

## Melodrama, Camp, and Sexuality in Nelson Rodrigues's *O Beijo no Asfalto*

Israel Pechstein

It has already been observed that Nelson Rodrigues employed melodramatic techniques in his works, including his 1960 play *O Beijo no Asfalto* (henceforth *Beijo*), but critical appraisals of melodrama have been limited to the subject as a theme, as a minor observation, or in relation to questions of genre (typically regarding psychological aspects or naturalism).<sup>1</sup> Further studies remain to be carried out on the specific ways that Nelson used melodrama to engage with dominant notions of gender, sexuality, and family in order to expand our understanding of the author's works. The camp sensibility, born from the experience of those marginalized because of their gender and sexualities, subverts mainstream tastes and offers a unique approach to *Beijo*'s portrayal of sexuality. Generally, melodrama is a mode containing exaggerated characteristics and a gripping plot that appeal to the emotions of the audience.<sup>2</sup> Looking back, melodrama's history is long and its place in Latin American cultural production has been studied extensively, whereas camp is a more recent area of interest. Reading *Beijo* through camp and melodrama highlights the nuances of sexuality in the play's text. Specifically, the reading resists the tendency toward normalization by producing a more ambiguous interpretation of homosexuality in one of the play's antagonists Aprígio and in the protagonist, his son-in-law, Arandir. Contrary to a limiting portrayal of the subject, this analysis works toward a more constructive reading of *Beijo* insofar as the ambiguity opens the two characters to new interpretations, and more specifically, as representing facets of the experience of being gay.<sup>3</sup>

Melissa Lockhart, in her essay on *Beijo*, notes the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality, stating: "while Rodrigues makes a point about the dangers of homophobia, he also reveals his *own* adhesion to the norm by tying the 'humanity' and 'purity' of the kiss to Arandir's perceived heterosexuality"

(156). Lockhart's position casts *Beijo*'s representation of homosexuality in a generally negative light, including her opinion as to Rodrigues's adhesion to norms. David William Foster's reading of *Beijo*, in his analysis of queer bodies in Latin American Theater, uses Arandir's body as an example of one that is made queer through the homophobia that constructs it as such: "lo que Rodrigues termina subrayando en *O beijo no asfalto* es la terrible teatralidad que subyace a la homofobia en su certera eficacia de poner en evidencia, sobre los escenarios de la vida real, los cuerpos que ostenta como queer" (26). While not as negative as Lockhart, Foster's position rests on a view of homophobia as constituting Arandir's potentially queer body. A camp perspective complicates the potential one-sidedness of society's homophobia, accounting for the nuanced perspective of a gay or queer reader of the play absent from Lockhart and Foster's essays.

*Beijo* tells the story of the dissolution of Arandir's life following the kiss he shares with a dying man; a kiss that Arandir claims was the stranger's dying wish. The premise itself already presents melodramatic elements such as the focus on emotion and tragedy. Arandir's fate is sealed when a reporter and corrupt police chief conspire to label Arandir as gay. The debate surrounding Arandir's sexuality constitutes a major component of the melodrama and causes the subsequent dissolution of his work life, personal life, and marriage. Selminha's father Aprígio, perhaps the most unlikeable character, condemns Arandir throughout the play only to reveal (at the play's conclusion) his desire for his son-in-law in the moment that he shoots and kills him. Examples such as this have contributed to a view of the play as a negative portrayal of homosexuality. A camp reading, however, tends to find the cracks in totalizing negativity or positivity. For example, classic female leads of melodramatic films are often seen by camp as almost too feminine not to be men (dressed as women). Likewise, in *Beijo*, Arandir is, in a camp reading, too conflicted about the kiss with another man not to be gay himself and Aprígio is too severe with Arandir not to be gay as well. A camp interpretation doesn't declare those great female leads are in fact men nor does it propose that Arandir or Aprígio are necessarily gay; rather, camp privileges suggestion, ambiguity, and inverted readings when melodrama presents us with totalizing extremes.

### **Melodrama and Camp**

Melodrama has long been associated with the lower classes since it was employed to inculcate aristocratic values in European society at large. Peter

Brooks's 1995 *The Melodramatic Imagination* paved the way for critical consideration of melodrama, which was previously considered unworthy of serious treatment. In Latin American Studies, Darlene Sadlier's 2009 *Latin American Imagination* addresses melodrama, and specific to Brazil, she writes, "the term melodrama has somewhat broader implications in countries [...] where it refers not only to family dramas, but also to historical epics in which family life is viewed in relation to larger national issues" (3). Sadlier later asserts that "the melodrama came under heavy attack in the late 1950's [criticized] as sentimental, Hollywood-style entertainment that ignores many of the sociopolitical and economic realities of Latin America" (11). Despite this negative response, during the period in which Nelson was writing his plays, many melodramas were still produced. To return to Brooks, he explains the attraction and the power of the melodrama:

even when [melodrama] starts from the everyday [it] refuses to content itself with the repressions, the tonings-down, the half-articulations, the accommodations, and the disappointments of the real. Melodrama's relation to realism is always oblique [...]. It insists that the ordinary may be the place for the instauration of significance. It tells us that in the right mirror, with the right degree of convexity, our lives matter. (ix)

