

*(Ser)tão Animal: Facing the Human Animality in Gabriel Mascaro's Boi neon (2015)*¹

FRANCISCO QUINTEIRO PIRES
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Abstract

This article argues that Gabriel Mascaro's *Boi neon* (2015) challenges the longstanding division between human and nonhuman animals in the *sertão*, a landscape that has been a fixture of Brazilian cinema. *Boi neon* blurs that dichotomy by presenting a group of characters that form a gender-destabilizing, nontraditional nomadic family that mainly works for *vaquejadas*, a Brazilian rodeo held in an arid region undergoing accelerating industrialization. The film collapses the Western cultural hierarchy between humans and animals in a key scene where Galega, a female truck driver, wears a horse's head mask during an erotic dance. According to the anthropologist David Le Breton, the face is the body region where the human condition acquires meaning and incarnates a person's identity. For Le Breton, modifying a face is the equivalent of changing existence. By analyzing Galega's performance in dialogue with Le Breton's theory, this article explores how *Boi neon* disrupts the ontological division between human and nonhuman animals in the landscape of the *sertão*, which historically became a stereotyped idea of impoverished, savage land that has only existed to be tamed or destroyed in the name of progress. Additionally, the article claims that Mascaro's film encourages viewers to recognize their own animality, challenging the speciesist view of humans as rational beings distinct from their animal nature.

Keywords: Brazilian cinema, animal, human, sexuality, gender, nature

Directed by Gabriel Mascaro, *Boi neon* (*Neon Bull*, 2015) is a subversive movie to the extent that it challenges the split rooted in Western tradition between human and nonhuman animals in a well-known landscape of the Brazilian cinema: the *sertão* (backlands). The living beings that appear as characters in *Boi neon* do not follow the artificial hierarchy imposed by this division that aims at subjecting them to a binary system of difference. The reinforced distinctions between human characters and animals give way to an intimate, unusual, and destabilizing proximity at each frame of *Boi neon*. This painterly film makes that split blur, as well as the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism imposed on the historical formation of Brazil by European colonialism. *Boi neon*'s montage and the direction of photography by

Diego Garcia produce a *sui generis* cinematographic environment for the spectators, who face the difficulty of defining where the relation between human beings and animals is located. It seems impossible to tell where the former begins and the latter ends. This film depicts a movable and diffuse animality in the *sertão*, in northeastern Brazil, a landscape that has been a fixture of the Brazilian cinema.²

By specifically examining Galega's dance performance through French anthropologist David Le Breton's perspective, this article argues that *Boi neon* reshapes the *sertão* from a perceived primitive wasteland into a space of shared animality while disrupting the anthropocentric view of humans as rational beings distinct from their animal nature. Consequently, Mascaro's film invites viewers to confront their own animalistic traits, moving away from speciesist ideas that prioritize human rationality and exceptionality. It also presents a profound commentary on the interconnectedness of all beings, critiquing modernity's demand to dominate and transform landscapes, such as the *sertão*, and challenging the notion of human supremacy over nature.

The dualism between human and nonhuman animals is one of the ontological separations that *Boi neon* proposes to haunt and challenge. By portraying characters who form a nontraditional, gender-fluid, nomadic family involved in *vaquejadas*—a Brazilian rodeo—, the film dismantles traditional Western hierarchies that separate humans from animals. In this film—which is a reaction to the tenets of cinema novo, especially Glauber Rocha's *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol*—Mascaro approaches other arbitrary binaries while destabilizing them with a plot almost devoid of linear narrative. *Boi neon* blurs the divisions between civilization and nature, development and backwardness, masculine and feminine, which persist in Brazilian cinema and the construction of a hegemonic national identity. Mascaro's movie represents a dry land undergoing accelerating industrialization. As discussed in this article's section on Brazilian cinema and the *sertão*, *Boi neon* features an ensemble of heterodox characters whose complex and atypical personalities stand apart from the portrayals seen in the history of films focused on that semi-arid region. In the next section, I analyze the sequence in which Galega wears a mask of a horse head in light of Le Breton's theory about the human face.

Galega and Her Animal Face

Galega (Maevie Jinkings) is a single mother who lives with her daughter on the road and drives a truck that transports bulls for *vaquejadas*, a spectacle where two cowboys on horseback try to

bring a bull down.³ In her spare time, she also works as an erotic dancer who wears a mask of a horse's head. Cacá (Alyne Santana), who is Galega's daughter, dreams of meeting her estranged father and having her own horse. While her aspirations do not materialize, Cacá draws an imaginary horse on the pages of a pornographic magazine. Iremar, who works at *vaquejadas* and lives with Cacá and her mother, is an amateur fashion designer who creates the costumes that Galega wears when she is dancing. Iremar and Galega are only friends; they do not have a sexual relationship. Júnior (Vinícius Oliveira), who had a brief sexual relationship with Galega, is a farmworker who likes to straighten his long hair in defiance of a sexist construction of masculinity, the *macho nordestino*.⁴ And Geise (Samya de Lavor), who had sex with Iremar in one of the final sequences of *Boi neon*, is a pregnant woman who works as a peddler of cosmetics during the day and as an armed security guard at night.



