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ESCOLA DE COMUNICAÇÃO, ARTES E DESIGN
FAMECOS
PUCRS

REVISTA FAMECOS
mídia, cultura e tecnologia

Revista FAMECOS, Porto Alegre, v. 32, p. 1-14, jan.-dez. 2025
e-ISSN: 1980-3729 | ISSN-L: 1415-0549

https://dx.doi.org/10.15448/1980-3729.2025.1.47859

SEÇÃO: CINEMA E AUDIOVISUAL

The men who cry, the women who vanish: a gendered reading of the Brazilian film City of God (2002)

Homens que choram, mulheres que desaparecem: uma leitura de gênero do filme brasileiro Cidade de Deus (2002)

Hombres que lloran, mujeres que desaparecen: una lectura de género de la película brasileña Ciudad de Dios (2002)

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Recebido em: 17 abr. 2025.
Aprovado em: 23 jul. 2025.
Publicado em: 25 set. 2025.

Abstract: This article offers a gender-focused reading of the acclaimed Brazilian film City of God (2002), arguing that it can be understood as reflecting a crisis of masculinity as much as – or even more than – depicting slum life. Set during Brazil's military dictatorship, the film portrays violence as a performative tool used to assert and preserve hegemonic masculinity, especially through its dominant, emotionally repressed male characters. A key focus of this article is the absence of the transgender character Ana Flamengo, who is central to the source novel but entirely omitted from the film adaptation. This omission highlights how the adaptation emphasises social transformations tied to urban "favelisation" and state-led displacement, but notably overlooks critical issues of gender and sexuality, particularly in its representation of women. Through close textual and visual analysis, the article demonstrates how the film constructs masculinity as both performative and fragile, which exposes emotional vulnerability even in its most feared male figures. These findings underscore the film's ongoing relevance to contemporary debates on masculinity, trans erasure, and the politics of cinematic representation more than two decades after its release.

Keywords: masculinity in crisis; gender-based violence; trans erasure; Brazilian cinema; Cidade de Deus.

Resumo: Este artigo conduz uma análise centrada em gênero do aclamado filme brasileiro Cidade de Deus (2002), argumentando que a obra pode ser interpretada como um reflexo de uma crise de masculinidade tanto quanto – ou até mais do que – uma simples representação da vida na favela. Ambientado durante a ditadura militar no Brasil, o filme retrata a violência como uma ferramenta performativa usada para afirmar e preservar a masculinidade hegemônica, sobretudo por meio da figura do homem dominante e emocionalmente reprimido. Um dos focos centrais deste artigo é a ausência da personagem transgênero Ana Flamengo, que tem papel importante no romance original, mas que é totalmente omitida na adaptação cinematográfica. Essa omissão destaca como a adaptação enfatiza transformações sociais relacionadas com a "favelização" urbana e com o deslocamento promovido pelo Estado, mas ignora de forma notável questões cruciais de gênero e sexualidade, especialmente no que se refere à representação das mulheres. Por meio de uma análise textual e visual detalhada, o artigo demonstra como o filme constrói a masculinidade como algo tanto performático quanto frágil, revelando vulnerabilidade emocional mesmo nas figuras masculinas consideradas mais temidas. Tais conclusões reforçam a relevância do filme para os debates contemporâneos sobre masculinidade, apagamento trans e políticas de representação cinematográfica, mais de duas décadas após o seu lançamento.

Palavras-chave: masculinidade em crise; violência de gênero; apagamento trans; cinema brasileiro; Cidade de Deus.

Resumen: Este artículo ofrece una lectura centrada en el género de la aclamada

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película brasileña Ciudad de Dios (2002), argumentando que puede interpretarse como un reflejo de una crisis de la masculinidad tanto como – o incluso más que – una mera representación de la vida en la favela. Ambientada durante la dictadura militar en Brasil, la película retrata la violencia como una herramienta performativa utilizada para afirmar y preservar la masculinidad hegemónica, especialmente a través de sus personajes masculinos dominantes y emocionalmente reprimidos. Un enfoque clave de este artículo es la ausencia del personaje transgénero Ana Flamengo, fundamental en la novela original, pero completamente omitido en la adaptación cinematográfica. Esta omisión pone de relieve cómo la adaptación enfatiza las transformaciones sociales vinculadas con la "favelización" urbana y el desplazamiento promovido por el Estado, pero pasa por alto de manera notable cuestiones críticas de género y sexualidad, especialmente en su representación de las mujeres. A través de un análisis textual y visual minucioso, el artículo demuestra cómo la película construye la masculinidad como algo tanto performativo como frágil, lo que expone la vulnerabilidad emocional incluso en sus figuras masculinas más temidas. Estas conclusiones subrayan la relevancia de la película para los debates contemporáneos sobre masculinidad, borramiento trans y la política de la representación cinematográfica, más de dos décadas después de su estreno.

Palabras clave: masculinidad en crisis; violencia de género; borramiento trans; cine brasileño; Ciudad de Dios.

Introduction

Cidade de Deus (2002) is one of the most internationally recognised Brazilian films of all time. Since its release, the film has attracted critical acclaim for its stylised depiction of favela life and escalating urban violence[2]. More significantly, the film introduced a renewed aesthetic to Brazilian cinema, drawing comparisons to Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (Shaw, 2005) and appearing on numerous "greatest films" lists, including ranking number 15 on the 2025 list of the 100 best films of the 21st century (The New York Times, 2025). Despite this cultural impact and multiple nominations, it did not win any major prizes[3].

Adapted from Paulo Lins's 1997 novel, the film spans three decades (1960s–1980s) and chronicles the dramatic evolution of Cidade de Deus, from a government-initiated relocation project to a community dominated by violent drug gangs. While earlier analyses have focused primarily on its depiction of poverty and crime (Vieira, 2005), this article contends that, intentionally or not, *Cidade de Deus* (2002) can also be read as deeply concerned with gender and masculinity. Building on this socio-political backdrop, the article explores how violence functions as a tool for performing and sustaining hegemonic masculinity during Brazil's military dictatorship, the sexual revolution, and the global rise of feminist and queer movements, historical shifts that the film largely ignores.

