

Seeing ghosts: the queer creative act in *I Remember the Crows*

Vendo fantasmas: o ato de criação queer em *Lembro mais dos Corvos*

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Abstract

Thinking of a queer cinema means reflecting on how film, using its aesthetic-narrative strategies, can contribute to the antinormativity, disruption and destabilization of rigid standards of gender and sexuality. Based on the notion that a series of contemporary movies fulfills this goal by focusing on a queer creative act (Silva, 2021), this paper intends to identify this act in Brazilian contemporary cinema, specifically in the omniscient filmic gaze of trans actress and screenwriter Julia Katharine in the documentary *I Remember the Crows* (Gustavo Vinagre: 2018). Combining an exercise of film analysis with the methodology proposed by the Filmmakers' Theory (Penafria, Baggio, Graça & Araujo, 2016), the investigation aims to examine how the dialogue of gazes staged by Katharine and Vinagre in the movie, a clash performed like a *pas de deux*, in/subverts not only the historical subject/object relationship in documentary production, but also the very tradition of objectification and/or erasure of trans bodies by cinema. Through her storytelling skills and her vast film knowledge, the protagonist establishes a co-authorship collaboration with the filmmaker, which makes the trans body, and the trans gaze, subjects of the narrative. As a result, *Crows* abandons the outdated notion of documentary as a genre in which reality simply happens and is captured by the genius gaze of the director, underlining the mise-en-scène and the filmmaking aspects inherent to the movie – and how Katharine is co-responsible for their creation.

Keywords

Queer creative act · *I Remember the Crows* · Julia Katharine · Gustavo Vinagre · Contemporary queer cinema

Resumo

Pensar em um cinema queer é refletir sobre como o audiovisual, com suas estratégias estético-narrativas, pode contribuir para uma proposta antinormativa de gênero e sexualidade. Partindo da noção de que uma série de filmes contemporâneos tem concretizado esse propósito por meio da encenação de um ato de criação queer (Silva, 2021), este artigo pretende identificar tal ato no cinema brasileiro contemporâneo, especificamente no olhar fílmico onisciente da atriz e roteirista trans Julia Katharine no documentário *Lembro mais dos Corvos* (Gustavo Vinagre: 2018). Combinando um exercício de análise fílmica com a metodologia proposta pela Teoria dos Cineastas (Penafria, Baggio, Graça & Araujo 2016), a investigação busca examinar como o diálogo de olhares encenado por Katharine e Vinagre no filme in/subverte não apenas a relação histórica sujeito/objeto na produção documental, mas também a própria tradição de objetificação e/ou apagamento de corpos trans pelo cinema. Por meio da sua capacidade de contar histórias e do seu vasto conhecimento cinematográfico, a protagonista estabelece uma colaboração de coautoria com o cineasta que faz do corpo trans, e do olhar trans, sujeitos da narrativa. Como resultado, *Corvos* afasta-se da noção ultrapassada de documentário como gênero em que a realidade simplesmente acontece e é capturada pelo olhar genial do realizador, evidenciando a *mise-en-scène* e os aspectos cinematográficos inerentes ao filme, e como Katharine é corresponsável pela sua criação.

Palavras-chave

Ato de criação queer · *Lembro mais dos corvos* · Julia Katharine · Gustavo Vinagre · Cinema queer contemporâneo

1. Introduction

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), one of this century's most acclaimed queer films, the French director Céline Sciamma follows a painter during the process of creating the title's portrait. The protagonist's first attempt does not work: it has no life, does not represent who her model really is. It is a painting exercise, not a work of art. It is only when the young woman being depicted returns the artist's gaze, and this gaze becomes a coauthor of the portrait, in an affective and artistic dialogue with the painter's, that the work gains life, is born, as a result of this conversation and

this mutual acknowledgement of the two of them as subjects – and not objects – of creation.

This idea of a gaze that, even while being portrayed, wishes to be – and eventually becomes – cocreator of its representation, can also be seen in the Brazilian documentary *I Remember the Crows* (2018). In one of the many moments in which the actress and screenwriter Julia Katharine questions her director, Gustavo Vinagre, about what they are doing exactly, and about the process of making the film, she addresses him directly and asks “*I understood that you want to make a movie about me, is that it?*” [0h12'30"]. This question is accompanied by a sharp gaze, almost like a stare, which will be repeated throughout the production whenever she comes up with this line of inquiry – and which seems to say “*I know what we are doing here, and if you want to make a movie about my life, I have a gaze, and it will be part of the creation of this story*”.

This paper is about this gaze, Julia's gaze. And about how *I Remember the Crows* is not a movie that merely portrays Julia Katharine, but, rather, focuses on her gaze and her creative gesture. And by doing this, it becomes cocreated – reinvented, defined, destabilized, challenged, and structured – by it (or by her). Omnipresent and occupying the center of the frame, her gaze turns into an element that affects and, in several moments, determines the movie's *mise-en-scène*, interfering in and influencing its director's creative gesture, which becomes molded by, and must adapt to, it.

Unlike documentaries such as *The Days with Him* (Maria Clara Escobar: 2013), for instance, in which the movie is built around a battle between the filmmaker and her character over control of the narrative, *Crows* results from a dialogue, and not a dispute – from a dance, a *pas de deux*, or a tango, and not a fight. If Dieison Marconi draws from Foucault to argue that documentary as a narrative construction is structured around a power relation, which makes it “a Western product in which the Other who speaks, that is, confesses, has the duty to bare it all. The one who has the power to make the Other speak and to subject them to the filmic framework will then be the owner of the ‘truth about sex’”¹ (2015, p. 55), the

¹ All quotes not originally in English were translated by the authors.

film that will be analyzed here dares to destabilize this historical verticality of the genre. Through the queer creative act (Silva, 2021) it depicts, the movie operates a horizontalization of its structural axis, with the so-called “truth” – if it exists (possibly not) – arising from an equitable dialogue, and not from a hierarchical monologue.