Galega plays a pivotal role in *Boi neon* by disrupting the film's narrative. The tension arises from the process of designing her clothes and determining how much of her body should be revealed. At first glance, the erotic choreography of Galega's dance, during which she wears a horse's head that covers her face, seems to represent a sense of modesty in a film dedicated to stimulating sexual arousal. However, the disturbing sequence portrays how Galega wears a mask to hide her human face while revealing her animality.



In the scenes of an exquisitely executed erotic dance, in which Galega mimics the movements of a horse for different audiences on the road, *Boi neon* short-circuits the Western division between human and nonhuman animals. Mascaro's film forces the spectators to look at their animal condition by being incapable of distinguishing clearly what is human and what is equine in Galega's body. Instead of reinforcing the speciesist notion that they are centered and rational subjects, Galega and other characters of *Boi neon* display, in a series of random encounters, the fragment of a shared idea of humanity based fundamentally on animal elements.



In the article “Antropologia da Face,” the French anthropologist David Le Breton explores the profound significance of the human face in identity formation and social interaction. As Le Breton asserts, the face is the primary medium through which individuals are recognized and categorized, reflecting attributes such as gender, age, and ethnicity. The loss or alteration of the face, through acts like disfigurement, symbolizes a profound existential

loss, disrupting the core of one's existence. Conversely, the acknowledgment and appreciation of a face through love or social recognition can significantly enhance an individual's sense of self. Le Breton highlights the face as a unique, irreplaceable entity that embodies at once personal identification and social presence.

Le Breton's article further delves into the symbolic and social ramifications of the face, portraying it as a canvas of infinite expressions and emotions that bridge individual uniqueness with collective cultural norms. Facial expressions and movements are seen as conveyors of social signals, reinforcing the individual's place within a community. Le Breton also discusses the implications of masking and disfigurement, emphasizing how these alter the perception and interaction of individuals in society. For example, wearing a mask while offering anonymity can also liberate suppressed desires and alter one's sense of identity, demonstrating the face's critical role in maintaining the balance between personal autonomy and social conformity.

As Le Breton affirms, there exists a consciousness that the mask reveals (160). In the case of Galega, this consciousness is that humans are fundamentally animals, a reality often concealed under the guise of rationality. When this act of masking a lesser nature fails, as Le Breton suggests, the animalization of the face emerges as an insult, evidenced by derogatory expressions such as "monkey face" (157-58). This desire to eradicate the human aspect in individuals highlights a profound need to dismantle the markers of their uniqueness and species belonging, particularly their faces (Le Breton 158). Historically, the act of cruelty is facilitated by the act of animalization, leading to the erosion of people's humanity (Le Breton 157-58). However, in the context of *Boi neon*, the mask that Galega wears does not merely hide; it also liberates, allowing for a re-examination of what constitutes the human core: its underlying animality. Galega's mask can represent "an act of great strength, through which an individual can, even unintentionally, have crossed the threshold into a metamorphosis" (Le Breton 158).

The insistence on avoiding a conventional narrative and prioritizing disconnected frames reveals, with a specific cinematographic style, the point where individuals could have become shamefully aware of their animality and attempted to conceal an internal otherness constitutive of their subjectivity. As the American philosopher Joan Copjec affirms, "[t]he searing pain associated with shame is not one of being turned by another into an object, of being degraded; it has to do with the fact that one is not integrated with oneself, one is

fundamentally split from oneself” (63). Copjec contends that the effort to mask the otherness is doomed because “[u]nable to discern our own desire, to know who we are, we feel compelled to flee into sociality in an attempt to find there some image of ourselves” (70). The role of society in civilizing individuals is not primarily about controlling primal animal instincts, but rather about colonizing “our savage, inhuman jouissance by allowing us to acquire self-image” (Copjec 70).