Despite being over two decades old, the film remains highly relevant when viewed through a gendered lens. Contemporary debates around toxic masculinity, trans erasure, and media representations of gender minorities underscore the need to revisit earlier cinematic portrayals of marginalised communities. Central to this analysis is the absence of Ana Flamengo, a transgender character who plays a significant role in the novel but is entirely omitted from the film adaptation. Her exclusion reflects persistent patterns of both trans and broader queer erasure, which makes this critique not only retrospective but also immediately relevant to contemporary cultural debates.

The film constructs masculinity as the dominant identity and embodies this through toughness, violence, and control while relegating femininity to roles of submission and sexual service. Characters who deviate from this masculine norm, such as Knockout Ned (Mané Galinha, played by Seu Jorge) or Benny (Bené, played by Phellipe Haagensen), are either forced to conform or rendered vulnerable. Ana Flamengo's gender nonconformity, in particular, is depicted in the novel as a source of psychological distress for her brother, whose gangster identity is threatened by her presence. Her removal from the film reduces this tension and simplifies the narrative's engagement with gender complexity.

This article therefore argues that the fragility of

[2] See Bentes (2007) for her influential concept of the "cosmetics of hunger", which she coined to critique how the depiction of poverty had become visually stylised and aesthetically appealing in Brazilian cinema. The term reworks Glauber Rocha's concept of an "aesthetics of hunger", developed during the Cinema Novo movement of the 1960s.

[3] It nevertheless won the 2002 Toronto International Film Festival award for Best Film and was nominated for the 2003 Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film as well as four 2004 Academy Awards: Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Film Editing, and Best Director.

the film's male characters reveals a broader crisis of masculinity, which is shaped by socio-political change and patriarchal expectations. It further contends that the film's male-dominated world aligns with narrative choices that marginalise women, reducing them to background figures or victims of male violence. Even female characters who hold substantial roles in the novel, such as Lúcia Maracanã, see their parts substantially reduced in the film. By examining these reductions, this article situates *Cidade de Deus* (2002) within a wider discourse on gender, power, and representation that reveal how its portrayal of masculinity functions both as a defence against, and a symptom of, its own instability.

The article is divided into three sections besides this introduction and the conclusion. The first section challenges dominant readings of *Cidade de Deus* (2002) as a slum narrative by foregrounding its portrayal of masculinity. The second section analyses how violence functions as a performance of male dominance while also exposing moments of masculine fragility. The third section focuses on the film's omission of the transgender character Ana Flamengo as a case study of trans erasure in contemporary cinema. The conclusion draws these threads together to consider the film's contribution to ongoing debates around gender, trans visibility, and power.

From slum to a masculinity-in-crisis narrative

The concept of a "masculinity in crisis" has, like feminism, often been rooted in a Western, white, middle-class context, which tends to overlook masculinities that deviate from this norm. When non-Western masculinities are addressed, they are frequently treated as if "masculinity" were a universal, homogeneous category. However, as Chaudhuri (2006, p. 105) argues, when citing Cohan and Hark, "[M]asculinity, like femininity, is also 'an effect of culture – a construction, a performance, a masquerade – rather than a universal and unchanging essence.'" Chaudhuri (2006, p. 105-106) further states that masculine identities are "historically mutable and ideologically unstable", making it essential to deconstruct the notion of a singular, stable masculinity.

To illustrate cultural variation, Cantú (2000) criticises the stereotype of Latino men as inherently aggressive and drunk and argues that such reductive portrayals obscure the richness of Latino masculinities. Gutmann (1996) echoes this, arguing that Latino "machismo" must be understood as historical constructs shaped by evolving political, social, cultural, and economic conditions. Yet in the Brazilian context, exemplified in *Cidade de Deus* (2002), idealised stereotypes of aggressive Black masculinity persist, which reinforces associations with violence, virility, and savagery (Amparo-Alves, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, much of the scholarship on *Cidade de Deus* (2002) focuses on the link between masculinity and violence. This connection is a common theme in masculinity studies, as seen in Shaw's (2005) critique of the film's comparison to Westerns and Vieira's (2007) exploration of its transnational impact[4]. Building on this scholarship, this section focuses on how the pervasive violence in both the film and the novel on which it is based intersects with gender dynamics. It argues that the violence depicted in the narrative functions as a mechanism by which men assert power in response to perceived threats, particularly those related to gender and sexuality. Violence, in this sense, becomes a strategy for reinforcing macho identities, which echoes Butler's (1990) assertion that gender is performatively constituted. The repeated enactment of a macho persona reflects societal expectations of what constitutes a "real" man. As Brickell (2005, p. 32) notes,

> The masculine self can be understood as reflexively constructed within performances; that is, performances can construct masculinity rather than merely reflect its pre-existence, and socially constituted masculine selves act in the social world and are acted upon simultaneously.

In *Cidade de Deus* (2002), masculinities are

[4] One intriguing issue is that although the film was co-directed by a woman (Kátia Lund) only Fernando Meirelles, the male other co-director, gained significant international recognition for its success.

symbolically aligned with the favela itself and portrayed as marginal and peripheral yet still positioned as superior to femininity. However, this performativity of masculinity arguably exposes its fragility rather than its strength, which contradicts the illusion of power it seeks to project. Silverman's (1992) notion of a "masculinity in crisis" is particularly relevant here. As Chaudhuri (2006, p. 108) discussed, such a crisis "has enormous political implications: it is a key site within which to renegotiate our relationship with ideology". This crisis is also inherently relational and has an effect on the construction and perception of female subjectivity as changes in masculinity "are bound to impact the way female subjectivity is lived and perceived" (Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 119).