In the opposite direction to this traditional approach to documentary, the film is more inclined towards what Jack Halberstam claims is fundamental to the attempt to narrativize or biograph trans lives. In an effort the author calls “listening to the ghost”, he explains that “the error of the willful biographer lies in her refusal to be changed by her encounter with the ghost she chases; the method of the transgender historian must be encounter, confrontation, transformation” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 61). And the purpose of this paper is to analyze how Julia Katharine’s gaze transforms her interlocutor/director’s biographical-documentary impulse. How the filmmaker allows (consciously or not) for his filmic gesture to be affected, horizontalized, queered by this creative act, and how this is reflected and manifested in the movie’s *mise-en-scène* – which thus becomes co-constructed, cocreated, horizontal, and not vertical.

In order to understand this horizontalization, how it happened and what cinema it produced, the authors will use the methodology proposed by the Filmmakers’ Theory (Penafria, Baggio, Graça & Araujo, 2016). Originally devised by Jacques Aumont in his book *Les Théories des cinéastes* (2002), in which he seeks to delineate the conception of cinema of a series of directors, the approach was made into a methodology by a group of Portuguese-speaking scholars, who aim to formulate film concepts based not on theoretical abstract thinking, but on the praxis – the movies, reflections and writings – of filmmakers themselves. The theories and concepts, therefore, result in “an arrival, and not a starting point, for the investigation” (Penafria, Baggio, Graça & Araujo, 2016, p. 10), after a deep dive into the praxis of the directors – or editors, cinematographers, art directors, producers, etc. – being studied.

This means that the following investigation will make use of interviews with both Vinagre and Julia herself, putting them in dialogue with reflections and concepts by queer scholars, along with a detailed

work of film analysis, to examine how, by focusing on the actress-screenwriter’s gaze, the documentary becomes more than a mere portrait of said gaze – it becomes co-created and queered by it. Not by chance, the protagonist is also credited as co-writer of the documentary, making clear her central role in the elaboration of its narrative.

Based on the interviews, the film analysis and the theoretical reflection, however, the investigation will try to demonstrate how this co-authorship is also inevitably extended to the aesthetic aspects – sound and visual choices – of the movie, destabilizing and queering the very notion of authorship in film². In order to lay the groundwork for this argument, however, we must first take a brief detour into the reflections of some key queer scholars who theorized about the relationship between non-heterosexual subjects and the artistic gesture. Only after that, we shall begin our dive into *I Remember the Crows*.

2. Inauthentic creators

Elaborating on the recurring presence of queer subjects among the biggest names in the history of art – from Michelangelo to Virginia Woolf, from Jean Cocteau to Leonardo Da Vinci and Oscar Wilde –, Richard Dyer (2002) associates it with a talent that almost all non-heterosexual individuals must develop, to a greater or lesser extent, in order to survive. According to the author, to grow up gay, lesbian, trans, non-binary... means, for many years, learning to “pass” as straight – mastering mannerisms, ways of dressing, speaking, behaving, manipulating perceptions – as a way to protect oneself from countless forms of violence. In other words: represent, stage, create a narrative, a character, an image.

To stay alive and unharmed we had to handle the codes of heterosexuality with consummate skill; to have any erotic and sentimental life we had to find ways of conveying our otherwise invisible desires (Dyer, 2002, p. 63).

² From a political and more pragmatic perspective, though, it is important to highlight that, as a co-writer, Julia does not own copyrights to the film, and has no ownership over the production, which, according to the current legislation enforced by Brazil’s National Film Agency (Ancine), belongs solely to its director.

According to the British scholar, from this capacity to observe and reproduce – to see “normal” as a theater to be staged, a puzzle to be assembled, a character to be constructed – comes the affinity of many queer individuals with what he calls the “crafts of style”, such as fashion and design.

David Halperin (2012), in turn, names this recurrent relationship between non-heterosexual subjects and the act of (re)presentation the “experience of inauthenticity”. The author argues that the fact that these individuals were forced to spend a significant part of their lives staging a sexuality – and an existence – that was not “real” ends up giving them a kind of talent, a series of “hermeneutic techniques that gay men have evolved for exposing the artifice of social meaning and for spinning its codes and signifiers in ironic, sophisticated, defiant, inherently theatrical ways” (Halperin, 2012, p. 457). Going further on this idea, he defends that:

Queer people’s distance on the social world (as defined and naturalized by heteronorms), and the acutely conscious consciousness they have of the different forms in which life presents itself to different people, issue inevitably in an irreducible critical attitude. The queer reprocessing of personal and social experience turns out, in other words, to be productive. It is in fact essential to the arts—to literature, to creative and critical thought, to cultural production in general (Halperin, 2012, p. 454).

This critical distancing, Halperin emphasizes, is something that is available to most people, not just non-heterosexual ones – and manifests itself in many of them, in different ways. However, it is especially latent in the queer community, given its social status – inserted in a reality whose rules do not contemplate them (and often despise, exclude and persecute them) – and its need to imagine and create a culture of their own that may provide them some shelter.

For what is culture if not a turning aside from nature, from the givenness of the world, especially from the givenness of the social world, from the self-evidence of human existence and

everything about it that we unreflectively take for granted? [...] Sexual difference or dissidence is likely to be the starting point for a more categorical, more conscious, more programmatic deviation from nature and from everything in the social world that passes for natural (Halperin, 2012, p. 455).

Therefore, looking through this prism, art becomes less a means of expression of identities/subjectivities and more a tool in a scenario of narrative dispute between a heterosexist and normative project and another that is disruptive and anti-normative. It becomes yet another way of literally imagining and conceiving new logics of space and time, outside of heteronormative discourse and parameters. It is about destabilizing not only the stage, the page, or the screen, but reimagining the house, the school, marriage, the past, the future, based on non-normative experiences because, as Preciado (2014, p. 31) explains, “sexual contexts are established through oblique space-time boundaries. Architecture is political. It is what organizes practices and qualifies them: public or private, institutional, or domestic, social, or intimate”.

