

The Strange Force of a Queer Pietà: Alternative Families in *Pixote, a lei do mais fraco* (1980)

GABRIEL CHAGAS

Marist University

Abstract: *Pixote, a lei do mais fraco* (1980) is a Brazilian film set in a juvenile detention center, often analyzed for its critique of authoritarianism and police brutality. By contrast, the film’s exploration of gender and sexuality has received little scholarly attention. In this article, I examine how the central characters form an alternative family that subverts dominant Western bourgeois ideals of childhood and motherhood. Drawing on gender studies and queer theory—particularly the concepts of queer temporalities and alternative kinship—I analyze the development of the queer character Lilica, arguing that she embodies and disrupts the Christian figure of the Pietà. By analyzing her mourning of a lover’s death and her performance of Caetano Veloso’s “Força estranha,” I suggest that Lilica emerges as a nonnormative maternal figure for the protagonist. As such, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the film’s social dimensions.

Keywords: Brazilian cinema, 1980s, alternative families, gender studies, intersectionality

Héctor Babenco (1946–2016) was an Argentine-born, naturalized Brazilian filmmaker whose work left a lasting impact on Latin America. Despite his close ties to the United States—directing critically acclaimed films like *Ironweed* (1987) and *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1991) with major Hollywood actors—Babenco remained deeply committed to portraying the complex social and political realities of South America. His breakthrough film, *Pixote, a lei do mais fraco* (1980), brought global attention to Brazilian cinema. Produced during the

country's military dictatorship, it provided a raw depiction of the conditions faced by children living in the streets.

The actor Fernando Ramos da Silva was only twelve years old when Babenco cast him in the lead role. Da Silva lived in Diadema, on the outskirts of São Paulo, and was not a professional actor. His real life closely mirrored that of the titular character, as both were children from the periphery who faced poverty and social inequality. Based on José Louzeiro's book *Infância dos mortos* (1977), the film follows young offenders imprisoned in a juvenile detention center in São Paulo. After the children escape, the story shifts to their struggles to survive through theft and drug dealing. Tragically, just a few years after portraying Pixote, Da Silva himself became a victim of the violent world depicted in the film, killed by the police on August 25, 1987 (Barcellos 252).

In the film, Da Silva starred alongside Jorge Julião, who played Lilica—a character with a fluid gender identity, at times appearing to be a homosexual cisgender man, at other times presenting more as a heterosexual transgender woman. At seventeen, Lilica commands respect from the younger children in the detention center, positioning herself as a figure of authority. Assigned male at birth, Lilica gradually embraces a female identity over the course of the film. I do not seek to impose an identity category on this character, particularly given the way terminology used by queer and trans people has developed since the film was made in the early 1980s.¹ What is most significant for my purposes is Lilica's subversive performance of gender and sexuality, as she emerges as a maternal figure protecting Pixote.

In this article, I argue that Babenco's film presents a counterhegemonic representation of motherhood, assigning the role of a nurturing mother to Lilica, thereby disrupting heteronormative expectations and queering the structures of the bourgeois family. My analysis focuses on two pivotal moments in the narrative: Lilica's mourning of her lover's death in a pose reminiscent of the Christian Pietà,

¹ In *Nossos corpos também mudam* (2011), Jorge Leite Jr. examines the origin and development of the concepts of "travesti" and "transexual," arguing that throughout history definitions of bodies and sexual identities have not been fixed and definitive; rather, they vary according to the groups and discourses within the domains of medicine, religion, and politics. This analysis helps us understand that, in many cases, there are no clear boundaries among the self-identifications of individuals who define themselves as travestis, transexuais, gay men, drag queens, cross-dressers, or transformistas, among others. In Brazil, the term "travesti" embodies this fluidity of categories and has been historically associated with the stigmas of marginality and sex work. For a detailed study of this concept in the Brazilian context, see Don Kulick's *Travesti*.

and her performance of Caetano Veloso's song "Força estranha" for Pixote, which symbolizes maternal protection. To develop my argument, I first provide a literature review of the film, along with a theoretical overview of the concepts of childhood and motherhood from the perspective of gender and sexuality studies. I then explore how the film challenges traditional representations of childhood as a time of safety and innocence. Finally, I examine the Christian image of the Pietà to highlight Lilica's nonnormative maternal presence, using Veloso's lyrics as a lens to interpret her role in the plot.