While melodrama is a popular mode whose codes are understood by a wide range of individuals, camp is a sensibility that is present only to those attuned to it. Most typically, the construction of camp readings is linked to queer individuals. This is because they are more likely to be aware of their own marginality and have lived or live a closeted and a public life—increasing their awareness of everyday performance.<sup>4</sup> Camp acknowledges the element of performance that emphasizes that what appears to be is not always what *is*. Camp inverts the stereotypes of melodrama, valorizing the mode's 'cheap' elements for their over-the-top esthetics: plot twists, forbidden love, emotions, rigid adherence to roles (gender, class, etc.).<sup>5</sup> Jack Babuscio, responding to Susan Sontag's 1964 "Notes on Camp," describes the four elements that make up camp: first, irony and its incongruity between a thing and its context (119); second, estheticism that focuses on artistry, performativity, and excess (120); third, theatricality that highlights superficiality (123); and lastly, dark humor, which exists to make camp comically ironic and to weaken its bitterness (126). Camp is a sensibility in which "good taste," morality, and traditional plot are often inverted and what prevails are subversive readings of what appears to be the norm. This inversion is related to the manner in which the sensibility

resists normalizing tendencies in cultural production. As such, when *Beijo*'s melodramatic elements keep the attention on superficial appearances, camp intervenes not necessarily to look beyond those appearances, but to interrogate their meaning and intrinsic claim to truth.

### Aprígio's Secret

By nature, locating camp is a necessarily incomplete task and perceiving it relies on a sensibility attuned to counter-readings. Aprígio is the protagonist Arandir's father-in-law and he is one of the few witnesses to the famous asphalt kiss between Arandir and a stranger who was hit by a bus. Aprígio's behavior following his son-in-law's engagement in the seemingly gay act raises suspicion regarding Aprígio's character. On the one hand, he is overly determined by his role as father to his daughter Selminha. On the other, his interest in Arandir's kiss with the stranger borders on obsessive: he fixates on the act even before the reporter Amado and police chief Cunha interrogate Arandir and publicize the kiss. Rather than supporting his son-in-law apprehended by the authorities, Aprígio denounces Arandir to his wife, Selminha. A good part of the family melodrama in the play hinges on Aprígio's allegations and his attempt to convince his daughters Selminha and Dália of the "truth" about Arandir and in so doing isolate his son-in-law from them. However, Aprígio's actions are interpreted by his daughters (and eventually Arandir) as incestuous jealous interest in Selminha. Here, incest functions as a red herring to hide Aprígio's true objective that stems from his repressed amorous feelings toward Arandir. A reader attentive to a camp sensibility is better positioned to read between the heavily drawn lines of moral superiority and fatherhood to perceive early-on what are later revealed to be Aprígio's true motives.

From his first scene, Aprígio's actions can be decoded in two principle ways: 1) worry in regard to his daughter that follows the pre-established codes of the classic melodrama where he would be the father as protector; 2) possible incestuous interest in his daughter. This initial tension appears in the following dialogue between father and daughter:

APRÍGIO: De casada, tem um ano, nem isso. Menos. Pois é. Minha filha, é pouco. Isso não é nada. Para um casal, minha filha. Pouquíssimo, um ano ou menos. Mas vamos lá. Você tem mesmo certeza que conhece seu marido?

SELMINHA: Mas absoluta! Eu conheço tanto o Arandir, tanto que. Nem ele me esconde nada. Papai, olha. Confio mais em Arandir que em mim mesma. No duro! E o senhor fala. Engraçado! Fala como se duvidasse, como se. (20)

Selminha questions the motive for her father's preoccupation in relation to her marriage. The last lines hint at suspicions about what Aprígio said, but the meaning of her doubt changes depending on the reading. Written in terms of melodrama, a first reading transmits the idea that Selminha believes her father doubts Arandir's fidelity even if she herself believes her husband. However, the message is different if we focus on the manner in which Aprígio makes Arandir the center of his preoccupations even without using his son-in-law's name ("teu marido," "meu genro")—a fact that becomes important at the end of the play. A reader attuned to camp will take note of the incongruity between the concerned father's supposed care for his daughter and his simultaneous fixation on her husband. They may also perceive that the realer-than-real melodrama is almost always hiding another, more deeply embedded truth.