Thus, if the heterosexist narrative has historically associated film and art, for example, with a place of homo and transphobic violence and insecurity, it is a matter of thinking about how Julia’s gaze and gesture reoccupy this space and invert this logic with her performance, becoming “not only a place of power, but, above all, the space of a creation in which feminist, homosexual, transsexual, intersexual, transgender, Chicana, postcolonial movements succeed and overlap” (Preciado, 2011, p. 14).

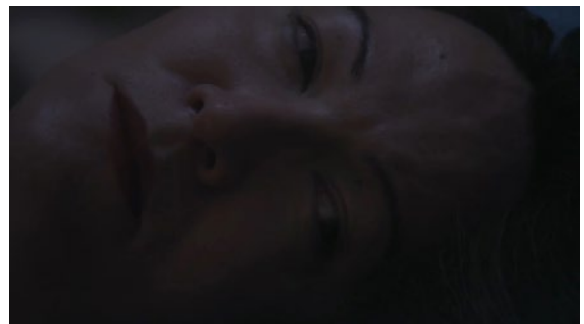
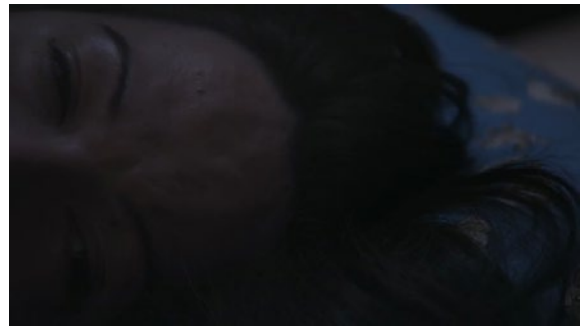
Therefore, in this dispute of narratives, the artist, their work, their performance and their body are not mere victims of oppression or censorship, but agents of a work of “deterritorialization of heterosexuality, which affects both the urban space (it is thus necessary to discuss the deterritorialization of the mainstream space, and not the ghetto) as well as the body space” (Preciado, 2011, p. 14). In this context, it no longer makes sense to speak of representation, but of occupation, deconstruction, tearing down walls, redesigning from the ground up, since, from a queer perspective, the difference is no longer merely sexual. But, rather, an unstable

and constantly reconfigured multiplicity of genders, sexualities and subjectivities that do not stop reinventing and rediscovering themselves, finding new ways of being in the world. “A transversality of power relations, a diversity of life forces’ that ‘are not “representable” because they are ‘monstrous” (Preciado, 2011, p. 18), no longer fitting into traditional artistic-creative systems and logics which, therefore, need to be questioned, subverted and reinvented, finding new forms of authorship, performance, of occupying the stage and the camera’s frame.

Exploring how *I Remember the Crows* puts that into practice is what we intend to do in the next section of this paper³. Because narrative cinema, as a filmic gesture, a creative act, basically consists of designing diegetic worlds from spatio-temporal slices. And, thus, it is an extremely powerful tool in this scenario of dispute, as “public space is contested for queer people and cinema creates spaces that negotiate between public and private. The spaces it creates onscreen are imaginary yet they refer, most often, to real profilmics” (Galt & Schoonover, 2015, p. 92). Elaborated and executed from a queer perspective, film has the potential not only to imagine new worlds, but to create “new and dissident modes of affection and pleasure as well as new modes of cinematic style” (Galt & Schoonover, 2015, p. 89). Without further ado, let us see how the artistic dialogue between Julia Katharine and Gustavo Vinagre perform this act of devising a new cinematic potential in their film.

3. The mirror, the cage, and the music box

I Remember the Crows begins with Julia Katharine’s gaze. The first shot of the film is a super close-up of her eyes opening, waking up, and staring directly at the camera. In the following image, though, the frame changes a little, and the scene is repeated – closed eyes, open, staring at us (imgs. 1 and 2).



Images 1 and 2. Frames from *I Remember the Crows*' opening sequence, captured from 0h0'43". Reproduction of the digital copy. Distribution: Vitrine Filmes

As will become clear later on, the idea is that the protagonist is waking up in the middle of one of her many bouts of insomnia, and the movie – and us – will follow her in this long journey into the night. However, the repetition is a bit odd, as it highlights the staging aspect of the sequence, and director Gustavo Vinagre, in an interview given to the authors via videoconference on April 6, 2023, explains that this was precisely the purpose:

We wanted to make [clear] this relationship the movie establishes with fictionalization, with these stories and this experience, so it is almost like there was this rehearsal of opening the eyes. She opens, then opens again,

³ It is valid here to highlight how *I Remember the Crows* is representative of a strong wave of queer filmmaking that took over Brazilian cinema during the 2010s, as a result of public policies carried out by the country's National Film Agency (Ancine) with the purpose of diversifying its film production in terms of not only gender and sexuality, but also race, geography and social class. *Tranny Fag* (Cláudia Priscilla and Kiko Goifman 2018) and *Futuro Beach* (Karim Aïnouz 2015) are other examples of this wave that put Brazil at the forefront of global queer filmmaking, and was eventually thwarted by the election of far-right president Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. For more on this queer Brazilian production, see Marconi (2021).

the frame changes a bit [...] for me, it was somewhat related with this idea of a Russian doll, of a story within another, this waking up, this dream within a dream [...] there was an intention of making the device of the film clear and that, in a certain way, the whole movie could be an awakening, but also a dream within a dream, as well as a fictionalization of those stories.

In these two initial shots, the documentary already establishes, therefore, its three central thematic elements: the gaze (Julia's, specifically), cinema, and narrative as staging/performance. More than a film about its protagonist's life, *Crows* is, above all, a movie about cinema. And, specifically, about cinema according to Julia Katharine's gaze.