Boi neon problematizes the notion of a civilizing self-image, the tension of an arising otherness, and the emergence of untamed animal instincts through Galega’s erotic performance. Her act as a dancer underscores the impossibility of conceptualizing human beings as possessing a rational and unified self. It also highlights the otherness implied by Galega’s name: *galego(a)* in Brazilian Portuguese denotes a foreigner.⁵ This discussion will be further explored in the following section, which examines how *Boi neon* reflects on the construction of national identity in Brazil amidst the pervasive fear of a supposedly innate animality.⁶

Nature versus Civilization

By placing characters like Galega in a mutual, communal, nonhierarchical relation with animals, *Boi neon* decenters a Eurocentric notion that generates tremendous anxiety in the formation of national identity in Brazil: the presence of animalized others. This discomfort comes from the perception that an animalistic element permeates Brazilian cultural formation. Mascaro’s film approaches this anxiety by refraining from developing a linear and teleological narrative. The plot does not offer clear information about the personal histories of its characters nor present a reassuring conclusion to its development. Since language can give the impression that humans are fundamentally different from animals, *Boi neon* prioritizes the presentation of a carefully photographed and almost disconnected sequence of frames and sexual scenes to indicate that at the core of human beings, and beyond language, lies the animal. The movie’s characters cannot free themselves from this realization, which is also an invitation for the spectators to stare at their own animality.

With this narrative fragmentation and an emphasis on sexuality, the characters’ relationship with the environment changes: they are always on the move in defiance of any attempt to fix them in a controlled and manipulated landscape separated from their animality. I contend that the *sertão* in *Boi neon* is not the site of backwardness and savagery but an

ecosystem where “the ethics of the passerby” (Mbembe 187-88) operates. Drawing from Franz Fanon’s thought on decolonization, Achille Mbembe proposes “the ethics of the passerby” as a “project of transfiguration” that transpires in a place defined less as a delimited territory than an “experience of encountering others, one that paved the way to becoming self-aware, not necessarily as a singular individual but as a seminal fragment (éclat) of a larger humanity” (187). According to Mbembe, “a ‘human’s specificity’ is not to belong to any particular place, since this human, which is a compound of other living beings and other species, belongs to all places together” (187-88).

By applying “the ethics of the passerby” to the nontraditional family of *Boi neon*, I argue that Mascaro’s movie decenters a dichotomy rooted in the gendered construction of the *sertão* as the negative and savage space in Brazil that needs to be occupied and domesticated. *Boi neon* deconstructs the authorized meanings applied to the Brazilian backlands with a story that centers on the voluntary dislocation of a group of characters and denaturalizes the elements associated with *the sertão* as an semi-arid space that either confines or expels its beings.

Boi neon represents the Brazilian *sertão*, in northeastern Brazil, to problematize a conceptual binary inherited from the experience of the European colonization of the Americas, a dichotomy that has regarded the colonizers as civilized and the colonized as the primitives, closer to the state of nature. As Michel Foucault has posited, “the seventeenth century ... marks the entry of nature, at long last, into the scientific order” (54). The widespread prevalence of the scientific order over nature represents a shift in favor of speciesism whose origins could be located before the 17th century: its roots extend through the maritime expansion of European empires.⁷ This European intellectual pattern that privileges the difference, instead of resemblances or affinities, has permeated the Latin American cultures, which “habían hecho del animal un revés sistemático y un otro absoluto del humano” (Giorgi 1). According to Gabriel Giorgi, the animal was a metaphor for barbarism in Latin American countries, which craved and sought to present themselves to the world as examples of civilized nations (1-2). As Giorgi asserts, “las imágenes de la vida animal trazaban el confín móvil de donde provenían el salvaje, el bárbaro y el indisciplinado, y donde lo animal nombraba un fondo amenazante de los cuerpos que las frágiles civilizaciones de la región apenas podían—cuando podían—contener” (1). If the civilizing process in Latin America was so fragile, the ontological opposition between human and nonhuman animals

could remain unstable. It could also represent a generalization that would be subject to deconstruction, ambivalence, and displacement.

In this sense, the adoption of the *sertão* as the backdrop of the experiences of a nontraditional family in *Boi neon* echoes the upside-down resignification and displacement of savagery by Oswald de Andrade's concept of *antropofagia*. The concept of *antropofagia* celebrates the Tupi—animalized beings, according to a European perspective—as a response to the process of colonization in Brazil. As Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago* stated when published in 1928, it was necessary to transform taboo into totem: "Tupi, or not Tupi that is the question" (Andrade). The indigenous being, according to Andrade's manifesto, would have a cannibalistic appetite that was antithetical to the European culture. This cannibalistic, inhuman appetite shows itself very clearly in an eerie scene of *Boi neon*. This scene presents a dead, decaying, and headless bull impaled by a skewer (*boi no rolete*) that is being roasted very slowly and implies the notion that an animal being will consume another one. This alludes to the cannibalism essential to the definition of *antropofagia*: people become what they eat. In *Boi neon*, a person is represented as a human animal. Humans and animals share a common nature. When *Boi neon* underscores this sort of kinship, the spectator is invited to treat the roasted, headless bull as food in a banquet prepared by and for cannibals. At this point, it is necessary to discuss more broadly the implications of Mascaro's choice of the *sertão* as the landscape for his movie and the film's challenge to the idea of an impoverished land, which only existed to be appropriated, tamed, or destroyed in the name of progress.



