term socio-cultural mediation in this study, following Oliveira and Galego (2006).

Meneses and Jayo (2018) have already proposed the idea that travesti artists can play the role of socio-cultural mediators towards a social affirmation of transgenderism and travestility. In fact, one possibility for socio-

cultural mediation, in favour of resolving conflicts and intervening in problems of integration, is the creation of training processes that are interwoven into artistic projects. The socio-cultural mediator (in this case, the travesti artist) would create strategies based on artistic language, in an attempt to reach the public aesthetically and also to raise awareness in a process of knowledge exchange, with impacts that are both artistic and social or political.

Three paradigms

There are three paradigms or patterns of mediating action by travesti artists that we want to distinguish here, namely: that of what we might call precursor artists, or *trancestral* artists, (present more at the beginning of the historical process and marked by marginality), that of *travestiland* (marked by growing social visibility, thanks to the media exposure provided by show business and TV, and at the same time by exposure to a high degree of exotification, violence and social prejudice), and that of *traviarchy* (characterised by greater political protagonism by travesti artists in the public debate and in the fight for rights). As we shall see, this is not exactly a periodisation, as there are temporal overlaps between these forms of insertion, which do not follow a logic of phases with rigid chronological boundaries.

Transculturality

Madame Satã (1900-1976), today considered by many to be the first known Brazilian travesti artist, can be presented as one of the main representatives of this first paradigm, which we call *transculturality*. Her travesti identity has been attributed to her by authors such as Cafola (2021), Cassimiro (2021), among others. We've chosen to call her that too, even though we realise that this name didn't exist in the character's historical time, when perhaps the most appropriate classification would have been that of a homosexual in her private life and a transformist artist in her professional life. It is worth noting, however, that the term travesti appears in the artist's autobiographical book, published in the early 1970s (Madame Satã, 1972)². She herself, therefore, even if only towards the end of her life, came to refer to herself as a travesti.

The construction of her identity, both gender and artistic, is associated with the atmosphere of the dances and contests of the Rio Carnival. The very name Madame Satã, by which she became known, came from a costume she wore at Carnival in 1938, as Green (2003) reports. At a time when gender dissidence was criminalised – in view of the Criminal Code of 1890, in force until 1940, which forbade “disguising one’s sex by wearing clothes inappropriate to one’s own”, with the penalty being “fifteen to sixty days’ imprisonment” (Barbosa, 2014, p. 78) – there was an *opportunity*, as Green points out, to exercise greater freedom in gender expression.

Black and born in Pernambuco, Satã lived in Rio de Janeiro from a very young age and tried her hand at different trades, which she alternated with performing on stage as a transformer. In 1928, she earned 15,000 réis a week performing as *Mulata do Balacochê* in a theatre in Praça Tiradentes, an artistic stronghold in the centre of Rio, playing a samba called *Mulher de Besteira*. After a night in which “they applauded and cheered and shouted my stage name and I was sure that I was pleasing millions” (Madame Satã, 1972, p. 1), the artist says that she was walking home, not far away, and decided to go into a bar. She had been performing the act for 15 days and, as she says, “I was dying to have a certain profession that would allow me to live in peace [...] and the theatre was the way” (Madame Satã, 1972, p. 1). Happy with this success and about to sign a new contract, she decided to celebrate: “I got excited and ordered a rare steak, which has always been my favourite food” (Madame Satã, 1972, p. 3). But her joy and peace of mind were, predictably, interrupted by a police officer swearing at her while she was waiting for her steak. Let the artist herself tell us what happened in her 1972 autobiography:

– Faggot.

[...]

– Are we already in the carnival, faggot?

[...]

– Are we or are we not in the carnival, you faggot?

[...]

Instead of leaving the bar and leaving me in peace because I had already shown that I didn’t want any trouble, he was almost at my table. Oh my God, I need to control myself. I was doing so well as an artist.

– Filthy faggot.

Alberto stopped in front of me. His eyes were huge. They seemed larger than his head.

- The faggot isn't going to say anything?
- Why are you doing this to me? I only came in to have a meal.
- Vagabond faggot.
- I'm coming from work.
- Only if work means giving up your ass and stealing from others.

My steak wasn't coming at all. Sure enough, when the bar owner realised that the policeman was having a go at me, he cancelled the order but didn't say anything to me. That was it. Fewer dishes to break (Madame Satá, 1972, p. 23).

The scene, set in 1928 and evoked so emotionally by the character herself in 1972, never loses its drama and remains poignant to this day, almost a century after it happened: in it we see someone being humiliated for being who they are. If the aggression initially came from the policeman, he was joined in solidarity by many others: the owner who cancelled the steak, the others present who did nothing. Madame Satá continues the story, detailing the events until the sad outcome. At first, she chose to leave the place: "I got up with my head down and left in silence" (Madame Satá, 1972, p. 24). But as she climbed the steps of the boarding house where she lived, "I began to get even more nervous and had a lump in my throat" (Madame Satá, 1972, p. 24), which prompted her to return. This time armed, she shot her attacker. Brought to trial, she was sentenced to 16 years in prison, later reduced to two. It was to be only her first imprisonment in a long series that would result in her spending a total of 27 years in the prison system (Green, 2003).

In 1986, ten years after her death, we found her pictured on the front page of the Rio newspaper *O Pasquim* (Figure 1). "Ten years without Madame Satá", says the headline. In the photo, she appears on a stage, making large arm movements and wearing an eye-catching costume: an apparently shiny cape, and large and eye-catching bracelets.