The masculinity in crisis may arise from the perception that modern society is "either feminizing men or forcing them into hypermasculinity, both of which are harmful to the natural order" (Alsop; Fitzsimons; Lennon, 2002, p. 135). Hegemonic masculinity, a Western construct, typically implies "heterosexuality, economic autonomy, being able to provide for one's family, being rational, being successful, keeping one's emotions in check, and above all, not doing anything considered feminine" (Alsop; Fitzsimons; Lennon, 2002, p. 141). However, as the authors note – and as *Cidade de Deus* (2002) illustrates – these traits are not fixed. Masculinity cannot be understood as a singular, stable concept that applies equally to all men and likewise in the film not to all men in the favela, despite these men having some shared characteristics and there being the pervasive presence of violence in this context.

The crisis is also shaped by shifting social expectations. What it meant to be a man in Brazil between the 1960s and 1980s differed from the ideals of earlier generations. As Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon (2002, p. 142) argue, "What was expected of men in our fathers' generation often differs from the expectations placed on men in our own". Furthermore, masculinity is an unstable category that requires constant reaffirmation and validation from other men, who evaluate and endorse these performances. Masculinity, the authors contend, is defined "more by what it is not than what it is" and is "constructed in opposition and contrast to femininity" (Alsop; Fitzsimons; Lennon, 2002, p. 163).

Given women's minimal presence in the film, McDonald's (2006) insight into the disintegration of the man/woman binary is especially apt. Yet despite this scant representation, the narrative persists in reinforcing dynamics of passivity and domination. This limited visibility is significant as it underscores how violence remains gendered, with women reduced to pawns in men's assertion of power. Notably, some female characters in the novel, such as Lúcia Maracanã, are portrayed as far more empowered than they are in the film adaptation.

The maintenance of these binary roles – active versus passive, dominant versus submissive – is particularly evident in acts of male submission. This dynamic must be considered within the historical backdrop of Brazil's military dictatorship, during which male power in society faced challenges from an authoritarian regime. Certain masculinities were rendered passive, and any resistance to the system was met with severe punishment. Interestingly, the inhabitants of the favela appear detached from this political context. Despite the national turmoil, the film presents favela-based criminals as largely uninvolved in resisting the regime, perhaps because of a lack of strategic engagement. There is no direct confrontation with military authority, and the police – who are emasculated by the gangsters – seem disconnected from the dictatorship itself.

The idea of a masculinity in crisis is embodied in the character of Knockout Ned, whose story dominates the final third of the film. Rocket (Buscapé, played by Alexandre Rodrigues), the film's narrator, explains that the central gangster Li'l Zé (Zé Pequeno, played by Leandro Firmino da Hora) despises Ned simply because he is handsome and capable of attracting women whereas Zé must pay for sex or resort to sexual violence. From childhood, Li'l Zé (then known as Dadinho, played by Douglas Silva) resists submitting to older gangsters and demonstrates a strong desire

to dominate other people. His hostility towards Ned reflects his deeper anxiety about masculine status and control.

Ned, initially depicted as a respectable family man, former soldier, and bus conductor, undergoes a dramatic transformation after his girlfriend is raped and his family murdered. In seeking revenge, he also attempts to restore his lost masculine authority. His narrative arc exemplifies how the film constructs masculinity through themes of loss, humiliation, and a violent reassertion of power.

A notable instance of Ned's submission occurs during a large party held for Li'l Zé's friend Benny at a local club. After a dance track ends and a slow romantic song begins, Li'l Zé invites a woman – Ned's girlfriend, who is briefly alone – to dance, despite his lack of previous dance experience, as the voiceover notes. She rejects him and leaves. Li'l Zé reacts with disbelief, which is emphasised by a lingering medium shot that foreground his stunned expression. Given his earlier violent behaviour, the audience anticipates retaliation, yet Li'l Zé holds back and later confronts Benny instead, accusing him of jeopardising their achievements by choosing to leave the favela for the "whore" (Benny's girlfriend). Benny defends her, and the camera captures Li'l Zé's astonished reaction, intercut with flashbacks of their childhood[5].

Shortly afterwards, Li'l Zé finds a way to reassert his male authority and feared status. He observes Benny and his girlfriend from a distance. A long shot captures Li'l Zé moving through the crowd, eventually focusing on Knockout Ned dancing with his girlfriend – marking the climax of the sequence. Li'l Zé approaches them aggressively, insulting Ned and challenging him to prove his masculinity. Ned's girlfriend attempts to intervene but is silenced with a derogatory term. Li'l Zé escalates the situation by forcing Ned to strip naked in the club, demanding to see his "naked arse". The camera then cuts to other scenes in the club and shows that Ned's humiliation continues. When it returns, Ned is fully naked, surrounded by laughing men, with Li'l Zé commanding him to "shake his arse". Ned remains passive, submitting to Li'l Zé while his girlfriend watches on, visibly distressed. Still enraged, Li'l Zé later fights with Benny over the camera Benny received as a payment in a drug deal – the same one Rocket later uses to take photos. Benny is accidentally killed by a stray bullet meant for Li'l Zé, who weeps at his friend's death and blames Benny's girlfriend, further demeaning her.

This portrayal of Li'l Zé's behaviour challenges the stereotype that men do not cry and reveals that even the most feared gangster can display grief and emotional vulnerability. The scene briefly disrupts the otherwise rigid, stereotypical construction of masculinity as emotionally repressed.

The turning point in Ned's submission occurs in a later sequence of the film. After being rejected again by Ned's girlfriend in an alley and watching her rejoin him, Li'l Zé rapes her (as discussed in the next section). The following scene highlights Ned's masculinity in crisis when he fails to protect his girlfriend from sexual violence. A medium shot captures his despondent expression as he confesses to his family that he cannot even bear to look at her after the ordeal. He also expresses a wish that the gangster had killed him instead, which suggests that such a death would have spared him the shame of failing to be a "proper man" in his social context. This marks only the beginning of his suffering. Li'l Zé later returns with his gang and riddles Ned's family home with bullets, killing his father and brother. This leaves Ned with no choice but to turn to violence to seek revenge and to restore his lost masculinity.