Because Julia talks about movies all the time. Everything is cinema. When she explains her relationship with her mother, she does so by telling the plot of *Terms of Endearment* (James L. Brooks: 1983). When she shows a childhood picture, she is "dressed in *Top Gun*" (Tony Scott: 1986). When she talks about her sexual life, Julia recalls the phase in which she decided to film her hookups and "*direct the fuck*" [0h29'10"], making homemade porn videos. And when she dresses in a kimono, Julia feels she is in an [Yasujiro] Ozu movie – only an Ozu movie that goes on about industrial silicone.

The latter sequence, by the way, is one of the most poetic and complex moments of the film. Julia goes behind a folding screen and asks the production to play "*very old Japanese music*" [0h32'06"] over the sequence, while someone beats the clapper board, and the music could already be heard extradiegetically – it was already there (img. 3). She quits the wine and offers tea (prepared by the production) to Vinagre. Then asks, "*so, what else do you want to know?*". She compliments the simplicity and the everyday life aspect of Ozu's films and, after a somewhat hectic life, full of dreams and dazzle, mistreats and a myriad of experiences, she seems to only wish for this: to sleep quietly, put on her kimono and drink a glass of wine. At the end of the scene, she questions how much was the kimono's rental, and we learn that it is actually not hers: "*but did it turn out the way you wanted it to?*". And we wonder if it also turned out the way she wanted it to.



Image 3. Frame from *I Remember the Crows*, captured from 0h32'12". Reproduction of the digital copy. Distribution: Vitrine Filmes

Because Julia is a scopophile. And the movie is fascinated, intrigued, by that – it wants to dive into this obsession of hers. At a certain point, the protagonist decides to observe a "boy from down the street" with whom she is infatuated. She goes to the window and looks for him with her binoculars. Vinagre films this moment on a wide shot, attentively – because that is what interests him: to film Julia looking, to film her act of looking.

It is not difficult to imagine, and the protagonist herself goes on about this in the documentary, that her idea of womanhood comes a lot from her relationship with cinema and audiovisual. At a certain point, when she narrates the abusive relation she had with a pedophile great-uncle, she says that as a child she already felt "like Malu Mader⁴ with the soap opera's *heartthrob*" [0h08'25"]. In the same interview over videoconference mentioned above, Julia goes even deeper and tells how, for many years, her notion of womanhood came from the divas she saw in Hollywood classics from the 1930s and 1940s: Greta Garbo, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Katharine Hepburn (from whom she would borrow her surname). Later on, when she came into contact with modern cinema, she became "obsessed" with Liv Ullmann and took her as her new reference of femininity. During all this time, though, she would feel a bit deranged – as she jokes in the film – because she knew she was not like those women:

⁴ Brazilian actress, famous for her roles in many soap operas, and a handful of movies.

What got me really confused and deranged for a long time was the fact that I knew I was part of something different, but I was neither the effeminate gay boy, nor the cisgender woman. So, who was I? I did not find myself in those pictures. And that is complex because there comes a time when you start to have these dysphorias, these doubts, like “man, I need a reference, who am I?”⁵

And this deranged relationship is not exclusive to Julia. We all are, to a greater or lesser extent, deranged by cinema. Our notions of masculinity, femininity, homosexuality, lesbianism, trans/vestility/sexuality/genderness are, in varying degrees, (in)formed by the images it shows us (Halperin, 2012; Dyer, 2002). Going even further, there is a moment in *Crows* in which Julia is concerned and wonders about the movie she and Vinagre are making because she does not know if it is a comedy or a drama – as if her life were, or could be, a genre. And what seems to move and interest Vinagre, and the film, is precisely the fact that Julia’s existence and stories are much more complex than what cinema and its history have made space for. It is not just that movies have historically erased trans lives – because they have, and that is a fact. It is that cinema has not had the capacity to handle, and portray, the complexity of narratives such as Julia’s.

It is not by chance that cinematographer Cris Lyra’s camera seems so restless at the beginning of the documentary: it is like she is trying to find the right frame, the space, the way to film someone like Julia – her narratives, her multiplicities. There is no manual, or classical rule, for that. That is probably why, when Julia tells the story of her abusive relationship with her pedophile great-uncle, Vinagre puts a mirror – a clear and recognized metaphor of cinema – behind her. The mirror is only able to reflect a small, tiny, fraction of Julia’s body. Cinema, in its more traditional approach, cannot handle everything she is putting forward in that moment. What Vinagre and Julia seem to proposition with their movie is cinema as cubism: what if audiovisual finally dares to reproduce all the angles of a story, to face all its complexities, its

inconsistencies, its crooked lines, its disconnections, and degenred/degendered imperfections? And what if it takes a risk on making the ugly attractive, the pretty uncomfortable, the crooked normal? Because Julia was, yes, abused by her great-uncle. But he was also the first person that saw her as a woman. Both things coexist and do not cancel each other out. It is complex. Can cinema fit all that?

Crows is only able to execute that and walk this fine line it sets out for itself because it has Julia Katharine in front of the camera. Because she understands cinema, its lexicon, its images, and knows how to use it, manipulate it, expand it. And Vinagre understands that, if his movie is about cinema according to Julia’s gaze, this gaze has an agency. We are all, yes, deranged by cinema, but we do not just passively swallow the images it sells us. We have agency over them, we reinterpret, subvert, reframe, reprocess, destabilize them. Otherwise, considering that film history mostly ignored queer existences, almost no one would have discovered themselves or come out as gay, lesbian, trans, etc. And Julia is a perfect example of that: “*I have seen The Birds, but I mostly remember the crows*” [0h30’50”], the line, referring to Alfred Hitchcock’s classic, that summarizes this idea and that, not coincidentally, gives the movie its title. Cinema gives us images, but it has no way of controlling what we do with them, how we remember, or what we keep from them.