The *Sertão* in Brazilian Cinema

The *sertão* is an arid land charged with a great deal of cinematographic meaning, “a space – a physical, imaginary and symbolic space – where the country’s contradictions are expressed with the maximum intensity and impact” (Oricchio 140). Since the middle of the twentieth century, many directors have chosen to shoot their movies in the Brazilian backlands. Influential films, such as Ruy Guerra’s *Os fuzis* (*The Guns*, 1964) and Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s *Vidas secas* (*Barren Lives*, 1964), have consolidated the idea of a mythical, harsh, and unforgiving region, where wretched people might survive, if they do not have the possibility or luck of escaping it. The blueprint for *sertão* movies is Glauber Rocha’s *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (*Black God, White Devil*, 1964).

Deus e o diabo na terra do sol begins by showing images of *caatinga*, a rarefied vegetable formation consisting of small trees. In this rural landscape, the plot develops schematically. It depicts Manuel’s and his wife Rosa’s trajectories as a series of struggles deeply tied to the harsh conditions of the hinterland. Manuel’s attempt to sell his cows to Colonel Morais fails when the cows die, and Morais unjustly makes Manuel pay for them, claiming legal authority. Refusing to accept this injustice, Manuel ultimately kills Colonel Morais.

An outlaw, Manuel decides to become one of the followers of Sebastião (Lídio Silva), a violent man and a self-proclaimed saint. Rocha uses the historical figure of Antonio Conselheiro to create Sebastião. At the end of the nineteenth century, Conselheiro led a social movement with a monarchist and millenarist discourse, which Euclides da Cunha discussed in his novel *Os sertões* and Rocha reinterpreted in *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol*. Rosa, Manuel’s wife, rebels against Sebastião, who demands her husband’s degradation. Rosa embodies the social conscience that her husband lost when he became a follower of Sebastião, who prophesizes that “o sertão vai virar mar e o mar vai virar sertão” (“the backlands will become the sea, and the sea will become the backlands”). Rocha extracted this sentence from *Os sertões*. With that prophecy, Rocha’s film underscored a desire to liberate Brazil from the notion that it is intrinsically associated with primitivism and portrayed it as a promised land (Nagib 60). Five decades later, *Boi neon* problematizes the *sertão* under a diverse light: now it is a changing region that is being industrialized. In this process, it confronts the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, coast and backlands, masculine and feminine, as the kernel of the Brazilian national identity. However, unlike Rocha’s film, which had stipulated that people

from the *sertão* should leave its backwardness behind, *Boi neon* represents people's lives integrated with the many elements of that ecosystem under the effects of industrialization.

Staying in the *Sertão*: The Reversal of a Tradition

The obsession with the sea resurfaces in *Boi neon*. Portuguese colonizers concentrated their economic activities along the coast. Inspired by Conselheiro's prophecy, as recorded by Euclides da Cunha in *Os Sertões*, Lucia Nagib argues that *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* articulated the most famous utopia in Brazilian cinema (60). Nagib observes that Glauber Rocha, working in the 1960s—a time when the national project dominated political discourse—engaged with these themes. However, such debates have since faded from Brazil's cinematic agenda. Nagib suggests that the myth of a promised land has never felt as distant from the Brazilian imagination as it did in the mid-1990s (60). It was during this period, known as *cinema de retomada* (renaissance), that Brazilian directors turned their attention to the country's interior. Unlike Rocha's era, their focus shifted away from the struggle for a revolutionary national development project.

From that decade to the 2000s, movies like *Baile Perfumado* (*Perfumed Ball*, 1996), *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*, 1998), and *Eu, Tu, Eles* (*Me You Them*, 2000) reinterpreted the *sertão* as a more accessible and redemptive place, according to Luiz Zanin Oricchio (156). These films have softened the enduring problems associated with that kind of landscape (Oricchio 156). Even when these movies address poverty,

it is dignified, more moderate and rectifiable. Pre-revolutionary fervor has been replaced by the quest for personal happiness. Where once the breakdown of society was depicted on screen, now we see problems that can be overcome with hard work and good will. What was once a battlefield has become a stage for cathartic reconciliation or existential redemption. (Oricchio 156)

Thus, considering this reinterpretation, these films have redefined the *sertão* not just as a backdrop for hardship but as a symbol of potential and hope, reflecting a shift in both cinematic narratives and societal perceptions.