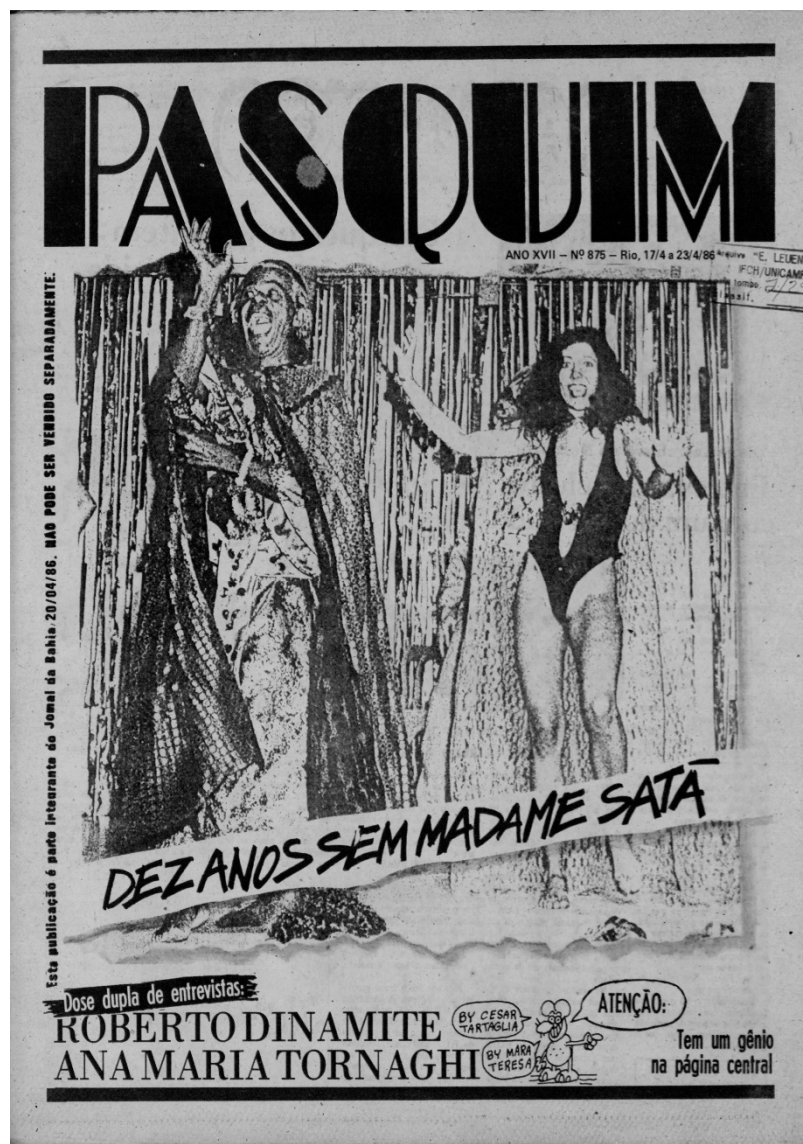


Figure 1 – Cover of Pasquim nº 875 (April 1986).

Source: Edgard Leuenroth Archive (Unicamp).

Years later, she would be portrayed in the cinema³, but is more commonly remembered from her police file:

[...] He's a troublemaker and a frequent visitor to Largo da Lapa and the surrounding area. He is a passive pederast, has shaved eyebrows and adopts feminine attitudes, even altering his own voice. However, he is a very dangerous individual [...]. He is always seen among pederasts, prostitutes and people from the lowest social level (Green; Polito, 2004, p. 145).

In between her troubles with the police and stints in prison, Madame Satã “[...] found refuge in the artistic life, since she always tried to return to it, saying that, on stage, she was free to fulfil her desires, travesti herself and

was still accepted by people” (Cafola, 2015, p. 139), while, off stage, she found mischief, bravado and violence as a strategy for surviving an extremely hostile environment.

Described by Silva (2011, p. 10-11) as a character with “multiple faces” who, throughout her life, “knew how to be several things”, Madame Satã actually occupied a place on the margins because she didn’t fit in with the standardisation imposed by society. She built her identity and lived in what Arantes (2010) calls an *in-between* place: a border zone between concession to the norm and transgression, between masculine and feminine identity, between brazenness and the stage.

Transformed over time into a mythical figure associated with the bohemian and roguery of 20th century Rio, portrayed in films, soap operas and samba themes, and investigated in academic research, she is certainly the best known representative (or the only really known representative) of a whole generation of travesti artists – or transformists, a denomination more suited to their historical moment – who lived through experiences marked by stigmatisation and multiple discrimination: by social origin, sexual orientation and/or gender identity, very often also by race. These are people whose non-standardised lives caused them to become marginalised. James Green (2000) lists some names about which little is known, but who seem to have had an equally frequent presence both on bohemian stages and carnival contests and in places of prostitution and police stations: Gilda de Abreu, Kay Francis, Lena Horne are some of them. Other names have certainly been lost to memory and their experiences still deserve to be researched.

One of these names that deserves more attention is recorded in the writings (also referred to by Green, 2000) of the doctor Leonídio Ribeiro (1893-1976). Director of the Civil Police Identification Institute of the Federal District in the 1930s, Ribeiro set out to characterise the homosexual presence in the Brazilian population. Among the individuals he researched, “M. S., known by the female name of Marina” (Green, 2000). Marina was interviewed in 1932 for the study conducted by Ribeiro, and it is striking how the doctor, even though he treated her in line with the times as a homosexual man, already recognised in her traces of what today would be considered a transgender or travesti subjectivity:

[...] Marina left her family in the north of Brazil, moved to Rio de Janeiro and got a job in the revue theatre as a male dancer (*sic*) and member of the chorus. In Rio, she met a man with a higher social status than hers, and the two began a six-year relationship in which Marina took on the traditional role of a woman. He looked after the house, had a wardrobe full of women's clothes and took on what Ribeiro considered a feminine persona. [...] In portraying Marina's feminine *persona*, Ribeiro describes him as a 'woman trapped in a man's body' (Green, 2000, p. 136).