Theoretical Framework

Although several works over the last decade have investigated the representation of children in Latin American cinema (Rocha and Seminet; Martin), Brazil is often excluded from these studies due to its distinct language and historical particularities within the region. In this sense, scholarship on *Pixote* generally centers on themes of repression and authoritarianism. Luis Alberto Pereira Junior's 2014 study draws on Foucault to examine government practices of repression and discipline during the military dictatorship. Cayron Fraga's 2017 analysis contextualizes the film within state policies aimed at incarcerating young offenders in the early 1980s. Antônio Reis Junior and Caio Lamas have suggested that one reason for the censorship targeting *Pixote* was the absence of a heteronormative family: "a ausência no filme de um modelo ideal de família nuclear e burguesa, dentro de um padrão heteronormativo" (99). To further explore the film's subversion of normative family structures, I propose that *Pixote* disrupts the "ideal" model of the bourgeois nuclear family through a queer representation of motherhood. This reading brings nuance to previous interpretations, which often focus on the protagonist and overlook Lilica's significant role in the narrative.

James N. Green and Renan Quinalha introduce the concept of "homossexualidades"—in the plural—to analyze the experiences of queer individuals in Brazil during the military dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s. They argue that travestis, transgender people, and gay men were commonly grouped together under a broad category of homosexuality, reflecting the limited vocabulary available at the time to articulate diverse sexual and gender identities (11). Yuri Fraccaroli, however, challenges the adequacy of the term "homossexualidades" to account for the full spectrum of gender expressions and

sexual orientations that existed during that period. Drawing on interviews with survivors of the regime, Fraccaroli examines the particular experiences of those who most visibly deviated from heteronormative expectations: “quem tava no armário vivia tranquilo, agora quem padecia mesmo e até hoje acho que é quem padece, é o afeminado ou travesti” (qtd. in Fraccaroli 35). This testimony is crucial for understanding Lilica’s role in the film. After escaping the detention center, she begins to wear makeup, a wig, and clothing coded as feminine. On the one hand, this gender performance aligns her with a maternal role within her alternative family of outsiders; on the other, it further marginalizes her within the restrictive social and sexual norms of 1980s Brazil.

Following Fraccaroli’s conclusions, I argue that the representation of Lilica as a symbolic mother in *Pixote* challenges the historical construct of the “normal” family, confronting what Michael Warner names heteronormativity. She subverts gender norms and the heteronormative model of the family by refusing to identify as a man while simultaneously rejecting the societal expectation of female fragility. Consequently, the emergence of a queer Pietà disrupts the imposition of rigid gender and sexual norms. This symbolic inversion transforms a traditionally Western Christian figure into a subversive strategy for reimagining motherhood and fostering an alternative form of kinship.

According to Philippe Ariès, a dominant discourse portraying children as naturally innocent emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while the notion of the heterosexual nuclear family also took shape. Consequently, bourgeois ideals of childhood and family flourished alongside the development of pedagogical norms, new forms of entertainment, and specific dress codes for children. The advent of “privacy” as a social concept also marked this historical shift. Richard Sennett argues, in *The Fall of Public Man*, that the “dignity” of the bourgeoisie was rooted in the “stability” of the home and the nuclear family, upheld by rigid gender and sexual norms of how men and women should behave. Victorian-era pathologization of homosexuality further reinforced this structure (Foucault, *History*), which turned the middle-class heterosexual family into the “ideal” model of living.

As a result, Lilica faces marginalization not only due to her gender identity and sexual orientation but also because of her peripheral status as a young individual confined to a detention center. This intersection of class, gender identity, carceral status, and sexual orientation produces compounded forms of

dehumanization, rendering such individuals “non-grievable lives” (Butler 13). Therefore, while Lilica subverts the idealized portrayal of motherhood, the protagonist, Pixote, challenges the romanticized depiction of children as innocent and pure, offering a critical examination of Western constructions of family. Both representations can be read as queer, as they dismantle the patriarchal family structure wherein the man leads, the woman bears children, and the children embody innocence. In what follows, I analyze the disruption of childhood and motherhood, as well as Lilica’s transformation into a queer Pietà.