Although the film centres on violence, much of it is also a gender issue, particularly in relation to submission, which is a distinctly gendered act (Kemp, 2013). The men are navigating a period of profound redefinition of masculinity at a

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[5] The way the shots capture Li'l Zé looking at Benny is quite suggestive, raising the possibility of a homoerotic subtext. While Li'l Zé's initial reaction may be interpreted as jealousy or fear of losing his friend, this gaze opens space for a reading grounded in homosocial desire (Sedgwick, 1990) wherein heteronormative structures are infused with erotic undertones through affective bonds between men. As this scene suggests, Li'l Zé's emotional dependency on, or non-violent intimacy with, Benny, especially given that he is never shown with a girlfriend and engages in sex only through acts of rape, risks destabilising his hypermasculine authority and leaves his gender and sexual identity open to interpretation.

time when women are increasingly resisting and challenging patriarchy. As the narrative shows, the men are unwilling to accept rejection or, even more dangerously, betrayal. This provokes revenge in various forms, including rape, honour killings, and other acts of physical or psychological violence. This pattern is evident across generations, with violence functioning as a means of preserving both male power and one's fearsome reputation.

From the early scenes of the film, violence is primarily associated with the Tender Trio (Trio Ternura), who rob a gas truck and share the proceeds with Cidade de Deus residents in a Robin Hood-like style. In contrast, the film subsequently shows how the next generation uses violence as a selfish display of power, driven by a desire to dominate drug trafficking in the favela, as exemplified by Li'l Zé. Masculinity is vividly expressed through the gangsters' pleasure in seeing their brutal acts featured on the front pages of major city newspapers[6].

Violence alone, however, proves insufficient for maintaining power across generations. This leads gangs to shift from armed robbery to drug trafficking, which offers a more sustainable and lucrative form of domination. The transition is made explicit in a sequence where Li'l Zé, accompanied by Benny, arrives at a party. For the first time, the audience sees Li'l Zé punch Knockout Ned and threaten to kill him. In a short reverse medium shot, Li'l Zé explains to Shaggy his intention to expand the business and increase profits. Various shots of rival gangsters are intercut as he lists to Benny the assets these men have accumulated: cars, gold necklaces, and women. Their success starkly contrasts with Li'l Zé, who remains tied to the old ways of armed robbery. Recognising that this approach is not enough to maintain his power, Li'l Zé then outlines his plan to eliminate these rival gangsters and take over their operations.

To support his new venture, Li'l Zé seeks spiritual body protection. He attends an African religious ceremony led by a *pai de santo*, who offers a ritual defence against bullets. Zé receives an amulet and is advised not to have sex while wearing it. During this ceremony, he also renames himself from Dadinho to Li'l Zé. By shielding his body from bullet penetration, he symbolically positions himself as "untouchable" – a notion deeply rooted in popular culture and cinematic depictions of hitmen. This transformation marks the growth of his enterprise, illustrated through a stylised sequence that portrays drug trafficking as a capitalist corporation, complete with career paths and promotional opportunities.

Li'l Zé emerges as the film's most formidable perpetrator of violence. He instils terror throughout Cidade de Deus and commits the film's most shocking acts – from massacring motel guests and killing Goose as a child to, as an adult, orchestrating the brutal punishment of the Rants (os Caixa Baixa), a group of local boys who had been stealing in the favela. In this scene with these boys, which is arguably one of the film's most disturbing moments, Li'l Zé forces the boy named Steak and Fries (Filé com Fritas, played by Darlan Cunha) to shoot another boy to prove his manhood. Although Zé exerts dominance over the children, they later take revenge by gunning him down at the end of the film. Their celebratory killing suggests that they will become the next generation of gangsters in Cidade de Deus.

This cycle reveals how violence is internalised as a key marker of masculinity. As hooks (2004, p. 26) observes, "Popular culture tells young black males that only the predator will survive," in other words that submission is not an option. Violence becomes a symbol of masculine power, particularly in the context of controlling the drug trade. It also serves as "the vehicle for a symbolic transition between boyhood and manhood" (McDonald,

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[6] It is striking that the male body in *Cidade de Deus* (2002) does not become a site of spectacle in the way it often does in American representations of hypermasculinity – for instance, in films featuring Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, or Jean-Claude Van Damme. Only in the first part of the film does the camera briefly linger on the gangster Goose (Marreco, played by Renato de Souza), whose natural physique becomes an object of the audience's gaze, but this is fleeting. Even when Knockout Ned appears naked, the camera remains hesitant to focus on his body, despite his reputation as a handsome man within the narrative. Rather than inviting a contemplative or erotic gaze, the camera positions his nudity as a moment of vulnerability, arguably intended to elicit the audience's pity for the humiliation he suffers despite his innocence.

2006, p. 20). It is through violence that these boys become men; through these acts, they do more than survive: they also reaffirm their place within a violent masculine hierarchy.

Moreover, state power works to contain these young men, predominantly young Black favela residents, within the confines of their neighbourhood[7]. By attempting to force them into submission, the state positions itself as the primary representative of patriarchal power in the country – an authority characterised by hegemonic masculinity, expressed through dominance, aggression, and institutional control. This reinforces the status of favela males as social outcasts or dejects. Their social condition positions them within a framework of peripheral masculinity, producing a twofold crisis: the public spectacle of extreme violence against young men's bodies and a state that not only fails to prevent this violence but actively reinforces it, coalescing into a display of hegemonic masculine domination. This dynamic has been employed over time by both governments and irregular forces, which is "often in tandem with the imposition of political and economic regimes" (Paley, 2014, p. 18).