It was undoubtedly common at the time for same-sex relationships to reproduce the rigid roles of masculine/active man and effeminate/passive man, and it's possible that Marina felt she understood herself within this model. However, today we could certainly ask whether she might have been a trans person or a travesti living in a heterosexual relationship. So why don't we think of Marina's female *persona*, and her lifestyle after swapping the stage for marriage, as an indication of her gender dissidence, reinforcing the perception that she was a travesti?

Finally, another little-known character who could also feature alongside Madame Satã and Marina among the *transcestrals* is Jacqueline Galiaci. Born in 1933 in the interior of São Paulo, Jacqueline was expelled from her home in 1947 at the age of 14. From then on, as Assunção (2021) reports, not only a star of the revue theatre was born, but also the first Latin American gender dissident to undergo a sex change operation (in 1969), as gender reassignment was called at the time.

In 1964, the starlet was described as:

An artist who, in São Paulo, performed in 'travesti', garnered applause for the perfection with which she presented herself in nightclubs and shows attended by large audiences. Sometime before, however, Jacqueline had already asked the police authorities to authorise her to go out in women's clothes, because that was how she felt, free from embarrassment (Revista do Rádio, 1964, p. 6).

In a series of statements, she gave to journalist Ademir Assunção in the early 1990s, reproduced in Assunção (2021), Jacqueline says that "in the 1950s I began to assume my female name", but when walking the streets of São Paulo, "[...] I wore a beret and put all my hair inside it, because if the police caught me in the street with big hair, they would arrest me. There was a lot of repression" (Assunção, 2021, p. 79). In 1960, she went to court

to obtain, through *habeas corpus*, the right to wear women's clothing in public (Figure 2). Even so, she was arrested numerous times and was subjected to torture and police violence. In one of her arrests, which took place after the 1964 military coup, she reports having been raped on the premises of the DOPS by four investigators. Still in the 1960s, Jacqueline formalised a request to change the registration on her documents, which was denied. It was only after gender confirmation surgery in Morocco that the official bodies accepted her request to change her documents.



Figure 2 – Jacqueline Galiaci out walking with her boyfriend.
Source: Revista do Rádio, n. 740, 23 Nov. 1962.

At the height of her fame, built up both on stage and in the police pages of the São Paulo newspapers, Jacqueline Galiaci, having already undergone reassignment surgery and apparently tired of the scandals involving the curiosity of the public and the press about her body, decided to abandon her artistic career and began living an anonymous life with Antonio Carlos Acquaviva. The travesti star, who sang sambas by Isaura Garcia and Dalva de Oliveira, died in October 1992, aged 58, from a heart attack.

The three artists dealt with here – Madame Satã, Marina and Jacqueline Galiaci – have, as you can see, very different biographies and profiles. They do, however, share a common trait that makes us classify them as representatives of what we call *transculturality*: they are artists whose lives have been marked by stigmatisation and violence, and whose professional careers have been marked by imprisonment and/or episodes of police violence. Madame Satã certainly spent more time incarcerated than she did on stage. Marina is one of the many characters about whom we don't know much, but what little we do know comes to us, suggestively, through detective literature. Jacqueline, just as Marina seems to have done, exiled herself from the stage: she swapped artistic activity for domestic and anonymous life, protecting herself or trying to protect herself from violence and prejudice. All of them, however, helped pave the way for the next model to insert travesti artists into Brazilian society.

Travestiland

Also, in the first half of the 20th century, while the figures mentioned above had their lives marked by stigma and transit between the stage, social marginalisation and police repression, little by little a new way of inserting travesti artists into social life began to emerge, first in Rio de Janeiro, then in other capitals across the country.

The first manifestations of this movement took place in the early decades of the century, when foreign transformist artists such as the Argentinian Aymond (stage name Norberto Americo Aymonio) and the American John Bridges (or João Bridges, as he used to be credited), among others, began to perform on a recurring basis in a more mainstream art scene, far from the cabarets of *ill repute* and the more popular circuit where one could find Madame Satã, for example.

Bridges, from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, performed in Rio de Janeiro singing in a soprano voice and imitating the Portuguese actress Pepa Ruiz, who was very successful at the time (Nunes, 2015; Oliveira, 2016). In the 1920s and 1930s, Aymond often performed small transformist shows in cinemas before screenings, imitating actresses of the time (Nunes, 2015). As well as often having a different social background (some of them even foreigners), these artists differed from previous examples in that they were the focus of interest from the entertainment industry.

So, unlike Madame Satã and other artists exposed to a greater or lesser degree to marginalisation, whose names were more commonly found in police records and investigations, here we have names that were featured in cultural programmes and news – configuring an entirely different mode of social insertion. Richard Bertolin de Oliveira recalls the example of a news item published in 1895 in the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *Jornal do Brasil*:

But the highlight, the hit, was Mr John Bridges, who in travesti gave us a portrait of Pepa in all 18 roles. The likeness was so perfect that the theatre seemed to collapse with applause. Evidently, Bridges, with his perfect imitation and soprano voice, is going to be a sensation (*Jornal do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, 3 June 1895, p. 2, reproduced by Oliveira, 2016, p. 86).

And among these and other examples, more or less commonplace throughout the first half of the century, one character would stand out around 1950, when the Walter Pinto Company announced its arrival *from Europe*: Ivaná (Figure 3).

The 1950s artistic scene was the heyday of the so-called revue shows, which had an extensive technical team and featured famous stars. Theatre producer Walter Pinto (1913-1994) had been responsible for a revival of this genre in the 1940s, introducing grandiose lighting and choreography, numerous choirs and large orchestras. Foreign chorus girls (dancers) – mainly French and Russian, according to Antonio Calori de Lion (2016) – used to be hired for the productions, which featured renowned artists such as Dercy Gonçalves and Grande Otelo, and big stars such as Mara Rubia and Virginia Lane. In 1953, they were joined by Ivaná, a young and voluptuous starlet, who was introduced to the public as an artist recently arrived from France.