In a following, more direct confrontation, the father-daughter argument centers around whether or not Arandir knew the stranger whom he kissed. Selminha declares, "o senhor tem ciúmes de mim" (45). This statement exploits the ambiguity of "ciúmes," which could mean that the father is simply overprotective, that he desires his daughter sexually, or even that he is jealous of Arandir or Selminha. A camp-sensitive reader appreciative of irony will notice that Aprígio's response to his daughter is yet another clue to his true feelings: "eu sou pai. Pai. Preciso saber se eram amigos e que espécie de amizade!" (45). He refers to his son-in-law's possible ongoing relationship with the man he kissed. Aprígio actively contributes to the ambiguity surrounding his motives when he answers his daughter's challenge that he has never loved: "(*com o olhar perdido*)—Querida, neste momento, eu (*esboça uma carícia na cabeça da filha*) eu amo alguém" (46). The scene raises the suspicion of the father's incestuous interest in his daughter, but, read through the lens of camp—attentive to irony, dark humor, and performativity—Aprígio's amorous interest in Arandir is apparent. In this scene, we witness how Nelson manipulates the genre of the melodrama with its relatively fixed rules and devices to produce ambiguities that complicate the expectations of the reader. This is not to say that Nelson Rodrigues actively employed camp, but that his insistence on ambiguity without losing the emotional imperative of melodrama opens the door for the type of reading that examines would-be

surfaces to find the multiple and contradictory meanings of a text. Paradox is not the end of a camp reading, but a powerful tool for analysis of the contours of an issue. In my exploration of the ersatz surfaces of Nelson's text, I explore deeper (through irony here, for example) to read smooth surface appearances as, in fact, textured under different modes of reading.

Dália, Aprígio's younger daughter, also accuses him of desiring Selminha. However, the way she broaches the subject differs from her sister. Dália confronts her father directly by claiming that she has discovered his secret. This surprises Aprígio because he believes that she has found out his true desire. Aprígio panics, raising his voice and seizing Dália by the wrist. When he discovers that his youngest believes the same theory as her sister (that he is interested in Selminha), the stage directions state the following: "o velho tem uma reação que, de momento, o espectador não vai compreender. Essa reação é de uma euforia brusca. Total, sem nenhuma motivação aparente" (67). Given that his supposed secret has been discovered, Aprígio's euphoria doesn't make sense to Dália or the reader and the confusion is even emphasized in the text. This incongruity scripted into the stage directions by Nelson forces the reader to question Aprígio's true secret. Yet again, a camp reading adds further nuance to Aprígio's characterization as it highlights his mastery of another technique that gives rise to a camp reading: the inversion. Aprígio states his fear of losing his daughter to another man, adding: "em certo sentido, Selminha cometeu um adultério contra mim!" (68). Aprígio hides his true feelings by inverting the situation to portray Selminha as the one betraying him by marrying Arandir. However, in his attempt to blame his daughter (that ironically refers us back to possible incestuous feelings), Aprígio is actually underscoring his interest in Arandir. Depending on the sensibility of the reader, the inversion either emphasizes Selminha's so-called betrayal, or the fact that she committed adultery with the true object of her father's desire: Arandir.

Beyond his family, we also witness a confrontation between Aprígio and the unscrupulous reporter, Amado, when the father goes looking for his daughter (68-72). From the beginning of the confrontation between the two men it is clear that Aprígio is less interested in the whereabouts of his daughter than he is in the now infamous kiss. The reporter himself believes that Aprígio came to bribe him to stop publishing more on the story of the kiss: "veio me cantar. Um momento. Claro. Veio me cantar. E eu não quero" (69). In the words of the reporter we can perceive an ambiguity that indicates yet another clue to the eventual revelation about Aprígio. First, in the repetition

of the verb “cantar”—employed by Amado in the sense of bribery. However, on another level of interpretation, informed by the camp sensibility, “cantar” could mean ‘to hit on’ sexually. Despite Amado’s clear attempts to unsettle Aprígio by discussing Selminha’s body and his own desire to possess it, Aprígio only becomes enraged at the end of the scene, in the following dialogue:

AMADO: Escuta, Aprígio. O Arandir não é homem pra. Não é homem pra tua filha. Ela é magra e tão sem. Sem barriga. Um certo histerismo na mulher. E d. Selminha. (*enfático*) Esse cara não aguenta o repuxo com tua filha.

APRÍGIO: (*desesperado de ódio*) Bêbado imundo! (71)

At first glance, this scene can be read as a defense of his daughter’s honor. However, a reading open to potentially contradictory meanings would notice that Aprígio is less concerned about his daughter than he is about the offense to his love interest, Arandir. Amado’s carefully chosen words are less insulting to Selminha than they are to Arandir and it is the reporter’s denouncement of Arandir, not his mention of sexual interest in Selminha, that sets off Aprígio’s rage and abrupt exit from the scene.