In this context, marginality functions as a counter-mechanism, which recalls Brickell's (2005) assertion that understanding masculinity requires consideration of the relationship between subjectivity, agency, and social structure. The lure of drug trafficking, driven by what hooks (2004, p. 16) calls the "lure of hedonistic materialism", compels young men to pursue money by any means necessary to maintain their masculine identity. This mirrors a common pattern among Black men in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As hooks (2004) argues, many Black men recognised that money, rather than access to respectable employment, served as a pathway to mainstream acceptance. In this way, marginality and violence seem to become outlets through which these young men negotiate the crisis of masculinity.

This double bind of marginality and masculinity suggests that violence is not merely a survival mechanism but a performative act that asserts manhood within a system that both excludes and demands it. The following section, therefore, examines how violence operates as a key tool through which masculinity is constructed, legitimised, and enforced in *Cidade de Deus* (2002).

Enforcing manhood: violence as masculine performance

One of the most cited lines from *Cidade de Deus* (2002) regarding constructions of masculinity in relation to violent acts derives from the boy Steak and Fries: "I smoke, I snort, I've killed and robbed. I'm a man!" Much of the film's portrayal of masculinity and criminality concerns the transition to manhood, as scholars such as McDonald (2006) argue. This reinforces hooks' (2004, p. 24-25) assertion that "[p]atriarchal manhood was the theory and gangster culture was its ultimate practice". The question then becomes: how do these subjects reclaim control rather than succumb to submission within their socio-cultural context? For them, violence becomes a form of resistance that undermines white masculinity dominance yet simultaneously enforces patriarchal norms by forcing women into subaltern roles and rendering them victims of male violence.

In terms of resistance, hooks (1990) emphasises the importance of understanding marginality as both a position and a site of resistance for oppressed, exploited, and colonised individuals. She describes being "in the margin" as "to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (hooks, 1990, p. 341). For hooks (1990), marginality should be seen not only as a space of deprivation but also as a place from which counter-hegemonic discourses emerge. In this context, for example, the expression "words fail, bullets talk" reveals how violence becomes a means of identity construction and resistance. It reflects the characters' peripheral status while challenging the established order, as marginal space is governed by its own internal laws. In Portuguese,

[7] See Amparo-Alves (2010) for a discussion of the film's engagement with the common social pathologisation of Black masculinity.

the term *marginalidade* captures both physical marginality and criminality – elements that help the characters maintain their masculinity. The language used in both the novel and the film is central to shaping these characters and conveys how violence functions as a constant structure in their social context[8].

Building on this, the expression "words fail, bullets talk" encapsulates the text's brutality. Yet this section focuses on the language of gendered violence, still linked to the bullet's symbolic power. When patriarchal language fails for these young men, they resort to violence to reclaim control and reaffirm their masculinity. As Penglase (2005, p. 6) notes, "Violence is both performative and poetic," as "violent acts produce effects beyond the merely instrumental [...] by drawing attention to the form within which they are executed and by deploying signs in new contexts, thereby altering their meanings". Consistently, women are assaulted through language – terms like "whore" serve to demean them, and the "language of the father" illustrates how patriarchal discourse translates into violence when verbal dominance collapses.

Although many instances of gender-based violence could be cited, this section will focus on two examples from the film (an honour crime[9] and a rape) and will briefly mention one omitted scene, which involves the killing of a baby as a means to punish its mother. These acts of violence against women highlight their structural and relational vulnerability and suggest, within a patriarchal framework, that they require male protection. They also reinforce stereotypical gender roles, especially in the context of a husband who believes he has been betrayed, and are particularly reflective of gender dynamics in Brazil during the 1960s and 1970s. While Brazilian society has changed significantly[10], at that time, women in many regions who were perceived as having betrayed their husbands were swiftly condemned for transgressing patriarchal social norms. Honour killings, though not legally protected or recognised as a valid defence under the penal code, were widespread and culturally tolerated as a means of reinforcing patriarchal control.

The sequence involving the honour crime begins with a migrant woman from the northeast receiving a "sexual education lesson" from a woman in Cidade de Deus. The camera frames them in a medium shot, occasionally cutting to show the former's husband watching from a distance. Their conversation explores sexual practices that diverge from traditional expectations in this patriarchal context. The migrant woman is portrayed as unfamiliar with such liberated sexual acts while the Cidade de Deus woman describes her sexual experiences, including the use of a hot banana (a primitive and rustic method), as well as oral and anal sex – acts often associated with homosexuality. She claims that her partner accepts these practices because "a real man likes *sacanagens* [naughty things]". The camera then focuses on the shocked expression of the migrant woman, who says her husband would kill her if she had such ideas. By depicting the favela man as more open to sexual experimentation, the narrative reinforces a traditional model of masculinity that marginalises the northeastern migrant in terms of sexual politics.

The next scene opens with a shot of a banana in the foreground, while a couple's naked bodies are blurred in the background. It becomes clear that the migrant woman is not with her husband, as his angry shouts, including "nigger son of a bitch", are heard off-screen. She is experimenting

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8 Nagib (2005) discusses the use of language in her analysis of the film.

9 Besides the case analysed in this article, the novel presents other examples of gender-based violence. In one instance, a husband ambushes his wife's lover at dawn, beheads him, and "put the bloody head with bulging eyes" in a plastic bag, which he then takes home and "threw it into the adulteress's lap" (Lins, 2006, p. 76). In another, Armando, a former military police officer, was dismissed from the force for killing his wife and her lover after finding them "fucking in his bed" (Lins, 2006, p. 80).

10 In such cases, violence against women can be considered within a contemporary framework that reflects social changes in Brazil, particularly the introduction of new legal protections. The enactment of the Maria da Penha Law in 2006, for example, marked a major milestone in establishing mechanisms to protect women from domestic violence – a widespread issue in the country – while also imposing stricter penalties on abusers. However, despite these legal advances, the problem persists. According to the Atlas of Violence (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, 2025), the number of femicides in Brazil has remained high since the 1980s, with no significant decline in recent decades. Black women are disproportionately affected, representing 66.5% of the women killed in 2023. That said, interpreting the film's portrayal of violence solely through a contemporary lens risks detaching it from the historical and social context it seeks to represent.

with new forms of pleasure with another man, the young Hellraiser (Cabeleira, played by Jonathan Haagensen), a fisherman in Cidade de Deus[11]. Her husband violently assaults her with a shovel, calling her a *meretriz do cão* ("fucking whore"), and buries her alive, turning the act into a media spectacle. Although he is arrested, his social standing as a "good family man", who regularly informs the police about favela criminals, likely influences the public's condemnation of his wife rather than of him.