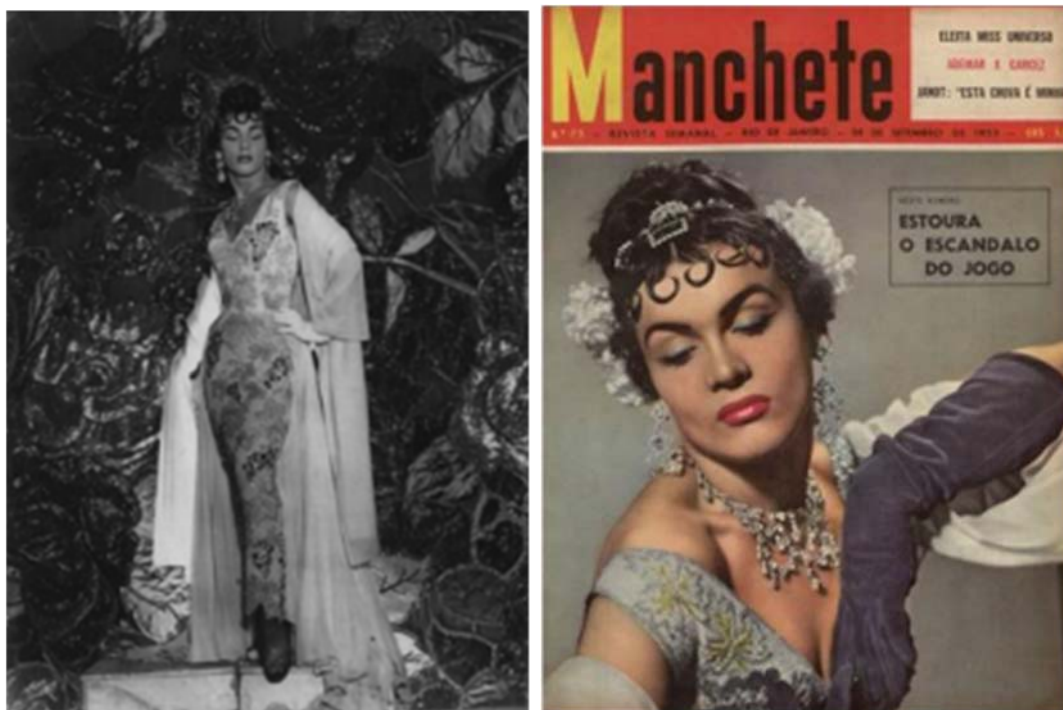


Figure 3 – Ivaná in a screenshot and on a magazine cover.

Sources: Lion (2016) (left) and Hemeroteca Digital da Biblioteca Nacional (<http://memoria.bn.br>) (right).

Despite the *French* identity with which she was sold to the public, Ivaná was in fact probably of Portuguese nationality⁴, was 20 years old and had lived in Rio de Janeiro for a long time (Nunes, 2015). Another piece of information initially omitted was her biological sex: the public was given to understand that she was just another cisgender star, which began to be rectified by media reports in 1953, as Lion (2016) reports. There, her civil name was revealed, as well as information about her social origin and life before the stage. In a 1953 article in *Manchete* magazine, reporter Ivo Serra emphasised the artist's feminine appearance and encouraged the general public's curiosity:

The publicity was marvellous, presenting Ivan as the great attraction of the magazine. Dressed in long black dresses and patterned capes, smoking through long cigarette holders, nothing was said about whether he was a man or a woman. And when she arrived on stage, no-one realised she was actually a man. She sang like a woman, dressed like a woman and presented the 'charm' and 'sexiness' of the French bars of the 'boites' (nightclubs) of Rio de Janeiro. Then the public discovered that Ivana was just a man playing the role of a travesti. The 'poster' gained traction (Serra, 1953, p. 22).

In 1954, in his column in *Manchete* magazine, playwright and journalist Henrique Pongetti (1898-1979) commented: “The most beautiful woman among those Walter Pinto brought back from Paris was Portuguese and she wasn’t a woman, she was amphibious, and her name was Ivana” (Pongetti, 1954, p. 3). Over time, Ivaná’s “amphibian” status not only became public knowledge, but was also publicised as a marketing strategy by show producers, who had previously hidden her. In 1963, her gender dissidence was highlighted and fetishised: “*Ivaná – man or woman? – last season in Brazil*”⁵ is what was proclaimed about the artist in the publicity for a show of hers staged in São Paulo.

Ivaná is often recognised as the first travesti to become famous as an actress in Brazil, a claim she herself sometimes corrected, naming Aymond as her predecessor, as Nunes (2015) explains. It is known from the many interviews she gave throughout her career that, for at least part of her life, she lived privately as a man, wearing men’s clothes when she wasn’t on stage. It is likely, however, that she was what is now classified as a trans person, judging by the information given by Nunes (2015, p. 166) about a statement she made to the press in 1961: her desire to undergo surgery for what was then called a *sex change*.

Whatever the term – trans starlet, travesti actress or transformist actor –, Ivaná was a performer who presented herself to a diverse public and was treated as a celebrity by them. Her figure was not based on imitation or caricature, but on the glamour typical of the film divas of the period, characterised by a high degree of what we would today call passing as female. She was successful not only in revue theatre, but also in cinema, playing female characters in various films in the 1950s – such as *Mulher de Verdade* (directed by Alberto Cavalcanti, 1954), in which she starred with artists of great popularity, such as Inezita Barroso, Adoniran Barbosa and Paulo Vanzolini, which meant surpassing unimaginable barriers for the time.

The phenomenon of Ivaná shows us that in the middle of the 20th century, the entertainment industry was already signalling to society the possibility of overcoming binary barriers of gender and sexuality. Discovered by show business, she could be considered the initiator of a generation of glamorous divas that would find their greatest impetus in the 1960s and 1970s.