Aprígio next appears in the final, climactic scene of the play. Dália is just leaving Arandir’s hotel room having confessed her love for him when her father enters. The confrontation begins with Aprígio’s denouncement of what he perceives as Arandir’s seduction of Dália and continues by alleging the criminal nature of the kiss he witnessed. Arandir defends himself by stating that his father-in-law never wanted him to be with Selminha and denounces Aprígio’s incestuous feelings toward his own daughter. Throughout the argument, Aprígio comes back to the phrase, “eu perdoaria tudo. (*mais violento*) Só não perdoo o beijo no asfalto. Só não perdoo o beijo que você deu na boca de um homem!” (81). The crescendo of the argument is typical in melodrama and, at this moment in the play, signals that we are close to a great revelation. As such, the reader is asked now more than ever to decipher the meaning of Aprígio’s actions and, in this respect, there are two possibilities: 1) Aprígio is really against the kiss that caused his family shame and offense; or, 2) Aprígio is actually jealous of the man who was kissed by his son-in-law. The argument culminates with Arandir declaring that his father-in-law is sexually interested in his own daughter. However, Aprígio declares:

APRÍGIO: (*estrangulando a voz*). Não de minha filha. Ciúmes de você [...] Quero que você morra sabendo. O meu ódio é amor. Por que beijaste um homem na

boca? Mas eu direi o teu nome. Direi teu nome a teu cadáver. (82)

Aprígio shoots Arandir, who falls to his knees, brandishing an open newspaper as an ineffective shield that inevitably harks back to the condemning stories about him. When the second bullet strikes him, “Arandir rasga a folha. E tomba, enrolando-se no jornal. Assim morre” (82). These stage directions end Arandir’s life, but the last uttered words of the play are when Aprígio speaks his son-in-law’s name for the first time over his dead body, repeating it twice. The culmination of the melodrama’s tension is a plot twist that takes advantage of the previously established insinuation of Aprígio’s incestuous feelings toward his daughter, revealing that, in truth, he was always interested in his son-in-law, Arandir.

The melodramatic end to the play (with the gun shot, newspaper shield, and the death) leaves the reader with no time to contemplate Aprígio’s motives. The end has been interpreted primarily as a negative portrayal of homosexuality as, ultimately, the only “out” gay man ends the life of his love interest at the climax of the play. *Beijo*’s end would be shocking for anyone who didn’t already suspect Aprígio’s true motives. An interpretation attentive to camp can free Aprígio from his role as a merely melodramatic character whose homophobia hides his homosexual interest, which, once revealed, is quickly associated with murder. Nelson’s employment of melodrama techniques at the same time that he manipulates the mode’s association with bourgeois morals helps the in-the-know reader to decipher Aprígio’s behavior as indicating his repressed homosexuality. Aprígio’s excessive interest in his son-in-law is incongruous with the expectations of a father who is shamed by his daughter’s choice in husband. Camp emphasizes the tenuous relation between appearances and reality, highlighting theatricality and irony. Aprígio’s ironic positioning is solidified by his self-assumed role as the moral bastion, patriarch of his family and the reality of his repressed homosexuality, colored by the play as immoral according to traditional standards of the time. Aprígio’s theatricality presents itself in his performance of the role of father and in how he masks his true motives under the guise of non-existent incestuous feelings for Selminha, all in order to hide the “worse” sin: his homosexuality. The ending scene that reveals his repression can be interpreted more positively as a representation of the often real struggle of a person consumed by rage for the very thing they cannot admit to be part of themselves. In this way, a constructive reading can be made of what has previously been seen as Nelson’s condemnation of homosexuality.



### Arandir's Ambiguity

While one of the only revelatory moments of the play is Aprígio's coming out, the greater portion of *Beijo*'s intrigue centers around the protagonist Arandir's kiss with a man who was hit by a bus and the subsequent police investigation and series of newspaper articles written about the kiss. Arandir's trajectory, seen through the lens of camp, will contribute to a constructive understanding of homosexuality in *Beijo*; this, despite the fact that the protagonist's life ends metaphorically and literally with the news of the kiss. Arandir shows a different side of Nelson's dramas because his character's plight commands the empathy of the audience. Among a cast of mostly immoral and suspicious characters in Nelson's work, Arandir stands out as naïve, goodhearted, and completely victimized by the antagonists of the play. Beyond that, we witness the dissolution of his marriage with the equally naïve Selminha.

One of *Beijo*'s principle melodramatic techniques is to hide the kiss that generates the play's central conflict and only allow access to the moment through impressions of it. Arandir himself—the one who performed the kiss—first appears in the third scene. Prior to this, we hear the reporter Amado and Arandir's father-in-law, Aprígio each give their own account of the incident. Both Amado and Aprígio emphasize the criminality of the kiss rather than the tragedy of the man's death. When Arandir is confronted by the reporter and the police chief, he seems pathetic affirming his innocence in relation to the potential homicide. In truth, and as the reader already knows, the antagonists only want more details about Arandir's alleged relation with the dead man. Arandir simply cannot comprehend Amado and Cunha's line of questioning:

- AMADO: Praticamente em lua de mel [...] Você larga a sua mulher. E vem beijar outro homem na boca, rapaz!
- ARANDIR: *(atônito)* O senhor está pensando que...
- AMADO: [...] E você dá um show! Uma cidade inteira viu! [...] *(furioso)* [...] Se o loteação passasse por cima de um de nós. *(Amado começa a rir com ferocidade)* [...] Você beijaria um de nós, rapaz? *(riso abjeto. Arandir tem um repêlo selvagem)*
- ARANDIR: Era alguém! Alguém! Que morreu! Que eu vi morrer!  
(26).