Rancière (2007) associates this agency and this autonomy to what he calls the “emancipated spectator”, who does not merely sees what they are given to see, but rather what they are compelled to imagine by the external stimulus represented by the artist’s creation. According to the author, this stimulus – the performance, the work – is never what the artist intends it to be, is something other, external to them and to the spectator, who does not simply apprehends a telegraphed message, but rather discovers something new. In this idea of someone who completes, who acts, constructs and co-creates, lies “the meaning of emancipation: dismantling the border between those who act and those who see, between individuals and members of a collective body”, something the philosopher calls the “reappropriation of a relationship of the individual to themselves” (Rancière, 2007, p. 31). Marie-José Mondzain, in turn, describes this “something other” in a more poetic manner, arguing that:

⁵ Interview granted to the authors over videoconference, mentioned above.

we must consider images in their physical reality and in their fictional operations; we must admit that images stand halfway between things and dreams, in a quasiworld where our bondage and liberty are perhaps at stake (Mondzain, 2009, p. 14).

Halberstam, on the other hand, sees in this ability to reimagine, destabilize and reprocess images in subversive ways an essentially trans skill – since they are people who, for the most part, grew up surrounded by a world with no one like them, yet became able to appropriate codes from this same world to invent themselves, reproducing/regurgitating parts from it without strictly imitating it. The author calls this talent realness, something that “is not exactly performance, not exactly an imitation; it is the way that people, minorities, excluded from the domain of the real, appropriate the real and its effects” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 51).

And just like trans individuals appropriate this reality without simply reproducing it – after all, they almost never existed in it –, Julia appropriates film to create something new, in her own likeness and difference. Because she knows cinema, she has seen all the classics, dominates their codes. But she does not wish to merely imitate it because she never existed in it. So, just like Brazilian trans singer and multiartist Linn da Quebrada uses funk and oratory to invent a new world, Julia utilizes her omniscient filmic gaze to unfurl the pleats of the cinematic frame and make herself fit into it – to invent her own story, in the likeness and difference of all the movies she has seen, and create her own place in cinema – a sort of trans *mise-en-regard* (Silva, 2021, p. 62). If Muñoz (2009) states that queer as a utopic elaboration is built upon a perpetual longing for something that does not yet exist, upon objects and moments that are pregnant with a potential to be fulfilled, Julia uses *Crows* to turn her cinema into one of these objects filled with “a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 96).

Julia makes it clear that she knows what a certain (a)historical and traditional conception of cinema considers to be good or bad, appropriate or not. She points out when she thinks a story will not be good, or does not sound interesting, for the movie; she is

shocked when she sees a sex scene that she deems inappropriate at a short film festival; and wonders, laughing, whether it is appropriate to talk about her fetishes on camera – after all, Katharine Hepburn would never. However, in all these moments, she directs her gaze – the same gaze – towards the camera and Vinagre, and unfurls the pleats of the cinematic frame a little wider, penetrates a little further into its space. She questions whether what she is saying or doing is appropriate for cinema – but says and does it anyway. Because *inventing* is the keyword here, the central idea. She is inventing a (new) cinema, which fits her, and is able to bear her complexity.

And this inventing also means fabricating her own story, in a cinematically interesting way. Not just narrate it *ipsis litteris*, but turn it into cinema. In several interviews about the film, Vinagre and Julia make it very clear that not all the stories she tells in the movie are real, and even those that are may have one (or more) small detail that has been reimaged – in other words, that the screenplay contains a lot of fictionalization. What is interesting is that they explain – and this is an expression they use repeatedly in their answers – that fiction was used as a form of protection for Julia – protection from moral judgement, from her relatives’ reactions, or from those of people involved in those stories, from unwanted consequences or developments. Fictionalizing means that, potentially, nothing in the film is true. Because they are not making truth, they are making cinema. Everything in the movie is cinema, and that is what Julia had in mind all the time, as she herself elucidates:

I was very aware of how much I wanted to expose myself and how much I did not. So, it was a *mise-en-scène*, at least for me, in front of the camera, I felt very much like an actress in several moments. I understood that I needed to protect myself because some things, if I told them like I tell them in my everyday life, they would not work in front of the camera. So, cinema was in my mind all the time. I was very aware that this was a movie, of how I wanted people to perceive me, of how everything I was saying would come across to people⁶.

⁶ Interview granted to the authors over videoconference, mentioned above.

Once again, Julia's film awareness is revealed to be the movie's creative raw material – the one thing, according to the protagonist herself, conducting the documentary's narrative and *mise-en-scène*. And this awareness comes from before filming. Vinagre discloses in many interviews that he had already seen Julia, a personal friend of his, tell those same stories a handful of times, in different contexts – and in each of them, some detail or even the narrator's attitude would change the plot⁷. Therefore, this idea of self-narrative as performance and creation for a specific audience, in which staging – or form – are as important, or more, as the very content itself, extrapolates the limits of cinema, but gains new contours and new dimensions within it. In the same interview, Julia points out, about her attitude during filming, that:

I remember that I had one concern, which was “I need to perform as if I were talking to a man I am attracted to”. Because I was also very aware that femininity is only read by people, especially regarding a trans body, if it is projected in the way society understands femininity. So, for me, people should not have the slightest doubt that they were watching a trans woman. In life, I feel that. When I am with my friends, the people I most hang out with, I do not feel this obligation to be feminine all the time, in this way people understand femininity. But when I am in a social environment, I feel very ridiculous sometimes because I feel this need to perform a femininity that is not natural so that people will not label me as something anormal⁸.

This realness, this self-narrativization as fabulation and staging is thus not a reproduction, but rather a response and a resistance to a cis-heteronormative world. In a violently transphobic and homophobic society, which has never been designed, engendered, or receptive to LGBTQIA+ individuals, fabulating, devising another, better, more queer, world is almost inevitable. It is a refuge, a balm, an act of resistance

and perseverance. To limit oneself to telling a story as it actually happened is to accept this violence, this oppression, these heterosexist circumscriptions. Fabulating is resisting and invoking something better to come. And this ability, or necessity, as Julia argues, comes from a very early age:

It is much easier when a cisgender straight boy starts to get a boner, for his parents to be proud and say “oh, yesterday I went to Eric's bedroom, and his dick was hard, lol”. But if mine caught me sticking my finger or a tube of deodorant up my ass, they would say “what, oh my God, this child is crazy, possessed, and whatever”. When you are a queer child and has this awakening of desire, of your libido, this is problematized, oppressed, and turned into a scandal way bigger than how people deal with a cisgender straight boy [...] What happens is an erasure, the mom and dad pretend they are not seeing it. And the little lonely fag starts to talk to herself. And then, she will fabulate. I do not know one fag who does not fabulate. It is amazing. And queer people, in general, dykes, non-binaries, whatever, everyone within this little box called queer. So, I think people have been fabulating since forever. In the life of a trans woman, that is it: we start to create a social persona, which we end up sticking to for life. She ends up becoming who you are. You make up her name. Or you use for a while the name people give you. I had thousands of names⁹.