A decade after the appearance of Ivaná (and also Phedra de Córdoba, another important travesti star of the 1950s), revue theatre in the 1960s was looking for a new commercial boost with shows in which the main attraction was travesti artists. As Delgado (2013) points out, it was now a question of attracting audiences to the theatre to see travesti bodies on stage. In 1964, what is considered to be one of the most important travesti shows in Brazilian theatre history was staged: *Les Girls*, directed by Carlos Machado. As Thiago Soliva (2016, p. 98) observes:

The premiere of *Les Girls* was a national success, even in a context of dictatorship, in which the Brazilian entertainment industry became the object of censorship and control. [...] It was a musical comedy in the best style, mixing Broadway aesthetics with Brazilian revue theatre.

The show, which as well as being staged in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo ended up touring abroad, continued to play until the 1970s and, over time, launched several new artists, from the generation after Ivaná, who would gain great prominence: Marquesa, Divina Valéria, Jane Di Castro, Camille K., Fujika de Halliday, Brigitte de Búzios, Eloína dos Leopardos, as well as the most famous of them all, Rogéria.

On stage and then on TV screens, many of these artists gained great notoriety as part of a lucrative entertainment industry. There were “[...] various entertainment venues where the shows featured casts made up exclusively of a new type of travesti” (Rodrigues, 2016, p. 93), employed by show business in socially well-regarded shows. The image that the artists built, on stage and also in their public personas, was that of a seductive woman, sex symbol, *femme fatale*, reproducing or even exacerbating the standards of glamorous femininity of Hollywood film stars. This was also the case with the artists who performed at the Medieval nightclub in São Paulo, which became one of the main stages for travesti art in the country in the 1970s (Figure 4).



Figure 4 – Vic Glamour, Monalisa, Gisele, Geórgia and Érica, performers from the nightclub Medieval (São Paulo, 1970s). Source: Photo by Madalena Schwartz in Aguilar and Titan Jr. (2021).

Celebrated as a new entertainment culture, travesti shows carried a certain symbolic value of modernity, allowing part of the public to construct for themselves the image of an elite open to the new (Soliva, 2016). And although until then travesti artists were seen as transformist actors, who dressed up to “imitate another gender as a theatrical resource” (Rodrigues, 2016, p. 104), they gradually began to contribute to the perception of the difference between stage transvestism and travesti identities. The aforementioned Divina Valéria, for example, after some time performing in Europe, returned to Brazil in the early 1970s with body modifications that she called *polishing* (Figure 5). In a statement to Camarero and Oliveira (2021), she proudly says that “when I got off the plane, everyone was waiting for me – as a man. And I was marvellous, in shorts and long boots, like Jane Fonda in ‘Klute’”⁶ (Camarero; Oliveira, 2021, n. p.). The previous *doing travesti*, restricted to the stage, gave way to being a travesti, in which the expression of the female gender takes place in all areas of life.



Figure 5 – Divina Valéria at the start of the 1970s. Source: Camarero and Oliveira (2021).

But of them all, Rogéria (Figure 6) was undoubtedly the most celebrated. Acting in theatre, film and television, she became a reference for audiences across different generations – from those who saw her in the revue theatre in *Les Girls*, back in 1964, to those who watched *Divinas Divas* (2016), a film by Leandra Leal (Figure 7), as well as her remarkable television roles, such as Ninete, in the soap opera *Tieta* (1989).



Figure 6 – Rogéria in an image from the 1970s.
Source: Reproduced from <http://ego.globo.com/>.



Figure 7 – Cast from the film *Divinas Divas* (2016): Brigitte de Búzios, Camille K., Divina Valéria, Rogéria, Jane Di Castro, Fujika de Halliday, Eloína and Marquesa. Source: Film photo press release.

Although she wasn't the first travesti to appear on TV, a position that belongs to Claudia Celeste (Silva Junior, 2017), Rogéria was certainly the most popular and had the longest career, spanning from the 1980s to 2017. Her popularity ended up earning her the nickname that would accompany

her until the end of her life, which she repeated in several appearances: the *Brazilian family's travesti*.

Accepted into mainstream culture, the *Brazilian family's travesti* was able to offer, through her charismatic public figure and her constant presence in soap operas and television programmes, references to the general public, consumers of mass culture, on issues related to gender identity – in other words, she promoted socio-cultural mediation. She contributed to the – undoubtedly still incomplete – process of socially affirming transgenderism and travestility, and this was reflected in the press coverage of her death in September 2017. “Actress Rogéria dies”⁷ headlined the main newspapers: it was the actress who died, the famous woman loved by the public, with little or no emphasis on her gender dissidence. It was a significant sign of social affirmation, something hard to imagine just a few years earlier.

This is not to say that Rogéria herself and the artists of a generation close to hers who rose to fame through show business didn't have their lives marked by stigma and marginalisation. Ivaná, even though she had been performing for years in theatre and cinema productions, was arrested in 1961, as Nunes (2015) reports. Rogéria tells Paschoal (2016) about various experiences of intolerance and police repression that she went through at different points in her career, despite the growing acceptance of her image by the public. In testimonies in the film *Divinas Divas, Les Girls* stars such as Divina Valéria, Jane Di Castro and Eloína also recount the police stops, arrests and beatings they suffered on a recurring basis, even during their most successful years in the theatre.

Part of the repression came as a result of the establishment of the civil-military dictatorship in 1964, which coincided with the launch of *Les Girls* and the period of greatest flourishing of travesti shows. The dictatorship, however, initially played an ambiguous role with regard to travesti artists. As Thiago Soliva (2018) points out, these shows were not the focus of censorship by the military governments, since “[...] apparently, the concern of the organs of repression was about the individuals identified as potentially dangerous to preserving the system, such as the different theoretical and political strands associated with the left” (Soliva, 2018, p. 24). According to Soliva, sexual and gender dissidence came to be seen by the dictatorship as a threat and entered the repressive agenda more vigorously a little later, in the

1980s, when travesti artists were already beginning to achieve public visibility through a technology that was broader than the stage: television – either by performing in talk shows or as part of the cast of soap operas.