Though Arandir finally understands the allegations against him are about the kiss, not the man's death, he doesn't yet comprehend the repercussions. Arandir is not just innocent, he is (melodramatically) *the most* naïve character

and it is his naivety coupled with the accusations against him that elicit a perception of him as fundamentally good and a victim. Camp allows us to question Arandir's excessive innocence, interrogating the incongruity of his portrayal compared to his later rejection of gay thoughts. In fact, the incongruity is even more entertaining than the relatively flat role melodrama would ascribe to him.

Entertainment is also a factor in Amado's choice to write a story about the kiss. Nelson Rodrigues's employment of the news of the kiss is used to place the innocent Arandir in a position where he comes to be perceived as guilty and perverse. Amado conveys Nelson's critique of sensational journalism by the reporter's choice to polemicize the kiss to sell more copies of his paper.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, a camp reading allows the consumption of stereotyped or even negative representations in a conscious and often inverted form. In this way, we can interpret Amado's divulging and representation of homosexuality in his news story as participating in the 'making visible' of homosexuality. *Beijo's* reader is confronted with the existence of a sexual other, even if it is an existence colored by association with violence, perversity, and death. Critics have noted the fraught representation of homosexuality in the play. Severino Albuquerque remarks that heterosexual members of the audience are able to think of themselves as "upholders of normality," but that gay and lesbian theatre-goers can "challenge the authenticity of the practices and markers put forth" (80). Despite the play's age, the issue of consuming cultural products against society's self-assumed values continues to the present day, highlighting the need for resistive readings of *Beijo*.

Following Albuquerque's line of thought, I believe a camp interpretation preserves a counter-reading of the negative stereotypes of homosexuality. It is useful here to consider Michel Foucault's discussion of the repressive hypothesis in *The History of Sexuality*, where he asserts that by naming a behavior contrary to society's values, the powers also generate the possibility of resistance (15-35).<sup>7</sup> Visibility contributes to the construction of sexual identities, including "being gay." This, of course, is not the case for the isolated Arandir, but the fact that he is made visible in the most painful of ways is a representation with which certain readers may be able to relate—even if the portrayal is unfavorable. Though the dominantly negative discourse prevails, we can point to the making visible (and even viable) of homosexuality as a silver lining for a reader accustomed to invisibility. The power of representability and a camp reading can free the possible meanings of the condemning,

sensational news of the kiss, opening it for an alternative, positive reading as a moment of visibility for some, or a constructive encounter with a sexual other.

It is true that Amado's story stereotypes Arandir as a perverse gay man; however, importantly, Arandir himself never actually comes out and, in fact, even rejects the idea that he is gay. Throughout the play Arandir will reaffirm that it was the dead man who asked for the kiss and he only conceded out of pity. Though Arandir attempts to change the discourse around the kiss, the existing narrative has already foreclosed alternative explanations.

ARANDIR: Quando eu me abaixei. O rapaz me pediu um beijo. Um beijo. Quase sem voz. E passou a mão por trás da minha cabeça, assim. E puxou. E, na agonia, ele me beijou. [...]

SELMINHA: (*chorando*) Não foi assim que você me contou. Discuti com meu pai. Jurei que você não me escondia nada!

ARANDIR: Era alguém! Escuta! Alguém que estava morrendo. Selminha. Querida, olha! (52)

Despite the fact that Arandir describes the dying man as the agent of the kiss, the newspaper and her own father have already colored Selminha's vision of her husband. The dominant discourses control absolutely the construction of meaning for the characters who are locked in a melodramatic plot bound for disaster. It is only at the level of the reader that we can perceive the validity of a counter-discourse. Readers will likely note the critique of sensational journalism and recognize Arandir's victimhood at the hands of a corrupt justice system and biased reporting. A camp reading goes further, interpreting Arandir's purported homosexuality as positive insofar as it is a representation of an alternative sexuality and makes visible a theme typically denied to the public discourse of the time.

The motives for which Arandir kissed the man become less important in face of the undisputed fact that they did indeed kiss. Selminha's sister Dália, infatuated with her brother-in-law, meets him at his hotel room:

DÁLIA: (*macia, insidiosa, com uma leve, muito leve malignidade*) Diz pra mim. Eu não te julgo. Não te condeno. Responde: Você o amava?

ARANDIR: (*atônito*) O que? [...]

ARANDIR: (*recuando*) Amante?

DÁLIA: Querido! Pode dizer a mim. A mim, pode dizer. Confessar. Escuta, escuta! Meu bem, eu não sou

como Selminha. Selminha não compreende, nem aceita. Eu aceito. Tudo! Fala. Eu não mudo. Serei a mesma! Fala! (*Dália quer abraçar-se ao cunhado. Arandir desprende-se com violência*) (79).