Resorting to fiction, and fabulation, to imagine and write one's own story would be, therefore, an almost natural or inherent state of being queer – especially, being trans. And *Crows* turns this into cinema, through the dialogue of gazes between Julia and Vinagre – not into truth, nor into documentary, but into a film creation that, echoing Prosser (1998, p. 9) – when he says that “‘narrative’ is not only the bridge to embodiment but a way of making sense of transition, the link between locations: the transition

⁷ See, for example: <http://filmint.nu/portrait-gustave-remember/>. Accessed on April 22, 2023.

⁸ Interview granted to the authors over videoconference, mentioned above.

⁹ Interview granted to the authors over videoconference, mentioned above. N.T.: I opt to maintain the female pronouns Julia uses to refer to the little fag boy/child in her original answer, in Portuguese.

itself” –, by being narrativized, affirms its existence. Or, as Halberstam (2005, 73) argues, “when we read transgender lives, complex and contradictory as they may seem, it is necessary to read for the life and not for the lie. Dishonesty, after all, is just another word for narrative”. Julia, thus, tells a tale, adds a twist, takes away another; invents a story, hides another – it does not matter if they are true or not: it is the story that she created for herself, and now it is cinema.

What Vinagre and the movie acknowledge is that Julia’s own gaze has the ability – after years as this lonely and fabulating queer kid, as this scopophile/cinephile young woman – to create this cinema. And a curious fact is that this is not the first time the director identifies how this queer predisposition to fable and to invention often flows into artistic creation. In an interview given to *Film International’s* journalist Gary M. Kramer, published on May 3, 2018, Vinagre says he likes “making movies about desires, fetishes, and dreams”¹⁰ – all of them acts of creation or imagination of something that still does not exist. Furthermore, his first short movie, *Film for Blind Poet* (Gustavo Vinagre: 2012), is also the portrait of another queer artist: the gay Brazilian poet Glauco Mattoso. If Nascimento (2021, p. 54), considers that “marginality is a stimulus to creativity”, this is exactly the spot, the aspect, of the queer universe that Vinagre wishes to focus on. His movies, as he himself explains it, are always made in dialogue with the artistic universe of these LGBTQIA+ creative individuals:

Every queer person is something of an artist because they were left on the margins. And when you are left on the sidelines, you start to look at the world with other eyes, and you develop a critical view of things and is able to not fall for this thing Julia mentioned, a life in which everything is predetermined, marrying, having kids. And I want to believe that we are still able – because we are more and more assimilated to this whole logic – to develop this view. In this sense, the comparison with *Blind Poet*, I think that all my documentaries... they are all about artists, actually. Deep down, I am entering the artistic world of that person – whether it is Julia

in her acting, and later directing; or Glauco in his poetry [...] For my method of making movies, which is totally independent, I cannot wait for things to happen. These are documentaries in which things must come together in two, three days because there is no more money. There is no crew that is willing to work for free all this time. So, I know that I will need to deal with fiction, and often I will need to deal with repetition [...] this kind of documentary I make is only possible because they are documentaries about artists. And artists are aware of what it means to make a movie, even though some of them have never made one before. I mean, they are aware of what the artistic work is¹¹.

This description of the process makes it very clear how, and why, *Crows* is not a film about Julia Katharine. But, rather, a film created in partnership with her gaze and her cinema. The movie is born precisely from the cinematic dialogue between Vinagre’s more raw and guerrilla approach, treating documentary not as a mere record of reality, but from a queer perspective as something more provocative, between the explicit and the dreamlike¹²; and the classic cinema references brought by the actress and screenwriter – her narrative, her mise-en-scène, and her ability to dialogue with, and seduce, the viewer.

So, Julia tells that, when her friend and director told her he wanted to make a film with her, the first conversations they had led her to imagine she would play a kind of Little Edie, from the documentary *Grey Gardens* (Ellen Hovde, Albert Maysles & David Maysles: 1975). It was only when she watched *Playing* (Eduardo Coutinho: 2007), in which testimonies by ordinary people are mixed with those of major Brazilian actresses, without it ever being clear which stories are real, and which are invented/staged, that Julia figured out a meeting point between her cinema and Vinagre’s, and understood what she would do:

¹¹ Interview granted to the authors over videoconference, mentioned above.

¹² According to Vinagre, one of the main references he had while making the movie was the pioneer queer documentary *Portrait of Jason* (Shirley Clarke: 1967). Interview granted to the authors over videoconference, mentioned above.

¹⁰ Available at: <http://filmint.nu/portrait-gustave-re-member/>. Accessed on July 17, 2023.

I would fabulate based on someone's story, and that someone is me. So, for me it was a very interesting exercise to create this Julia who is not me, who is a fabrication. As much as I see moments in the film in which I recognize myself, in which I remember how much I was myself and there was no layer of acting, 99% of the time I was very aware of being an actress there, of how much that was important for me. Not only due to the security concerns, the self-protection concern. It was actually a filmic concern as well. Because Gustavo's documentaries are very raw, they have some staging, but those people are themselves. I cannot see Glauco not being that person I watched in the movie. But I did not want to be Glauco, you know? I did not want to be the real person. I wanted to be the person that remained in the fabrication realm, a kind of Little Edie, some Tennessee Williams stuff, which have always captivated me. So, I would be like, "ah, I want to play, I want to bring a Blanche element, a Little Edie thing"¹³.