It was, in fact, from the turn of the 1980s that the stigma and marginalisation of travestis found its greatest strength, with the backing of society, given the hygienist police operations that began at that time in large urban centres, with the aim of *clearing* the travesti presence from the streets. The 98th Public Hearing of the “Rubens Paiva” Truth Commission of São Paulo State, whose theme was *Dictatorship and homosexuality*, in November 2013, proved the atrocities to which homosexuals and travestis were subjected during this period. Although spaces of sociability proliferated from that time onwards, thus giving a false impression of gaining respect and social harmony, the daily actions of repression and control of sexual and gender dissidents increased consistently. This is well illustrated by an article published in the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo on 01 April 1980, entitled *Police already have joint plan against travestis*. According to the article, the proposal of the São Paulo civil and military police was to:

[...] removing travestis from the streets of strictly residential neighbourhoods; reinforcing the DEIC’s Vagrancy Police Station to enforce article 59 of the Criminal Offences Act; allocating a building to collect only homosexuals; and opening up a part of the city to settle them are some points of the plan drawn up to immediately combat travestis in São Paulo (Comissão Nacional da Verdade, 2014, p. 307).

There were the *rondas* (rounds), a term that became popular in the 1980s:

These ‘rounds’, commanded by José Wilson Richetti, head of the Central Zone Police Department since May 1980, had the aim of ‘cleaning up’ the central area from the presence of prostitutes, travestis and homosexuals. The method used by the security forces was to carry out raids on places frequented by LGBT people, especially travestis, who were taken ‘for questioning’ to police premises, on the legal grounds of the criminal misdemeanour of vagrancy and the precautionary detention provided for in the Code of Criminal Procedure of 1941, then in force (Comissão Nacional da Verdade, 2014, p. 307).

Repression of the travesti presence on the streets and in spaces of sociability was also reflected in the media. Television programmes – such as *Comando da Madrugada*, presented by journalist Goulart de Andrade –

documented some of these *cleaning operations* in the city in a spectacular and sensationalist way, showing and endorsing on a national network the violence and humiliation suffered by the people targeted by the police operations⁸.

Sensationalism is also present in countless other media coverage of the subject, such as the article entitled *Travestilândia: um mundo sem fronteiras em São Paulo* (Travestiland: a world without borders in São Paulo), published in October 1979 in a monthly *men's magazine* with a large circulation. The eight-page article aimed to reveal “who the (sic) travestis are, how they live and what they think” (Araújo, 1979, p. 51). The result is a strongly exoticised portrait, in which travestis “who drive executives crazy” (p. 51), “show” travestis (p. 55), “local travestis” (p. 56), “Paris travestis” (p. 52), and “travestis who have undergone surgery” (p. 53) parade as objects of curiosity for the reading public. “With them *pau é pau, queijo é queijo*” (wood is wood, cheese is cheese) (p. 53), sums up the text, investing in a homogenising and caricatured characterisation whose synthesis is in the title of the article itself: *Travestiland* alludes to Disneyland, the name of the famous entertainment consumer park populated by characters aimed at promoting fun and consumption by the paying public and the turnover of the business. Similarly, whether in theatre performances, nightclub shows or in the *redlight* district, travestis, whether artists or not, have in common the fact that they are seen as exotic (and/or erotic) objects of consumption and entertainment.

Travestiland, in short, sums up this new pattern of social insertion for travesti artists, whose origins can be roughly traced back to the revue theatre of the 1950s and 1960s and which reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. Although they often rose to fame and became public *personas* of a certain visibility, gears that became part of show business, in everyday life they continued to suffer social prejudice, marginalisation and stigmatisation not dissimilar to those that affected the representatives of the previous model. Finally, there is also a racial dimension: the travesti artists who rose to fame in this paradigm are generally white, or appear to be white. “Black deviants suffered much greater persecution,” Oliveira points out (2020, p. 179).

Traviarchy

The word chosen to name this third and most recent model for inserting travesti artists into society makes use of the Greek suffix *ἀρχή* (arc), which can be translated as government, command. The *traviarchy* is thus characterised by the demand for power and rights, the contestation of cisnormativity, a greater role in public debate and an active presence in the political struggle.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to establish a precise timeframe for the emergence of the first manifestations of this new model. Even in the 1980s and 1970s, many activists and travesti artists survived and fought for visibility from the stage and the *dancefloor*. Examples of this are documented in the photographic work of Madalena Schwartz, who portrayed different aspects of the lives of homosexuals, transformists and travestis on the São Paulo scene in the 1970s (Felitti, 2021). Another perhaps more emblematic example, from the 1980s, is the multi-artist Claudia Wonder (Figure 8), whose work already includes issues of representation and rights, so dear to the travesti artists of the current generation.



Figure 8 – Claudia Wonder in an image from the 1980s.
Source: blog O Caralho do Rock (<http://www.cdorock.com/>).

“I always wanted to be an artist, and Rogéria was my reference since childhood” (Wonder, 2008, p. 23): this is how Claudia Wonder refers to the most famous travesti artist who gained fame in the previous paradigm.

However, even though she was influenced by her predecessor, Claudia pioneered a counter-cultural artistic aesthetic, markedly underground, in many ways opposed to the glamour and reproduction of hegemonic femininity that characterised Rogéria and other travesti divas who emerged from the revue theatre.