In Mascaro's film, this rediscovery is informed neither by the teleological myth of a promised land nor by other utopic projects of national development. *Boi neon* exhibits what Jens Andermann calls "an archival self-consciousness," a practice in which some Latin American movies from the 2000s "both call on and dismiss the repertoire of rurality proper

to a previous, national cinematic modernity: ... they both identify rural landscape as an iconic, historically layered and contested site of representation and enact the exhaustion of this very tradition” (51). However, contrary to *Viajo porque preciso, volto porque te amo* (*I Travel Because I Have to, I Come Back Because I Love You*, 2009) by Karim Ainouz and Marcelo Gomes, another recent Brazilian film that takes place in the *sertão*, *Boi neon* does not pretend to completely “ignore the previous archival codings of the rural interior” (Andermann 55). Mascaro’s film comments on this consecrated cinematographic representation of the rural interior to transgress it.

Boi neon also challenges a cinematographic tradition according to which “[p]olitical avant-gardism assumes that the oppressed, due to knowledge-deficit, need pedagogical guidance. Middle-class intellectuals are the possessors of the episteme or rational knowledge, while the people are the victims of the doxa, or fallacious ordinary opinion” (Stam 140-41). Mascaro’s film is a refreshing counterpoint to this elitist and paternalistic stance that considers the rural landscape as an allegorical site of Brazilian primitiveness. Moreover, *Boi neon* criticizes the traditional representation of the *sertão* and its inhabitants by creating nomadic characters who circulate in a landscape that is no longer intrinsically symbolized as a negative reference. It subverts what is deemed wild and animalistic, a categorization central to a discriminatory construction of the Brazilian identity.

Notwithstanding their performance as a troupe on the road, these characters do not express an explicit desire to leave the despised backlands for the more alluring coast. The reversal of a Brazilian cinematographic tradition that celebrates the coast and the sea problematizes the attempt to define *Boi neon* as a road movie.⁸ On the contrary, in *Boi neon* it is the coast and the sea that arrive at the backlands as a citation in the form of a colorful advertisement and the representation of a wave that is reminiscent of *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai. The advertisement painted on a big rock announces a beachwear brand: “Tropicaos,” a portmanteau in Portuguese for tropical and chaos. Mascaro introduces the paradox of an industry of surfing fashion in an arid place, far from the Brazilian coast. “Tropicaos” is also the title of a book by Rogério Duarte, a graphic designer who was an important member of the *antropofagia*-influenced *Tropicália* movement. Duarte also created the poster for *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol*.



Although *Boi neon* does not intend to promote a message of social emancipation as *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* did in the 1960s, it aims to disorient the clear distinction between civilization and nature, city and hinterland, masculine and feminine. It decenters a hegemonic narrative about the *sertão*. In an interview given when the film was launched in the United States, Mascaro commented on the *sertão*, Glauber Rocha and *Cinema Novo*. Mascaro stated that

[t]he northeast has been represented as the place that would fix or repair the modern identity crisis of the bigger cities in Brazil. A sort of Maoist idea ran through the *Cinema Novo* films where you could transform the urban centers through a rural revolution. And, in a way, the characters are turned into allegories, and they become characters that are brave and courageous and preserve the ideals of the country. In *Boi neon*, I'm sort of modernizing that idea. I can't look at people as museums, as people who are preserving national roots because the roots are changing all the time. I was a lot more interested in human beings in an ordinary way, not as the people who would preserve the history of Brazil or sort of recuperate this notion of identity. (Lucca)

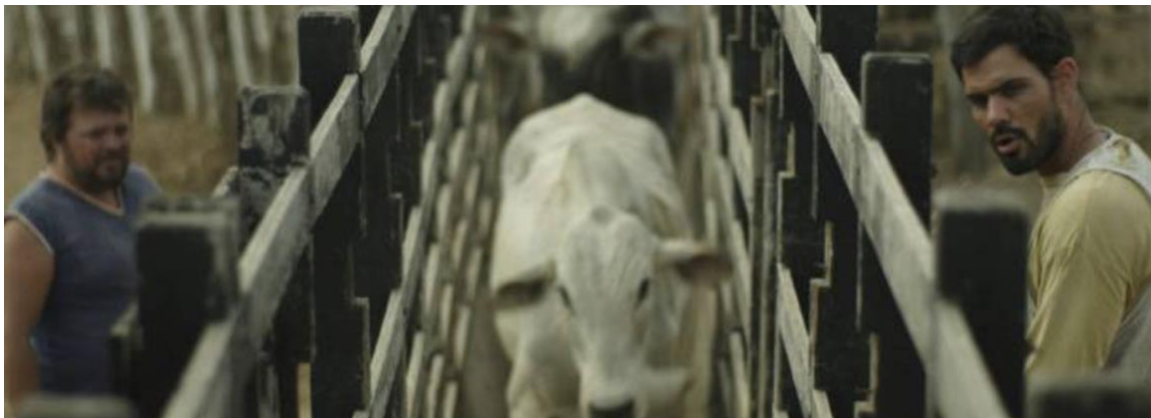
Mascaro's film suggests that northeastern Brazil is not a natural or wild space that needs to be programmatically conquered by and for Brazilians according to the state-sponsored ideology of progress or rescued from their misery as promised by the leftist idealism that motivated the directors of *Cinema Novo*. Nor does it portray the region as a static museum where Brazil could seek its origins.