Rape is another form of violence used in the favela to assert male power. In *Cidade de Deus* (2002), it functions both to undermine Knockout Ned's masculinity and to enact Li'l Zé's revenge in the nightclub scene discussed earlier. This rape is not shown graphically but is conveyed through sharp, rapid cuts reminiscent of the knife-sharpening montage at the beginning of the film. Li'l Zé's voiceover instructs Ned's girlfriend to enjoy the act; the scene then cuts to Ned's face pressed against the floor, with a male foot holding him down and forcing him to watch. The camera adopts Ned's point of view, heightening the sense of his humiliation and powerlessness. This moment also foreshadows Li'l Zé's fate: during the assault, he wears the amulet given to him by the *pai de santo*, thus breaking the rule that forbade sex while wearing it and ultimately losing the protection that it gave him.

The third example of gender-related violence is the killing of a baby, described in graphic detail in the novel. This incident involves a Black gangster seeking revenge for what he sees as a profound insult to his honour: his wife gives birth to a white baby. Believing this to be proof of infidelity, he becomes enraged, feeling betrayed despite having supported her financially, including buying clothes and paying for visits to the hairdresser. His rage is rendered with visceral imagery, underpinned by explicit depictions of his overwhelming jealousy and resentment. He imagines his wife having sex with white men, his suspicions fuelled by her obsession with white soap opera characters. As the narrative puts it, she "never took her eyes off the television during the soaps, where you never saw blacks. Whenever that Francisco Cuoco guy appeared on TV, she almost came" (Lins, 2006, p. 73)[12]. This portrayal intertwines violent male rhetoric with deep-seated racial and sexual anxiety, which lays bare the magnitude of the man's sense of betrayal.

The gangster seeks revenge for this supposed betrayal by brutally killing the baby. He cuts the child's body into pieces on a table while it cries. The dismembered body is then placed in a shoebox and delivered to his mother-in-law's house in a cold and calculated act of violence that becomes a horrific form of revenge. While committing the murder to reclaim his masculine honour, he is also preoccupied with the risk of imprisonment. For him, going to prison would mean having his body violated – an ultimate affront to a "proper macho" under patriarchy. He believes that as a child murderer he would be especially despised in prison and likely face sexual assault. He would rather die than suffer such humiliation. However, this fear is not just about physical degradation; it reflects deeper gender dynamics at play. The crime he commits serves a dual purpose: it is not only an attempt to restore his masculine identity but also a psychological punishment directed at his wife, designed to inflict the most profound and enduring suffering on her.

However, it becomes over time clear that violence alone cannot sustain masculinity or resolve its crises. As Kemp (2013) argues, being a man involves possessing and retaining things like power and status rather than relinquishing them. In Cidade de Deus, drug trafficking emerges as the ultimate source of power and authority. For many criminals in the favela, it becomes a means

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[11] Yet again, by placing the fisherman in bed, the narrative reproduces the male anxieties of the 1960s and 1970s surrounding women's renewed sexual autonomy – anxieties that emerged in response to the sexual revolution and feminist liberation movements. These themes became a staple in films from various countries, particularly in sexploitation genres such as Brazil's *pornochanchadas*.

[12] That said, the reference to actor Francisco Cuoco – then a long-standing *galã* (soap opera heartthrob), a kind of Brazilian Rudolph Valentino – is significant. It highlights not only the absence of Black male figures in Brazilian television but also how desirability is constructed through whiteness. The attractive male body is coded as white, relegating Black masculinity to a marginal and undesired position. This illustrates that masculinity is not a universal construct but is shaped by race and mediated through dominant cultural representations.

of accessing not only power, but also money, women, and consumer goods. This pursuit of economic power and material wealth is epitomised by Li'l Zé's decision to enter the drug business. While violence initially serves as a substitute for denied masculine privileges in the early stages of the film – such as social status and economic power typically associated with Western, white, middle- or upper-class norms – it later coexists uneasily with consumerist desires that suggest a complex, evolving model of masculinity centred on both domination and material acquisition.

This shift becomes evident in the latter part of the film and novel, when both transition into the 1980s. The evolution from the "myth of marginality" to the "reality of marginality" (Perlman, 2004 *apud* Perlman, 2006) is marked by the increasing violence associated with drug trafficking[13]. This environment escalates into what Paley (2014) describes as drug war capitalism – a long-term response to capitalism's crises that fuses terror with neoliberal policy, penetrating previously inaccessible social and territorial domains. Yet this very war generates more violence and further vilifies the residents of the favela. Criminals in these areas are treated harshly compared to powerful white individuals who are also involved in drug trafficking but avoid punishment[14]. Paley (2014) argues that this type of war supports the continuation of a capitalist model based on security. It produces a public discourse that legitimises state militarisation under the guise of protecting civilians from criminal groups.

Across the decades portrayed in *Cidade de Deus* (2002), there is a marked shift in how masculinity is constructed. This reflects a generational clash with earlier patriarchal norms in which men were viewed as workers and heads of households. By contrast, the younger generation, shaped by advanced capitalism, sees such men as little more than labourers or slaves (hooks, 2004). This evolving model of masculinity highlights broader socio-economic changes and their impact on gender roles and expectations.