The show that made Claudia Wonder famous, entitled “*O Vômito do Mito*” (The Vomit of the Myth), premiered in 1985 at the Madame Satã nightclub in São Paulo, and you can see a suggestive chain of references there: Madame Satã, representative of *transculturality*, gives the stage its name; Rogéria, an important diva whose fame stems from *travestiland*, is a stated influence; and finally, going against the aesthetic and entertainment proposal that marked this model, the show makes crude references to the social stigma that then fell on homosexuals and travestis, aggravated by the emergence of the AIDS epidemic.

In *O Vômito do Mito*, the lavish sets and costumes that had marked traditional travesti shows were abandoned. Going against the glamorous aesthetic that had been valued until then, Claudia acted naked. Years later, she herself commented on this transformation: “I wanted to show that the travesti can do something else; an artist can’t limit themselves to one genre of work” (Wonder, 2008, p. 52). And on the political nature of the show, she added:

There was that scene in the bathtub with the redcurrant, which represented blood, at a time when Aids was terrorising everyone. I would get completely naked, and show them the bloodbath. And I would throw that blood on everyone [referring to the audience]. I think that was it, the boldness and the right time to do it. It was rock, it was rock (Wonder, 2008, p. 52).

It was precisely to the rock and counterculture of the 1980s, and no longer to the mainstream entertainment industry, that Claudia Wonder affiliated herself aesthetically. She stopped emulating the glamorous image cultivated by the divas of *travestiland*, which in her art gave way to a countercultural aesthetic committed to political activism for LGBT rights and visibility. As well as Cláudia, who merged her artistic activity as a singer, songwriter, writer and actress with that of a militant, other travestis who became famous, linked to the *bas-fond* of the 1980s, were Andréa de Mayo,

Brenda Lee and Janaína Dutra, among others. Not all of them were artistic; all of them, however, were politically active.

Andréa de Mayo (1950-2000) has a less extensive artistic biography compared to Claudia Wonder, although she did stand out as Geni in Chico Buarque's *A ópera do malandro* in 1979 (Figure 9). She most often performed on stage at her own nightclub, Proibidu's, in the centre of São Paulo. She is best known as a nightlife entrepreneur and madame/pimp and for her denunciation of social violence (especially police violence) against travestis in the 1980s and 1990s and for her political struggle for LGBT rights.



Figure 9 – Andrea de Mayo in a scene from *A ópera do malandro*. Fonte: Press photo.

For the most part, these militant travesti artists of the 1980s had their careers and lives cut short, either as a result of AIDS or the life circumstanc-

es to which the trans and travesti population is subjected in Brazil. The decline of this generation of artists came in the 1990s and 2000s, and some also attribute it – as Claudia Wonder (2008) did – to the explosion of drag culture in LGBT discos and nightclubs. Competition from drag queens is said to have displaced many of the travesti artists who performed in discos and nightclubs from the stage and the market. Even so, the seed of *traviarchy* was planted and would be taken up again by contemporary artists who were part of this new paradigm.

This is how, after what Meneses and Jayo (2018, p. 169) called the “drag interregnum”, the travesti artist presence on Brazilian stages resurfaced at the beginning of the 21st century with a new generation of artists, carrying a new and strengthened discourse related to trans bodies and the political or activist role of their art. These are artists who take on political roles on and off stage, with agendas that are both aesthetic and political. They understand that stage art is a strategy for both survival and attack, necessary “within the toxic atmosphere of the racist and cis-heterosexist colonial regime” (Leal, 2021, p. 113)

These are artists such as Assucena Assucena and Raquel Virgínia (lead singers of the now defunct São Paulo musical group As Bahias e a Cozinha Mineira), Ave Terrena and Renata Carvalho (actresses and playwrights), Tyller Antunes, Ambrosia, Verónica Valenttino⁹, Marina Mathey, June Weimar, Leona Jhovs and Olivia Lopes (actresses and singers, members of the cast of the musical *Brenda Lee e o Palácio das Princesas*) (Figure 10), Wally Ruy (actress), Ventura Profana (multi-artist and performer), Lyz Parayzo (performer and visual artist), Liniker (singer and actress), Julia Katharine (filmmaker and actress), Linn da Quebrada (singer, actress, composer, presenter), Jup do Bairro (singer, composer, presenter), Kiara Felipe (DJ and member of the artistic collective Batekoo), Clodd Dias (actress), Danna Lisboa (actress, singer and dancer), Wescla Vasconcelos (actress, director and poet), among many others.



Figure 10 – Travesti cast from the show *Brenda Lee e o Palácio da Princesas* (Tyller Antunes, Ambrosia, Verónica Valentino, Marina Mathey, June Weimar [later replaced with Leona Jhovs] and Olivia Lopes). Source: Press photo.

The public images and artistic performances of this generation of artists convey messages of combat against machismo, cisnormativity and transphobia – in short, a strong political discourse of affirmation of new subjectivities and travesti corporealities. This discourse also includes questioning the need for biotechnological procedures and prosthetic bodies through which, since the 1970s, trans and travesti women have been normalising themselves in the face of a society that expects hegemonically female bodies from them. It is in this sense, for example, that Assucena Assucena (Figure 11), lead singer of the now defunct *As Bahias e a Cozinha Mineira*, declared in an interview in 2016 that she was not interested in undergoing body transformation procedures, such as hormone therapy and silicone prostheses (Ferraz, 2016).



Figure 11 – Assucena on the 2nd of October at the 2022 elections.
Source: Photo posted by the artist on social media.

It's no longer a question of seeking the hegemonic image of a woman on stage in a transformed body, but of defending, even from the stage, the possibility of trans identities that don't adhere to the rigidity of the binary system, including appearances. By proposing what Preciado (2014, p. 22) calls a "systematic deconstruction of the naturalisation of sexual practices and the gender system", the travesti artists of this new paradigm reflect on the impositions of female visualities, as well as the possibilities of corporealities. They thus question hegemonic processes (social and artistic), what Dodi Leal and Marcelo Denny (2018) have called artistic insurrections and expanded gender performances. They do this through their dissident corporealities and gender disobedience that reinforce the true anti-coloniality of and in the per-

forming arts, as Dodi Leal and André Rosa (2020) put it. They collaborate so that travesti lives are strengthened, understanding that the cisnorms “[...] don’t know that our impossible lives are manifested in each other”., [...] that, once in pieces, we will spread. Not as a people, but as a plague: at the very heart of the world, and against it” (Mombaça, 2017, p. 21-22).