Crows is, thus, the result of this tango danced by director and character, or of this friction staged by the two, in which Vinagre plays the role of this filmmaker posing questions or provocations that would lead to a certain version of the movie he wishes to make, and Julia answering with a *mise-en-scène* and a performance of the story she wants to tell. And the duo makes it very clear that this clash is staged, that all the moments in which the protagonist questions the director about the documentary, or about her supposed discomfort or reaction to the filmmaking process, were already planned in the screenplay, as the film's main subject matter, or its raw material. According to Julia:

In fact, we do have very different views of cinema [...] but when we perform any conflict in the movie, it is only with the intention of conveying to people this reflection on what the site of speech really is, these issues of power over the narrative, of who holds the power over the narrative. So, at some point, I would be like "oh,

I felt objectified". But actually I said that, and it was previously agreed upon, with the clear intention of implying "why can't you question your directors?". You can, and that is interesting. Because whatever friction that would come up on set would encourage me to do my job better, and I believe the same is true for him as well¹⁴.

This argument over a certain historical configuration of cinema – especially of documentary – between subject and object of creation is, therefore, in *Crows*' very DNA. If the movie does not necessarily set out to reverse these roles, it operates at the very least a queer destabilization or horizontalization of this structure – a documentary version of what Sciamma and her actresses do in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. And Vinagre himself acknowledges that, ultimately, the balance may actually end up tipping the other way. Because, even though the clashes had been planned beforehand, the dialogues were not written, with the situations developing organically on set. And the filmmaker admits that, in this game of artistic ping-pong, Julia may have come out the winner:

I think it's her really playing with the viewer, playing with me. And I think she dominates it, actually, dominates everything. One of my big surprises on screen is seeing how much she is dominating the whole situation, she does what she wants, from my point of view. That is how I feel, and I have heard that from a few people as well¹⁵.

Talking in terms of winners or losers, however, is not entirely appropriate. Because the film is not a fight. It is, yes, in a way, a reckoning between Julia and cinema – this cinema that deranged her: that in/de/formed her femininity, that erased her, that did not return her gaze, her image, and of which she now takes control. In the words of Vinagre, it is "a journey of this trans character, with this relationship of looking back at the camera, this journey from an abused child until becoming a filmmaker. It was kind

¹³ Interview granted to the authors over videoconference, mentioned above.

¹⁴ Interview granted to the authors over videoconference, mentioned above.

¹⁵ Interview granted to the authors over videoconference, mentioned above.

of Julia's journey taking back the reins of her own life and her own narrative"¹⁶. And in order to stage this abusive love story between the protagonist and the audiovisual culture, until reaching this "happy ending", *Crows* makes use of three visual metaphors for cinema, that represent its complexity – and the complexity of Julia's relationship with it.

The first has already been mentioned above: the mirror, this surface that cuts and chops, that seemingly reflects reality, but can in fact distort and erase what does not interest it. There is a scene in *Crows*, however, which underlines how the movie uses this instrument as a tool at the service of the protagonist's gaze. In it, Julia looks at herself in the mirror while narrating another abusive relationship she had, this time with Roberto, a man who provided her with hormones so that she would shape her body according to the aesthetic/cosmetic expectations he had of a trans woman. Vinagre and Cris Lyra stage this entire account in a single take, that begins with a close shot of the reflection of the protagonist's face in the mirror (img. 4) and, through a zoom out, gradually reveals her whole body. Due to the placement and angle of the mirror, though, it is Julia's gaze that remains in the center of the frame the entire time. The story is about the external gaze, Roberto's – which, just like cinema's, represented a violence –, and about the protagonist's attempt to (cor)respond to it, but in *Crows* it is her gaze that matters. Hers is the one in control.

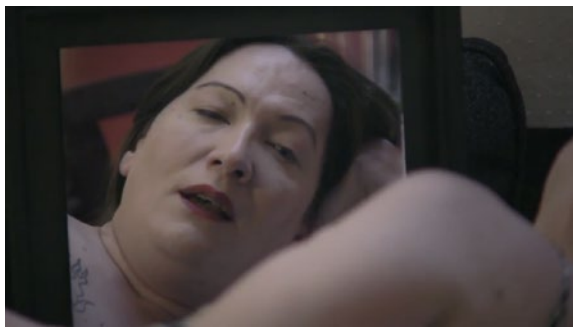


Image 4. Frame from *I Remember the Crows*, captured from 0h54'04". Reproduction of the digital copy. Distribution: Vitrine Filmes

¹⁶ Interview granted to the authors over videoconference, mentioned above.

The second one is the cage holding the bird Nuvem¹⁷, which Julia had supposedly just bought – another fictionalization imagined specifically for the movie¹⁸. Because cinema can be a surface that reflects, but its distorted images, idealized and cosmeticized, may also imprison us. They can become a cage that, while protecting from the dangers of the outside world, confines us within its bars of unattainable expectations, preventing us from going out and finding our own stories, our own potential. It is no coincidence, by the way, that Julia claims in the documentary that Nuvem is female. To a certain extent, that is what happened with the protagonist: cinema served her as a kind of refuge and a place to sublimate the terrors of life through fabulation, an escape from the cis-heteronormative violences of her daily life, but it was also a violence itself, by erasing people like her and presenting toxic and incomplete ideals of femininity and womanhood. In the only moment of the documentary in which she expresses any concern about her weight, it is not due to a health issue, but rather because she admits to having thought of losing weight for Vinagre's film – for the camera.

