

Film Review

- *Carta para além dos muros (Letter beyond the walls)*, directed by André Canto. Brazil, 2019.¹

From March 1964, Brazil found itself in a military dictatorship that would last twenty-one years. The regime deployed social policies that monitored and controlled civil participation. Part of the conservative attempt to decimate left-wing thought was a commitment to heteronormativity, declaring homosexuality and other sexualities as perverse. These policies provided military authorities with a legal set of tools to censor, torture, and exile non-normative artists, writers, and activists. In the 1980s, the slow-moving process to open the country to liberal democratic ideals, known as *abertura*, allowed space for alternative forms of expression and modes of living in Brazil. Years later, however, the arrival of the HIV/AIDS crisis punctured the South American country. The infection would once again marginalize the Brazilian LGBTQI+ community, since government officials, doctors, and the general population portrayed the disease as exclusive to homosexuality.

In reference to Brazilian gay and HIV-positive poet Caio Fernando de Abreu, the documentary *Carta Para Além dos Muros* (2019) offers a glimpse into the emergence of the AIDS/HIV crisis and its enduring effects on the country's social and cultural spheres. By conducting interviews with health professionals, public figures, and HIV-positive patients, director André Canto opens a window into the untold narratives of those in contact with, and affected by, the condition. The film marks the first solo project of the director, who has been involved in several other documentaries on Brazilian cultural life in the capacity of producer, including *Mulheres Olímpicas* (2013) and *Hilda Hilst Pedre Contato* (2018). Notably, *Carta* is part of the online platform #PrecisamosFalarSobreIsso (#WeNeedtoTalkAboutThis), an initiative focused on providing public health information on sex and sexuality.

Carta presents multiple stories surrounding the national history of AIDS/HIV, alongside a personal voice-over of an unknown participant in contemporary Brazil. The film is attuned to health experts' responses to the crisis, such as popular medical figure Drauzio Varella and dermatologist Valeria Petri, the latter being the first doctor to report a case of the infection in the coun-

try. While including various specialist perspectives, the film also attends to the stories of HIV-positive individuals and their friends and relatives, including Lucinha Araujo, the mother of popular rock legend Cazuza. The singer-songwriter gained a crucial role in publicly engaging with, and demystifying, the condition in the wake of his HIV-positive diagnosis.²

The web of affections that appear on the screen renders visible the intersectional nature of the AIDS/HIV crisis, whose consequences impacted the Brazilian population at large. Through this approach, *Carta* articulates how the demystification of AIDS/HIV in everyday Brazilian society did not accompany its medical advances over the past decades. One stylistic approach that offers such a reading emerges from Canto's choice to interview all participants in a seemingly confined space. Behind the interviewees, however, one observes an open door facing the streets of Brazil. In this instance, the viewer is simultaneously imbricated into a narrative of isolation and exposure. Likewise, in the 1980s, the social legibility of the LGBTQI+ community was based on discussions about HIV/AIDS. This contributed to the group's stigmatization, as visibility outside a medical language was minimal. To address this gap, the documentary presents interviews held with the general populace, including declarations of AIDS/HIV as a disease born of promiscuity, only contractable by *invertidos* (the inverted), a pejorative expression to define non-heterosexual sexualities.

At several moments in the film, the narrative flow is interrupted by an unknown voice-over. The narrator's anonymity evidences how the contemporariness and vastness of the infection still cannot be fully verbalized, as he expresses fear of rejection and stigma throughout. This acknowledgement is pivotal to cut through current discussions of AIDS/HIV in Brazil. When health issues in the LGBTQI+ community enter today's dialogue, it is through belligerent patriotic stances such as president Jair Bolsonaro's, who has openly declared homosexuality a disease and insisted on medical practices aimed at a 'gay cure'. Additionally, Bolsonaro's characterization of the use of masks during the COVID-19 pandemic as "a faggot thing," amongst similar statements, has driven recent studies to investigate the dangers of associating masculinist behaviour to bodily invincibility (Parmanand 2020).

By offering space for different angles on the sanitary crisis, Canto argues that AIDS/HIV, unlike its historical association with the LGBTQI+ community, is not a single-sided story. By doing so, however, the film gives freedom to all positions to be conflated under the flag of diversity. For instance, Canto interviews right-wing politician José Serra, whose role in the breaking of the patent of the drug Viracept profoundly contributed to the popularization of AIDS/HIV medicine. Although this initiative cannot be dissociated from the shared history of the infection, Serra's contribution in the Brazilian political life has diametrically opposed the efforts and demands of LGBTQI+ groups over the past decades.³ When the documentary's testimonials emerge outside the broader context of homophobia in Brazilian politics, relevant nuances of

the history of LGBTQI+ struggle for recognition and respect are lost in narration. Insofar as LGBTQI+ sexualities are conflated with sickness, it becomes vital to explore political stances on the group's destigmatization beyond the medical field. Still, although the documentary misses such relevant particularities, it compellingly weaves together the strands of narratives to compose a shared biography of AIDS/HIV in Brazil.

Definitely, *Carta* takes resonance at the present as we face yet another extended sanitary crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. It counters glorified narratives of the past and the dictatorship animated by new homophobic currents since ultra-right president Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power in 2018. By turning the narration of AIDS/HIV into a shared experience, the film allows viewers to juxtapose governmental and social expectations at both historical moments to observe the new inequalities at play in our current scenario.

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Notes

- ¹ This 93-minute documentary can be seen on Netflix Brazil.
- ² In the media, covers of magazines commonly headlined famous HIV-positive homosexual men negatively. A notable example in the documentary is the well-established political magazine *Veja*'s iconic coverage about Cazuza in 1989. It declares that "each day more, [Cazuza] withers away facing an inexorable end" (Abreu & Porro 1989: 80).
- ³ For example, Serra declared the 2011 educational project School Without Homophobia, to discuss sexual and gender diversity in schools, "improper and ridiculous." In addition, in 2012, when running for mayor in São Paulo, the politician allied with Brazilian Pentecostal leader Silas Malafaia, notable for declaring homosexuality a disease and a criminal act.

Reference

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