In *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*, Rocha suggested the teleological perception that the peripheral condition of Brazil was a temporary stage and not an unsurpassed destination.

However, as Ismail Xavier observes, Rocha's subsequent film *Terra em Transe* (*Land in Anguish*), released in 1967, marked a shift towards a more apocalyptic and disillusioned perception of Brazilian society (Xavier 9). This transition from optimism to pessimism in Rocha's work coincided with the escalating military dictatorship in the late 1960s. This change would embody an enduring question: What aspects of Brazilian identity provoke shame? One way to approach this question is to examine a deep-seated fear within the national consciousness: the concern that Brazil might be inherently primitive or untamed. As explored in the following two sections, the characters and their actions in *Boi Neon* confront this fear by transforming a neon-painted bull into a symbol of modernity and through encounters that challenge conventional notions of sexuality.

Neon: An Illuminating Sign of Modernity

Boi neon starts with a powerful and perplexing sequence. It exposes a first plot unit in which bulls are piled up and pressed against one another in a claustrophobic and cruel manner. The image is one of physical compression and symbolic oppression. Some men have crammed these bulls into a very narrow corral as if they were inanimate objects. Each bovine is only allowed to leave this corral to participate in *vaquejada*, a brutal spectacle that resembles an exhibition sports rodeo. In an arena surrounded by bleachers where sand covers the ground, two horsemen run alongside a bull. One of them is Ireomar. He holds the animal's tail and pulls it violently until the bull loses balance and falls to the ground.



Soon after the bull reaches the floor, and though he is in pain, an announcer says with an operatic voice: “Valeu, boi,” which could be interpreted as an acknowledgment of good service, if this phrase did not hide the indifference to the animal's welfare as a central issue in the practice of *vaquejada*.⁹ Before this happens, an anonymous worker spreads a handful of

sand over the bulls' tails and brushes them. It is clear from the beginning that the worker does not demonstrate the slightest care for the bovine. His is an automatic activity, as if bulls were products in an assembly line, which only facilitates the cowboys' grip when they pull their tails in the most exciting moment of the spectacle. The perception that *vaquejada* follows an industrialized logic is more evident when a bull covered in phosphorescent paint becomes the climax of that spectacle.

The neon, glow in the dark bull suggests how the backlands in the northeastern region of Brazil have increasingly faced urban culture's influence. Neon is a colorless, inert, and odorless gas famously used in colored electric sign lights to attract customers to casinos and to commercial urban areas, a phenomenon of which Las Vegas and Times Square are the epitome (Ribatt 8). Illuminated signs and artificial lightning accentuate even more the superficial and theatrical character of the modern city, a process that over time increasingly demands new and stronger ways of calling the pedestrians' attention (Harvey 93-97).

In *Boi neon*, a living being reduced to an object serves as a symbol promoting a lifestyle and entertainment steeped in the themes of modernity and progress in twenty-first-century Brazil. The neon imagery attempts to contemporize the traditional bull, typically associated with the rural spectacle of *vaquejada* and the *sertão*, by infusing it with modern sensibilities. However, despite these efforts, Mascaro's film continuously blurs the boundaries between urban and rural landscapes, suggesting that simply updating the image of *vaquejada* is insufficient to reconcile its raw, cruel performance with an idealized vision of modern Brazil.



The unstable boundaries between humans and animals become starkly apparent when comparing Iremar's interactions with the bulls to a later scene in *Boi Neon*. Here, numerous men are depicted naked, bathing in a cramped space outside the *vaquejada* arena. These men, employed by the *vaquejada*, seem oblivious to their actions, behaving as if their minds were solely attuned to what their instincts tell them to do. Both Mascaro and *Boi Neon*'s cinematographer, Diego Garcia, draw parallels between the film's characters and animals in various scenes, suggesting a shared primal nature. This underscores the idea that instinctual needs and drives often dominate even the most mundane activities, including intimate sexual encounters, which I will explore further in the following section.

Sex as a performance of animality

The American philosopher Alphonso Lingis proposes the anti-speciesist acknowledgment that a common core exists despite the apparent diversity of forms between living beings and heterogeneity that could hide their commonality (179). Lingis states that an inescapable animal condition defines the center of what constitutes humans. The moment when it comes out more clearly is during orgasm, an event where “the ego loses its focus as the center of the evaluations, decisions, and initiatives. Our impulses, our passions, are returned to animal irresponsibility” (Lingis 172). While sex is performed, it demonstrates the inevitable connection between human and nonhuman animals.