There will certainly still be a lot to study about this new generation of travesti artists, not least because they are booming. For now, let’s finish with the didactic dialogue reproduced below, between Jup do Bairro and Linn da Quebrada in the 2018 documentary *Bixa Travesty*, directed by Kiko Goifman and Claudia Priscilla. (Figure 12):

Jup: I had to explain to him [referring to a taxi driver who insisted in addressing him in the male form].

Linn: That not every woman has...

Jup: A beard but I do!

Linn: That not every woman has...

Jup: A beard shadow, but I do!

Linn: That not every woman has...

Jup: Dry hair, but I do!

Linn: That not every woman has...

Jup: A cock!

Linn: Imagine that!

Jup: What a novelty!



Figure 12 – Linn da Quebrada and Jup do Bairro in the film *Bixa Travesty* (2018).

Source: Press release photo.

Final considerations

This article set out to put the relationship between the arts (especially the performing arts) and travestilities in Brazil into historical perspective. It sought to show how travesti artists, throughout the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st, contributed in different ways to educating cis-gender society through a process of public pedagogy or socio-cultural mediation, towards a better social understanding of gender dissidence. In doing so, we have tried to avoid a conventional periodisation based on chronologically well-delimited phases placed on a timeline. This type of schematisation, which we have already done in previous work (Meneses and Jayo, 2018), has the advantage of being didactic, but it comes at the price of oversimplification. As such, what this paper has done is point out three paradigms, or patterns for inserting travesti artists which, although they tend to follow one another over time, don't follow a rigid chronology and can coexist at different times.

If the greater trans protagonism that is visible today on the artistic scene has succeeded in promoting a new societal outlook on gender dissidence, it is through the accumulated work that this phenomenon has been built. Today's artists, representatives of what we call the *traviarchy*, with their artistic and political proposals, act as socio-cultural mediators in the fight for the affirmation of trans populations on and off stage, confirming art's commitment to a changing society. Their existence and their social role, on the other hand, cannot be seen in isolation from a process in which other models of inserting travesti artists into society have already taken place (and sometimes still take place), and which were their precursors: that of *transculturality* and that of *travestiland*.

We have seen how, through their performances, *traviarchy* artists have managed to produce socio-cultural mediation and contribute to the affirmation of the travesti presence in cisnormative society, as well as constituting an epistemic source (Vergueiro, 2018) for understanding the complexities of everyday life and art beyond binary lenses. But, in addition, the discussion presented here also allows us to see how *traviarchy* itself and its activism are the result of a historical process also led by artists from other generations and/or paradigms.

In short, if the *traviarchy* translates into a potential for socio-cultural mediation from the stage, towards a better understanding between a cisnormative society and those trans and travesti artists who struggle against the precariousness of their lives, this potential that the artists are able to call upon today has, in its genesis, the contribution of artists from the other two paradigms. The socio-cultural mediation exercised by the *traviarchy* should only be interpreted as the result of a historical process in which the artists of *transcestrality* and *travestiland* have a role and importance that should be equally recognised.

Notes

- ¹ Cisnormativity is the term that designates the social expectation of a correspondence between biological sex and gender identity, an expectation that translates into a system of oppression and discrimination against individuals who do not fulfil it.
- ² This book, which in its first edition (1972) was entitled *Memórias de Madame Satã* (Memoirs of Madame Satan), is sometimes mistakenly referred to as being written by Sylvan Paezzo, a writer to whom Madame Satã, a poorly educated person, dictated the testimony and delegated the organisation of the text. The work, however, is an autobiography. When it was reissued in 2022 by the São Paulo publisher Noir, an attempt was made to solve the problem, although perhaps not in the most appropriate way: the title was changed to *Madame Satã: autobiography*, and the authorship was this time credited to Madame Satã, but using her civil, male name instead.
- ³ Madame Satã was played by actor Lázaro Ramos in the biographical feature film *Madame Satã*, by Karin Aïnouz (2002), a film that enjoyed great notoriety. Before that, she had already been portrayed in another, less well-known film: *A Rainha Diaba* (1974), by Antônio Carlos Fontoura, whose main character is inspired by her, played by actor Milton Gonçalves.
- ⁴ Although authors such as Nunes (2015) and Lion (2016) claim that Ivaná was Portuguese, her place of birth has more recently been the subject of controversy. In an article published in September 2021, Thürler and Mathieu (2021, p. 20) present documentary evidence that she was actually born in Mont-St-Aignan, France. In any case, her civil name, Yvan Monteiro Damião, clearly indicates Portuguese origin.



- ⁵ Text advertising the show *Não Aperta que eu Grito!* (Folha de São Paulo, 29 Aug. 1963).
- ⁶ *Klute* is a 1971 American film directed by Alan J. Pakula, with Jane Fonda in the lead role.
- ⁷ *Morre a atriz Rogéria aos 74 anos, no Rio de Janeiro* was the headline published by the newspaper O Globo on 5 September 2017, similar to the treatment given by other media outlets in the country.
- ⁸ The programme mentioned is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EQ6dtDhGTs>. Accessed on: Oct 2, 2023.
- ⁹ In 2023, Verónica Valenttino won the Shell Award for Best Actress for the musical production of “*Brenda Lee e o Palácio das Princesas*”. It's also the first time that a travesti actress has won the Shell Trophy, which is considered one of the most important in the performing arts in the country.

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