Each character has their own way of interpreting the kiss and Dália's question reveals hers: was it love? While Selminha rejected Arandir, Dália affirms that she would accept him even if he were gay. This affirmation raises its own problem because it means that the only character that comes close to accepting Arandir's supposed homosexual act would be an accomplice in masking this sexuality in their new, heterosexual relationship (not to mention the transgression of being left by one sister and beginning a relationship with the other). Once again, homosexuality here would be associated with a tendency to break all types of social rules. A reader *in* on camp has the increased capacity to navigate these contradictory interpretations because they understand that appearances do not necessarily correspond to reality: what the characters say is as important as that which is masked. Dália's accepting attitude doesn't bring Arandir to come out as gay, but leads him to demand she leave.

Consciously or not, Dália forces Arandir to face the fact of having kissed the man, a thought that has caused great consternation on his part. On the one hand, Arandir claims: "beije porque! Alguém morria!" (77), continuing, "se entrasse aqui, agora, um homem. Um homem. E. (*numa espécie de uivo*) Não!" (77). Evidently, Arandir has internalized Amado and Cunha's previous suggestion that he would kiss any man who he encountered. In fact, following this, the stage directions show the protagonist's strong reaction to gay thoughts "*Arandir passa as costas da mão na própria boca, com um nojo feroz*" (77). The camp tendency to seek out inversion calls attention to the strength of the character's rejection and the evidence that he has indeed agonized over potential homosexual desire—even if only to deny that possibility. Despite his rejection of homosexual desire, we find Arandir closest to gay thoughts when he discusses with Dália his feelings toward her in contrast to his feelings when he kissed the dying man on the asphalt:

ARANDIR: (*numa alucinação*) [...] Diz a Selminha. (*violento*) Diz que, em toda minha vida, a única coisa que se salva é o beijo no asfalto [...] Pela primeira vez, na vida! Por um momento, eu me senti bom! (*furioso*) Eu me senti quase, nem sei! [...] Quando eu te vi no banheiro, eu não fui bom, entende? Desejei você. Naquele momento, você devia ser a irmã nua. E eu

desejei. Sai logo, mas desejei a cunhada. Na Praça da Bandeira, não. Lá, eu fui bom [...] Lindo beijar quem está morrendo! (*grita*) Eu não me arrependo! (77-8)

A reader in-the-know will notice that the protagonist inverts pure and perverse sexual behaviors. Typically, desire for Dália would conform to socially-accepted heterosexuality whereas the *beijo no asfalto* would be associated with perverse homosexuality. However, in Arandir's mind, his desire for Dália was impure while his kiss with the man on the asphalt constituted the greatest purity.

The construction of Arandir's discourse on his possible homosexuality in *Beijo* should be considered in relation to sexuality's specific conditions in Brazil where two central notions have dominated the topic: private/public and gender/sexuality.<sup>8</sup> Both oppositions are inverted in Arandir's case: the would-be perverse act of the kiss occurs in public, on the street and because it is between men, the kiss brings notions of femininity and masculinity to the foreground (see: Parker 34-75).<sup>9</sup> The result of the inversions of typical understandings of sexuality in Brazil is that Arandir is put into a position in which his life is questioned by his spouse, family, co-workers, and society and whereby he is forced to question his own identity. Confronted with this reality, Arandir begins to lose the innocence of a life of privilege and suffers the type of assaults typical of a publically outed gay man. The reader witnesses the invasion of Arandir's privacy by the press and law enforcement and the gradual dissolution of his family.<sup>10</sup> At his job, Arandir's co-worker Werneck ridicules him, calling him, "viúvo de atropelado! Ou viúva!" (38). Not only does his colleague ridicule Arandir's supposed homosexuality, he refers to Arandir in the feminine. The inversion of the sacrosanct oppositions of private/public and gender/sexuality contribute to Arandir's helpless situation, but also open up the possibilities of recognition of the constructed nature of these divisions. Nelson's melodrama calls into question the validity of Arandir's vilification in the news and the presence of inversion will be noted by readers attuned to camp—a sensibility that often manipulates such notions of the sacred and the profane.

The subject of Arandir's masculinity comes to light again during Selminha's defense of her husband to the reporter and police chief. Even though the antagonists force the widow of the dead man to fabricate a romantic past between her husband and Arandir, Selminha still supports Arandir. Responding to the threat that the allegations of homosexuality pose to her

husband's masculinity, she yells, “(*feroz*) [...] É homem! Eu estou grávida!” (62). Selminha's assertion of her pregnancy recalls the sex that must have occurred between them to produce the state as well as Arandir's fertility that is linked to his masculinity. However, Selminha's following affirmation immediately undoes the strength of her defiant claim: “ele me pediu pra tirar. Tirar o filho. Meu marido acha que a gravidez estraga a lua de mel! [...] Foi na Caixa Econômica apanhar o dinheiro do aborto” (62-3). Arandir's suggestion and desire to pay for an abortion contradicts Selminha's logic that he is a straight man because of her pregnancy as it figuratively undoes the sex. Later, Selminha again props up sex with Arandir as a defense of her husband's masculine heterosexuality:

SELMINHA: (*desesperada com a ironia ou incompreensão*) Ou o senhor não entende quê? Eu conheço muitas que é uma vez por semana, duas e, até, 15 em 15 dias. Mas meu marido todo o dia! Todo o dia! Todo dia! (*num berro selvagem*) Meu marido é homem! Homem! (*Selminha está numa histeria medonha. Solução. Cunha a segura pelos dois braços e a domina, solidamente*)

CUNHA: (*com um riso sórdido*) Você nunca ouviu falar em gilete? Em barca da Cantareira? (63)

The scene shows a different side to Selminha who up until this point is portrayed as an understanding wife and kind sister. Her discourse in the above passage can be understood in terms of a melodramatic episode that highlights excessive emotion and interpreted via the theatricality of camp: Selminha obscures the line between seriousness and irony. The character, consciously or not, makes contradictory, ironic assertions of her own pregnancy as proof of her husband's virility, at the same time declaring that he desired that she have an abortion. Dark humor pervades the episode, which closes with Cunha's derisive answer to Selminha's linking of Arandir's masculine heterosexuality to sex and pregnancy with her: the suggestion that Selminha's husband could very well be bisexual,<sup>11</sup> negating totally the validity of her argument.

The allegations against Arandir for the kiss he gives to a dying man expand to include what Amado and Cunha see as his abnormal gender. At the level of gender and sexuality, Arandir's unintentional transgressions result in his discipline via public and private persecution. His wife leaves him, his enamored sister-in-law abandons him. Arandir is fired from his job after being confronted by his co-workers and boss. This series of unfortunate events

exemplifies the power Foucault describes as acting through dispersed channels and dominating the production of knowledge. Nelson's play gives three dislikable faces to the typically anonymous discursive powers: Amado, Cunha, and Aprígio; together and separately these men take hold of and construct an inescapable narrative in which Arandir has no choice but to live out the plot that ends with his demise.

As readers, we are conditioned to understand this inevitability in the melodramatic mode, and it is precisely at the level of inevitability that we can intervene with camp sensibility. Through a camp reading, the content of the inevitable becomes less important than its esthetics, irony, theatricality, and humor. These elements allow us to be entertained by and engage with the inevitable. Reading *Beijo*, if we already know what is coming then the construction of meaning occurs in different places, such as at the level of ambiguous and paradoxical characterization. For example, we can be on Arandir's side and also recognize the violence he represents against homosexuality when he thinks of the kiss as nauseating. A camp reading emphasizes the incongruity between his nausea and his description of the kiss as the greatest purity, not to mention his lack of regret for engaging in the kiss. Those attuned to camp are accustomed to the ambiguities and inversions of the real world with its irony and falsity of appearances. For camp, the entertainment of the melodrama lies in its emotional superfluity.

### Conclusion

Nelson Rodrigues takes advantage of melodramatic techniques to critically invert the aristocratic values that the mode once instilled. *Beijo* questions how sensational journalism produces meaning, silencing Arandir's opposition, and how it influences society's values and morality. More specifically, Nelson incorporates the theme of sexuality in what could be seen as an attempt to *épater le bourgeois*. He does so by positioning his most sympathetic character as the target of the newspaper's rampage against what it understands, according to the morality of the time, to be a homosexual act. Critic Melissa Lockhart (using Adrienne Rich) is not wrong in noting the negative characteristics associated with homosexuality and the preservation of compulsory heterosexuality. I agree with Lockhart when she states that *Beijo* "would have truly been a remarkable play had it presented the notion that homosexuality is not incompatible with such 'positive' attributes" (156). However, there is still something to say about the simple representation of homosexuality as well as the more complex interpretation of inversion and ambiguity provided

to us by camp. Despite only arriving at a few ‘truths’ in the play (Aprígio’s homosexuality, for example), following a camp sensibility we recognize that what the characters say doesn’t always correspond to what they believe—as shown through the stage directions and their contradictory actions.

Camp’s twists differ from those of melodrama because they question appearances while melodrama relies on emotional turns of events. When Aprígio reveals his same-sex desire in the same instance that he murders Arandir, a melodramatic reading would interpret that moment as a shock necessary for the end of the play. Critics who adhere to a pessimistic reading of queerness in the play would point to it as another limiting portrayal. A camp interpretation picked up on clues of Aprígio’s homosexuality long before he “comes out” and can appreciate that last moment as a culmination of ambiguity and tension. The freeing of meanings surrounding the character allows Aprígio to be appreciated as a representation of pervasive and dangerous internalized homophobia.