Near the end of the movie, though, Nuvem comes out of her cage and takes a walk over Julia's body. It is a profoundly complex scene, filled with layers of interpretation, which allows for a series of readings. But if we opt to follow the hypothesis of the previous paragraph, that the bird may – to a certain extent – serve as a representation of the protagonist in her relationship with cinema, the sequence could be perceived as a synthesis of the very movie. Because it would show Julia coming out of her "prison" and "exploring", unveiling, her own body, her stories, her existence, in front of – and for the – camera. It is an exploration and an uncomfortable procedure – the protagonist is clearly tense and uneasy, though stoic, with Nuvem's touch walking over her skin – because the filmic gesture always carries with it a potential violence. This violence, however, is sublimated by the third metaphor of cinema that is shown in this same scene: the music box.

¹⁷ N.T.: Nuvem, the name of the bird, means "cloud" in Portuguese.

¹⁸ Interview granted to the authors over videoconference, mentioned above.

While Nuvem walks over her body, Julia operates the engines of a small music box that we hear throughout the sequence. It is not difficult – nor an exaggeration of interpretation – to perceive this exposed mechanism as the very engines of cinema, which *Crows* spends its entire duration unveiling and which the protagonist, finally, not only accesses, but controls, operates. At the end of the scene, filmed in a single take, Vinagre’s voice yells “cut”, but the camera does not obey him and keeps on framing Julia’s face, gazing directly at it. The gaze that permeates the entire documentary, that controls it and that now takes over: sitting, figuratively, in the director’s chair, the protagonist determines the end of the shoot in the very next sequence and directs, as we will see in the following section, the film’s final scene.

4. Conclusion: Trans disorders to the cis-order

In *Crows*’ final sequence, Julia invites Cris Lyra’s camera to follow her to the window and watch the sunrise. The frame takes on a kind of POV of the protagonist, while we hear her say “now I am the director. I will direct the sun... action!” [1h15’32”]. And as the sun slowly obeys her command, we see the end credits. The movie ends because the dramatic arc described above by Vinagre is complete: Julia is now a filmmaker, having taken the reins of her own life as well as of cinema.

In that same year, this narrative would become true: she would write, direct, and star in her first short film, *Tea for Two* (Julia Katharine: 2018). The movie is the result of an idea she talks about in *Crows* and that she describes as “a romantic comedy. Because I have decided that, in my life, if I ever become a filmmaker, I will always direct romantic comedies because whatever lack of romance I have had in my life, I want to make up for it in cinema. I want to fulfill in film all the amazing love stories that I have once imagined I would live. It is crazy, but that is exactly what it is” [1h09’27”].

It is a speech that, in a way, synthesizes the idea of the queer creative act. Art, paintings, movies, music, books help us imagine the new world(s) to come. They allow us to glimpse what is not yet possible. They are fundamental to the way humanity conceives and designs the future. Because they are not content with reality as it is. They have reality as a starting point,

only to extrapolate it. As Gilles Deleuze stated in the conference “What is the Creative Act” (1987), there is no art that does not summon “a people that does not yet exist”. And Silva (2021) uses this Deleuzian conference as one of the bases to come up with this concept he calls the “queer creative act”, derived from the analysis of three contemporary features – *Weekend* (Andrew Haigh: 2011), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, and *Pariah* (Dee Rees: 2011).

The three films depict protagonists who, faced with the impediments and obstacles of a non-normative life in a violently normative world, resort to artistic creation to queer their existences. Through confessional chronicles, painting and poetry, the characters in these movies reimagine and fabulate their personal narratives with a queer wholeness that their realities do not allow. And once he identifies this same structure in a series of other contemporary productions, the author calls such a gesture of self-narrativization a “queer creative act”, which, in these films, represents a space-time reconfiguration

which, based on its notion of historicity and space, abandons the idea of art (and film) as a mere representation of a category, towards a proposal to explore new subjectivities, multiple, non-fixed, in constant construction and mutation, which express themselves and give meaning to this perpetual instability only through artistic production. (Silva, 2021, p. 104)

Julia Katharine and *Crows* present this same refusal to accept the mediocre cis-heteronormative violence of reality, while drawing from it to insist on fabulating, on imagining a world in the image and likeness of one’s own desire, one’s own subjectivity. A world that claims the right of LGBTQIA+ individuals not simply to be an object to be represented – in cinema, in the arts – but to be subjects of their own creation, their own representation. They are not interested in merely mirroring their reality, this insufficient and heterosexist reality, but rather inventing and elaborating their own utopias.

Ironically, there is a moment in Vinagre’s documentary in which Julia tells the story of a relationship she had with a teacher when she was a teenager and, when she decided to expose it, she was beaten, and heard from people that “oh, she has a very fertile

imagination, she has these delusions, these fabulous stories, and she believes in them. I have always had this stigma of deranged woman” [0h16’44”]. If high school and reality considered the protagonist’s stories and narrative to be a sort of disorder, a daydream, now they are considered cinema. Art.

Thus, films that operate in this key of the queer creative act are productions that see this trans-disorder not as episodes of madness, but as a creative gesture – an act of self-invention that, by producing art and narratives that reach other people, has the power to imagine and invoke new worlds, new utopias –, and allow themselves to be contaminated by this gesture, weaving their film fabric with it. If Halberstam (2005, pp. 116-117) states, regarding trans women, that “we should locate femaleness not as the material with which we begin, nor as the end product of medical engineering, but as a stage and indeed a fleshly place of production”, we can consider that it is this very act of creation, this gaze Julia has, that makes her queer. Not her body, not merely her objects of sexual desire. But her ability to invent herself – and reinvent the artistic languages she uses – in the image and likeness of her own self.

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Webgraphy

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- [19] *Os Dias com Ele [The Days with Him]* [documentary, digital]. Dir. Maria Clara Escobar, Brazil, 2013, 1h45min.
- [20] *Filme para um Poeta Cego [Film for Blind Poet]* [short, digital]. Dir. Gustavo Vinagre, Brazil, 2012, 26min.
- [21] *Jogo de Cena [Playing]* [documentary, digital]. Dir. Eduardo Coutinho, Brazil, 2007, 1h40min.
- [22] *Lembro mais dos Corvos [I Remember the Crows]* [documentary, digital]. Dir. Gustavo Vinagre, Brazil, 2018, 1h22min.
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Bio

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