As Lingis claims, sex is an act that makes visible the abolition of the boundaries between human and nonhuman animals, whose strict separation was insisted upon by Western philosophers over millenniums (171). Following a metaphysical tradition that Greek philosopher Aristotle launched and French philosopher Rene Descartes deepened, these thinkers defined the human being as the owner of rational, spiritual, subjective, and civilized characteristics that animals do not possess at all.¹⁰ The dualism between human beings and animals enters modernity as the notion that “the human body, like the animal one, comprises nothing but a machine, the human alone also has a mind, is separable into *both* a rational, thinking being *and* an animal *bête-machine* (beast-machine)” (McCance 3).

Sex plays a preeminent role in *Boi neon*, for it directs the spectator's gaze to a blurred relation between humans and animals that indicates their commonality. Before the sequence, near the end of *Boi neon*, in which Iremar and Geise have sex inside the factory, there was another sequence that involves sex between Galega (Maeve Jinkings) and Júnior (Vinícius

Oliveira), who appears later in the movie to help with the *vaquejadas*. Galega and Júnior engage in outdoor sex beside a herd of cattle, as though they were blending with the bovines. In contraposition to Iremar and Geise, whose encounter took place inside a factory, a so-called symbol of modernization, Galega and Júnior intimately share a space with animals, thus blurring the human-animal boundary. The animal condition in the four characters, whose sexual contacts occur in two different spaces associated respectively with civilization and nature, is a source of discomfort and instability for the spectators of *Boi neon*. In these two long nocturnal sex scenes, the spectators bear a glimpse of an animalistic core inside every being in different landscapes. *Boi neon* also suggests a parallel between the two sex scenes as well as the sequences that show bulls cramped at a corral and men bathing in order to disorganize the ontological split between human and animal, civilization and nature.

While working in a *vaquejada*, Iremar meets Geise, a peddler of cosmetics who is pregnant and sells him men's cologne. In previous scenes of *Boi neon*, Iremar expresses his fondness for perfume, a product useful for concealing the smell of the bulls' stool that impregnates the bodies of the people who work at the *vaquejada's* corrals. A few days later, Geise decides to give the cologne as a gift to Iremar. She looks for Iremar but does not find him. After being told that Geise had been looking for him and that she left the gift with a friend of his, later that night Iremar rides a motorcycle to a clothes factory where the cosmetics peddler has a second and masculinized job as an armed security guard. He wants to thank her. Also, his dream is to work as a fashion designer; hence the factory where Geise works has a tremendous appeal for him. During an informal tour through rooms packed with sewing machines, Geise takes the initiative and has sex with Iremar. It is a rare and protracted sex scene that lasts seven minutes without a cut. The actress, Samya de Lavour, was seven months pregnant at the time of the filming.



In the final sequence of *Boi neon*, after having sex with Geise, Iremar appears next to the bulls, in a corral, with a strange facial expression, one that the viewer does not discern with certainty. After some interaction with the bulls, he turns his back on the animals and leaves the corral. The film ends without a clear conclusion. It is legitimate to assert that the affective and sexual contact with Geise modified Iremar's behavior and seemed to emancipate the male character from his everyday tasks. However, it is risky to determine whether he abandoned his participation in *vaquejadas* to work as a female clothes designer. Even Mascaro states he is not sure about the character's destiny.¹¹ It remains unclear whether Iremar becomes more aware of his desires and recognizes his ability to defy the civilizing expectations of northeastern Brazilian society—a region that appears geographically isolated from other metropolises, yet simultaneously attempts to replicate certain aspects of their urban cultural elements. In this process, Iremar transgresses accepted and reinforced expectations of gender separation based on *machismo*. He does not display any intention of exerting an authority derived from a traditional definition of manhood in Brazil.

The *Sertão*: A Space of Flux and Transformation

Boi neon reinvents a traditional landscape in Brazilian cinema by blurring binaries, such as the opposition between humans and animals, civilization and nature, masculine and feminine. With fundamental input from the director of photography and emphasis on sexuality, Mascaro directs a movie that reacts to the history of *Cinema Novo* and obfuscates the distinction between civilization and nature at the core of the Brazilian national identity construction. With a sequence of autonomous frames in a plot devoid of narrative, *Boi neon* presents the commonality between nonhuman and human animals, especially in the disconcerting, crucial

sequence in which Galega wears a horse's head to hide her human face. Also, it invites the spectators to follow a heterodox family of nomadic characters that challenge the fixed and traditional notion of gendered roles.