The sensibility also produces a more positive view of Arandir’s sexuality, rescuing a nuanced interpretation of Arandir’s contradictory characterization, statements, and actions regarding his desires. Camp recognizes that what Arandir says and does do not necessarily constitute his true feelings. Attention to Nelson’s melodrama and to a camp sensibility provide us a productive way of approaching sexuality in *Beijo* that highlights the importance of Arandir’s sexual ambiguity. In Arandir’s conflicted feelings there is a space for re-evaluating centrality and marginality in *O Beijo no Asfalto*. There is room to further interrogate Nelson’s use of melodrama by employing camp, which reads Arandir as too outwardly naïve, and too conflicted about the kiss to not have a queer side. To conclude, and echoing Brooks, the ordinary man named Arandir can be read as a site for the instauration of significance; in *Beijo*’s protagonist some readers will see themselves mirrored in all their own ambiguity.

*Independent Scholar, United States*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In his essay on melodrama in Nelson Rodrigues, Sebastião Milaré declares that “os críticos mais cultos e agudos reconheciam valores na obra de Nelson Rodrigues, mas arrepiavam-se antes aos escandalosos sinais de melodrama nela presentes” (17) The author highlights four main considerations when approaching melodrama in Rodrigues: 1) older Brazilian theatre traditions; 2) the importance of viewing



melodrama as a valid genre for study; 3) understanding that melodrama corresponds to the tastes of the audience; 4) necessity of placing Rodrigues in a cultural tradition rather than reifying his mythic position in modern Brazilian theatre (18). On the other hand, Luiz Arthur Nunes's approach to melodrama with respect to the playwright is to examine its relation to naturalism and to specify the melodramatic techniques Rodrigues employed.

<sup>2</sup> *Merriam-Webster* defines melodrama as "a work (such as a movie or play) characterized by extravagant theatricality and by the predominance of plot and physical action over characterization."

<sup>3</sup> My deep gratitude to Profs. Severino Albuquerque and Kathryn Sanchez as well as to my colleagues who offered feedback on this project from its conception. I also extend my thanks to the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Joaquim Nabuco Award, which afforded me another opportunity to revisit and refine my thoughts on *Beijo*. A preliminary version of this article was presented at the 2016 conference of the American Portuguese Studies Association and I greatly appreciate the productive discussions that occurred there.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of the history of camp and queer/gay communities, see Fabio Cleto's introduction to *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. It should also be noted that awareness of everyday performance is not limited to queer individuals.

<sup>5</sup> Though his subject is German film, Fassbinder specifically, Johannes von Moltke comments that melodrama can serve as an interesting site for the queer deconstruction associated with camp (412).

<sup>6</sup> Among other critics, Brazilian theatre critic Sábado Magaldi declares that *Beijo* adopts a "padrão de libelo irresponsível" and that "a imprensa, para Nelson, não observa limites na impostura" ("Introdução" 16). Magaldi also adds that the criticism of sensational journalism in *Beijo* will eventually lead Nelson to quit the paper he worked for, *Última hora* (16).

<sup>7</sup> Foucault's "repressive hypothesis" doesn't ask why we are repressed but explores why we repress and hide sex as a discursive subject. He asks who discusses sex and why in an effort to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure (11) that is the basis of discourse on sexuality, at least in the West. I point out that the discursive explosion on sex in the Victorian era to which Foucault refers is mirrored in a way in *Beijo*. In both cases, the repressive language proliferated on sex at the same time brings the subject to the forefront.

<sup>8</sup> In *Bodies, Pleasures, Passions* (Orig. 1991), Richard Parker explains the distinction between public and private in Brazil. Among other material, he uses popular expressions including, "em baixo do pano, tudo pode acontecer" and "entre quatro paredes, tudo pode acontecer" (113). We should understand 'tudo' in both cases to be any sex act including creative positions, non-procreative sex, or even sex between men. The sociologist Gilberto Freyre was the first to theorize this idea in his 1933 magnum opus *Casa-grande e senzala*, but it was Roberto da Matta who developed the concept further in his works including *A casa e a rua* (1985).

<sup>9</sup> Though the motive for the kiss is debatable, many authors, including Severino Albuquerque (78) have alluded to the kiss as a gesture of solidarity in reference to the Christian practice of kissing a dying person. I take the kiss at the value that it is given in the play by the media, police, and eventually by most of the characters—as a condemnable homosexual act. While I believe the kiss as a gesture of solidarity can be unpacked in terms of gender and sexuality, the kiss as a homosexual act and the persecution that ensues is not only accurate to the play, but also more open to a reading that explores themes of gender and sexuality.

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed discussion of authoritarianism in modern Brazilian theatre as it relates to the dissolution of the family, see Roberto Reis, who examines *Beijo*, among other texts.

<sup>11</sup> The more obvious slang term "gilete" is the Brazilian Portuguese term for safety razor that is slang for bisexual because it is a two-sided razor. Less clear perhaps is the reference to the "barca da Cantareira," which is a ferry line between the city of Rio de Janeiro and Niterói, the city that lies across from Rio de Janeiro on the Guanabara Bay. The footnote in the cited edition of *Beijo* notes that Cunha's expression "barca da Cantareira" was also an old slang term used in Rio de Janeiro to describe men who had sex with both men and women (63), hence the ferry that goes both ways.

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