Furthermore, as hooks (2004, p. 28-29) argues, "Hedonistic materialist consumerism, with its overemphasis on having money to waste, has been a central cause of the demoralization among working men of all races". This supports the view that masculinity is "theoretically and historically troubled" (Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 105) because it is culturally constructed and, as such, continually contested in modern society. Numerous films have explored the issue of reclaiming masculinity by portraying what it means to be "real men".

In *Cidade de Deus* (2002), this is illustrated through the contrast between hardworking men and gangsters. By the end of the film, it becomes clear that the aspiration of the new generation is to become gangsters, as powerfully demonstrated by the Rants. According to Hagedorn (2004, p. 329), "[G]angs have always been an arena for acting out masculinity, often a source of aggressive masculine behaviour centred on the values of honour and respect, through the means of violence; being a gang member means to be 'macho'". In *Cidade de Deus* (2002), this dynamic is epitomised by the image of "putting guns in the hands of black children" (Amparo-Alves, 2010, p. 303). Thus, as hooks (1990, p. 341) proposes, marginality is not merely a space of deprivation but a "site of radical possibility, a space of resistance". In the face of a crisis of masculinity, reclaiming the position of the "tough macho" appears to offer a solution. By the film's conclusion, this is achieved through drug dealing and reinforced by the spectacle of violence: gun battles, executions, and displays of control that glorify gangster masculinity.

While the film focuses on the performance of masculinity through violence and material gain, its construction of gender is also shaped by strategic omissions. Most notably, the complete absence of the transgender character Ana Flamengo reveals a deeper layer of masculine anxiety, as explored in the following section.

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[13] For an analysis of the development of violence and drug trafficking in Rio's favelas from the 1960s onwards, see Perlman (2006) and Zaluar (2010).

[14] The Brazilian film *Tropa de Elite 2: O inimigo agora é outro* (2010) directly engages with this issue.

Erasing Ana Flamengo: Queer absence and gender anxiety in the film adaptation

In *Cidade de Deus* (2002), the absence of any mention of a character who deeply unsettles the gangster Hellraiser – his younger transgender sister Ana Flamengo, born and raised as Ari – is a telling omission that underscores the adaptation's anxieties around gender nonconformity[15]. Her presence in the novel highlights the distress and panic her very existence provokes in her brother. When Hellraiser's family is introduced, it becomes clear that "[h]aving a faggot for a brother was a huge tragedy in his life" (Lins, 2006, p. 17) – even more so than having a drunkard for a father and a prostitute for a mother. For Hellraiser, even Rio de Janeiro's mountains Panela Rock, Gávea Rock, and the Grajaú Range "were not bigger than the pain of having a brother who was a faggot" (Lins, 2006, p. 39).

Ari/Ana Flamengo is a particularly challenging figure for the time and place in which the story unfolds. Her transformation is something her brother refuses to accept, as do many in their social context. She does not identify with her assigned gender and wears "lipstick, women's clothes, wigs, and high-heeled shoes" (Lins, 2006, p. 17), which draws both attention and gender-based violence. This is vividly illustrated in a scene where Ari is described as wearing "brown boots, a black leather miniskirt, yellow silk blouse, a flaming-red wig, large earrings, and a blue shoulder bag, with an enormous beauty spot drawn on his left cheek" (Lins, 2006, p. 38). As Hellraiser reflects: "Yes, it was Ari, the Marilyn Monroe of São Carlos, his mother's son who wanted to be a woman. He looked like a samba school sprawled across the road" (Lins, 2006, p. 38).

Violence against Ari begins when Hellraiser hears a mob of children shouting "faggot" at someone, with one white boy suggesting, "Shove a brush handle up his arse!" (Lins, 2006, p. 38). On initially hearing this comment, Hellraiser laughs; however, his reaction shifts when he realises that Ari is the target. Overcome with shame, he wants to hide his face "someplace where he wouldn't see anyone" (Lins, 2006, p. 38). These boys act as enforcers of the patriarchal matrix by reproducing hegemonic gender norms. While anal sex in consensual homosexual contexts is an act of intimacy and/or pleasure, the suggestion of anal penetration with a broom handle functions here as punitive violence: a tool of correction and subjugation. It mirrors other forms of gendered abuse and reflects the desire to reassert control over bodies perceived as weak or peripheral.

Kemp (2013) argues that corporeal penetrability has traditionally been associated with women. In patriarchy, where the female is positioned as passive and penetrable, a male who experiences penetration is seen as losing masculine power and occupying a position of submission. Kemp (2013, p. 29) contends that males experience "a fascinating jouissance and an abject terror" when placed in a position of submission. He further argues that "male subjectivity is only intelligible – paradoxically – through a penetrability it cannot subsequently concede but must actively avoid if it is to retain its masculine status" (Kemp, 2013, p. 32). In essence, "To allow oneself to be 'f….d' is to lose control, is to become 'Miss'-ing" (Kemp, 2013, p. 48).

This construct of domination and passivity mirrors Brazilian societal views on gender and sexuality. As Foster (1999) and Parker (2009) argue, male domination – particularly in sexual relations – is central in Brazilian sexual culture. Power and dominance are linked to the active heterosexual male, while passivity is relegated to women and submissive male homosexuals. Connell (1993 *apud* Brickell, 2005, p. 37) notes that "hegemonic masculinity is perpetuated or resisted in part by actual men in interactions with women and other men" which reinforces the idea that "women submit, and men dominate" (Kemp,

[15] A noteworthy detail is that Ari's new name, Ana Flamengo, references not only a district in Rio but also one of the city's most prominent football teams. This is particularly interesting given that many transgender individuals and drag queens in Brazil have historically adopted foreign or glamorous names – for example, the widely known Roberta Close. In contrast, Ana's chosen surname is distinctly *carioca*, rooted in local culture and tied to Flamengo, a team strongly associated with stereotypical notions of masculinity.

2013, p. 29).

Penetration symbolises how most men in Cidade de Deus lose their power: through the violation of their bodies by a bullet. Once the bullet crosses the skin – the boundary between subject and external world – these men usually cease to exist physically. However, unlike sexual submission, death by bullet affirms their manhood and echoes how fallen soldiers are valorised in war while the penetrator, whether the shooter or the sexually active male, reasserts dominance.