These characters embody Mbembe's "the ethics of the passerby," since they reject having their identities fixed as allegories in a delimited place central to constructing a national identity in Brazil. They are always on the move, recreating themselves as human animals in a changing landscape, which was historically and symbolically represented in Brazilian cinema as a negative space, available for destruction or domestication. Unlike earlier cinematic depictions that often framed the *sertão* as a place of desolation or primitivism, *Boi neon* reimagines it as a dynamic space of flux and transformation. The *sertão* becomes a backdrop for exploring fluid experiences and representing blurred species boundaries.

Notes

¹ I chose to keep part of this article's title in Portuguese as a nod to João Guimarães Rosa's 1956 book, *Grande sertão: veredas* (translated as *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*). The translation into English would erase the wordplay inherent in *(ser)tão animal*. This phrase has a dual meaning; it suggests a being that is very much an animal (*ser tão animal*) and refers to the animality within an ecosystem in Northeastern Brazil (*sertão animal*). A metaphysical interpretation of Guimarães Rosa's book suggests that *grande ser tão veredas* implies a greater being characterized by vast multiplicity and many paths, reflecting the complexity and diversity of life.

² In this sense, it is productive to think about the landscape as an outside place that interrupts, according to Jens Andermann, "the narrative continuity. It introduces into the diegesis another time associated with the intrinsic duration of a world external to the diegesis" (52).

³ I prefer to define *vaquejada* as a spectacle instead of a sport by drawing on Roland Barthes's essay on wrestling. About *vaquejada*, it can also be said that there is a "wrestled performance of suffering," in which "the public confines itself to spectacle's primary virtue, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters to this public is not what it believes but what it sees" (Barthes 3-4).

⁴ According to Martha Santos, masculinity in northeastern Brazil had political implications already visible in the 19th century, during the transition between monarchy and republic. In her study, Santos also problematizes Durval Muniz de Albuquerque's description of the *nordestino macho* "—the always brave, virile, and honor-obsessed Northeastern man—as a regional type during the first half of the twentieth century" (2). As Santos proposes, "this process of 'invention' of a masculine regional identity occurred when a series of transformations, including the aftermath of the abolition of slavery and the adoption of republicanism, incipient urbanization, and industrialization— especially in the Southeast— threatened the power of agrarian notables from the Northeast" (2). In reaction to the perceived critique of the supposed virility of the Brazilian nation, "these elites produced a masculinist regional discourse that created a gendered identity, centered on the cultural image of an always-already violent *sertanejo*, as the symbol of resistance of the region to the onslaughts of a modernizing, now feminized, republican nation" (Santos 2).

⁵ *Galego*, the Portuguese word for someone born in Galicia and for the vernacular language spoken in the historical nation in northwestern Spain, has different meanings in Brazil to highlight the notion of otherness. *Galego* is a word that Brazilians use to refer to foreignness. It is also associated with poor, uneducated Portuguese who work in menial jobs. In the Northeast region of Brazil, *galego* can describe a blond person with light eyes.

⁶ My article explores how *Boi neon* dismantles traditional boundaries between humans and animals while critiquing speciesism. I engage with these themes more expansively than Dana Khromov's analysis, which situates Mascaro's film within the context of the contemporary Northeast. Khromov highlights how *Boi neon* challenges the extractivist and heteropatriarchal structures of late capitalist agro-industry, emphasizing that Mascaro strategically uses the setting to navigate away from these oppressive frameworks (437).

⁷ In a letter that is a foundational document of Brazilian history, the Portuguese scribe Pero Vaz de Caminha describes the Amerindians in an animalizing way. He tells King Manuel I that it is possible to "tame" these people with innocent souls (Caminha 7). While treating Amerindians as prone to Christian salvation, Caminha emphasizes what he sees as a shared condition between indigenous people and animals. This rhetoric becomes a central justification for the enslavement of indigenous people in the colonized territory that would be named Brazil.

⁸ In an interview, Mascaro commented on whether *Boi neon* could be defined as a road movie. He said that he "wanted to make a road movie where people weren't going away but weren't staying in the Northeast. There's almost like a cyclical movement in this road movie. The idea of the road movie here is more about how to transform that desire: the characters don't want to go away; they want to transform the place they are in, together. It's not a film about a poor and isolated place, but a film about a place in transformation" (Lucca).

⁹ On October 6, 2016, the Supreme Court ruled that *vaquejada* is illegal and against the Brazilian Constitution.

¹⁰ For instance, Immanuel Kant argues that "[t]he fact that man can have the idea 'I' raises him infinitely above all the other beings living on earth. By this he is a *person*; and by virtue of his unity of consciousness through all the changes he may undergo, he is one and the same person—that is, a being altogether different in rank and dignity from things, such as irrational animals, which we can dispose of as we please. This holds even if he cannot yet say 'I'; for he still has it in mind" (127).

¹¹ Gabriel Mascaro in discussion with the author, New York City, April 2016.

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