In contrast, women are denied this symbolic power. While penetration for men is connected to honour and violent affirmation, women's subjugation is depicted differently. The film avoids showing women being shot, thereby reinforcing the idea that they do not pose a threat to male control. Instead, women's submission is reinforced through sexual penetration. Male violence thus reasserts dominance and underscores the gender hierarchy.

These representations of male invulnerability and female submission conceal an underlying tension: the threat posed by male penetrability itself, which aligns with what Sedgwick (1985) terms "homosexual panic" – the moment when the line between being a "man's man" and being attracted to men becomes dangerously blurred. She argues that this panic, which emerges from evolving definitions of sexuality, is a form of psychologised homophobia that affects "nonhomosexual-identified men" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 185). It represents "the most private, psychologized form in which […] Western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail" (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 88-89).

In the novel's narrative, Ari/Ana Flamengo becomes an abject figure that haunts Hellraiser's public masculinity. She repeatedly returns to the favela despite his order never to do so. Her offer to clean his home is rejected with vehement slurs: "I don't want no homos at my place [...] you're such a faggot, perv, queen, slut, homo nancy…" (Lins, 2006, p. 39). Her presence disrupts the image of masculine control to which he clings. Hellraiser had even earlier tried to "fix" Ari by pushing him into stereotypically masculine activities: "He'd tried to get his younger brother to play footy [...] That was when Hellraiser began to suspect his brother might be a homo" (Lins, 2006, p. 39).

Ari/Ana Flamengo occupies the lowest position in the social hierarchy because of her gender identity. She faces abuse from various segments of society. Although she normally submits to her brother's violence, when she finally resists, "[s]he got lead in [her] foot" (Lins, 2006, p. 38). She even blames herself for Hellraiser's descent into criminality, as he left home shortly after she began cross-dressing. He comes to view her as "a cancer that ate at his stomach" (Lins, 2006, p. 164). Even as he lies dying, he refuses to cry, insisting that men who cry are "queers, like Ari" (Lins, 2006, p. 165). Only after his death can Ana Flamengo live in Cidade de Deus "like any other resident" (Lins, 2006, p. 247).

Although marginalised by intersecting factors such as race, social class, and systemic exclusion, masculinities in the favela nonetheless generate their own internal gender hierarchies. These "peripheral masculinities" (Alsop; Fitzsimons; Lennon, 2002) create normative systems in which non-conforming identities are policed and punished. The dynamic between Hellraiser and his transgender sister Ana Flamengo shows how her presence provokes "homosexual panic" and threatens his fragile masculinity. By omitting Ari/Ana Flamengo, *Cidade de Deus* (2002) sanitises its portrayal of gender and masculinity and reduces the complexity and instability her presence might have exposed. In doing so, the film perpetuates a narrow portrayal of masculinity and sustains a rigid world in which gender remains binary and hegemonic masculinity remains unchallenged.

In summary, the removal of Ari/Ana Flamengo from the film reinforces the same fears and exclusions depicted in the novel. Just as Hellraiser's rejection of his sibling reinforces his own masculine identity, the adaptation's omission of Ari/Ana Flamengo upholds the ideal of the tough, hegemonic gangster. This act of exclusion not only simplifies the narrative but also perpetuates a restrictive and reductive representation of

masculinity that excludes the broader spectrum of gender identities and their complex intersections within marginalised communities.

Conclusion

Cidade de Deus (2002) is widely regarded as a landmark in Brazilian cinema, celebrated for its visceral depiction of favela life and urban violence. However, as this article has argued, the film continues to warrant critical re-examination in ways that go beyond its widely acknowledged contributions to both Brazilian and global cinema, including its aesthetic innovations and social commentary. By engaging with its construction of gendered identities – focusing on how masculinity is performed through domination, violence, and exclusion – this study explored dimensions that have often been overlooked, especially in the transition from novel to screen.

Building on this adaptation-centred approach, a close analysis of the film's narrative and visual strategies reveals a recurring pattern: male characters assert and reinforce their masculinity through violence, the domination and abuse of women, and the rejection of identities that threaten heteronormative norms. Central to this is the film's complete absence of a key character in the novel – namely Ana Flamengo, a transgender character whose presence in the source novel introduces a profound disruption to the hypermasculine logic of the favela, particularly for her gangster brother. Her omission appears to be less incidental than symptomatic of broader patterns of trans and queer erasure in cinematic representation. By removing a figure whose very existence destabilises patriarchal authority, the film works to stabilise a fragile masculinity that is threatened by otherness.

More than two decades after its release, *Cidade de Deus* (2002) remains strikingly relevant in its exploration of masculinity, violence, and social inequality. It addresses intersections of toxic masculinity, gender-based violence, and media representation – issues that continue to demand attention in global cultural and academic discourse. By exploring the film through the lens of gender and sexuality, this article contributes to a broader re-evaluation of canonical cinematic texts and highlights the need to interrogate not only what is made visible on screen but also what is systematically left out.

In conclusion, *Cidade de Deus* (2002) can and should be read not only as a crime drama or a socio-political commentary on urban marginalisation but also as a text deeply invested in constructing and policing masculinity. Within its male-dominated narrative world, structured around performances of toughness and dominance, the film simultaneously reveals both the endurance and the fragility of hegemonic masculinity. By omitting characters like Ana Flamengo, it also mirrors a broader cultural impulse to suppress identities that destabilise the very gender norms it seeks to uphold. Recognising both the suppression of trans/non-normative identities and the enforcement of hegemonic masculinity allows for a more comprehensive and critically engaged reading of the film and its broader ideological implications, which open new avenues for revisiting this important cinematic and literary text.

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Os textos deste artigo foram revisados pela Texto Certo Assessoria Linguística e submetidos para validação dos autores antes da publicação.