An Impossible Childhood

The depictions of violence in *Pixote* dismantle dominant perceptions of childhood, paving the way for the emergence of a nonnormative family structure in the latter half of the plot. The film opens in a filthy and chaotic detention center, where dozens of children sleep in a disordered heap. After one of the boys sexually assaults another inmate, Inspector Sapato (Jardel Filho) sees the victim, yet says that he is not there to father anyone (“Eu não sou pai de ninguém,” 00:07:53–00:08:01), implying that the center is not a space of familial care. From the outset, fatherhood is invoked only to be denied. Sapato’s words underscore the systemic abandonment these children face, signaling that familial protection is unattainable for them. Instead, they are subject solely to the violent authority of the police, rendering the romanticized ideal of childhood impossible. This erosion of innocence is further illustrated when the boys, confined to their grim environment, improvise weapons and use them as toys to stage a mock bank robbery (00:20:09–00:21:26). Their play, shaped by the brutality surrounding them, reflects the premature corruption of their imagination, highlighting the profound impact of systemic violence on their lives.

Moreover, the depiction of education within the detention center complicates the representation of childhood. When teaching Pixote to read and write, the teacher instructs him to copy a phrase from the blackboard: “A Terra é redonda como uma laranja” (00:17:58–00:19:46). The camera lingers on Pixote’s young face for over a minute, capturing his intense concentration as he struggles to complete the task. Despite his difficulty, he persists, aware that literacy might offer a path toward a different future. The round Earth evokes the vastness of the universe, subtly contrasting with the suffocating confinement of the detention

center—the only “planet” Pixote knows. His attempt to transcribe the sentence suggests a longing to move beyond his grim surroundings.

In the chapter “Suffer the Little Children” in *The Brazilians*, Joseph Page reports that at the Vila Maria shelter in São Paulo, counselors encouraged children to draw and describe their experiences with drugs. According to Page, “voyages to stars, comets, and satellites—obvious reflections of the children’s earthly discontents—were the most popular fantasies” (267). Likewise, Pixote’s earnest effort to record the sentence embodies an attempt to transcend the brutal constraints of his environment. Writing that the Earth is round becomes a symbolic gesture, allowing him to imagine a world beyond the prison walls. This yearning for escape is further realized through his later acceptance of Lilica’s maternal love, signaling his desire to reconstruct kinship and find refuge beyond institutional violence.

Interpreting this scene as a reference to the outside world suggests that Pixote uses the normative structure of the school within the detention center to imagine an escape. This reading underscores Lilica’s significance in the narrative, as Pixote ultimately breaks free from prison after she transforms into a queer Pietà. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault argues that schools are among the institutions where modern systems of power regulate bodies to maximize productivity. In *Pixote*, the school functions within a detention center, intensifying its role as a site of discipline and control. However, the protagonist challenges this oppression by using the system to his advantage, attempting to learn practical skills that might help him navigate the outside world. Unequal access to formal education becomes central to the film’s critique of normative childhood, revealing how institutional systems may limit possibilities for liberation.²

² Fernando Ramos da Silva’s tragic fate was profoundly shaped by his lack of literacy. Despite his remarkable success as Pixote at the age of twelve, his inability to read made it difficult for him to memorize scripts, ultimately hindering his acting career. This struggle is explored in the film *Quem matou Pixote?* (1996), based on *Pixote nunca mais!* (1988), written by his widow, Cida Venâncio. In 2007, two decades after Da Silva’s death, directors Felipe Briso and Gilberto Topczewski released the documentary *Pixote, in memoriam*, which features interviews with Héctor Babenco and other key figures from the original production. These works underscore the cultural impact of Da Silva’s performance, both in Brazil and abroad.

Shortly after this scene, Pixote's grandfather visits the detention center and asks what the boy wants to be when he grows up. Pixote's silence (00:27:57) is revealing, as the grandfather figure traditionally symbolizes protection and guidance toward adulthood. When Pixote expresses to his grandfather his desire to find his mother, the older man admits that he has no knowledge of her whereabouts and responds dismissively, suggesting that Pixote could try to locate her and let him know if he succeeds ("Se você encontrar ela antes de mim, me avisa primeiro, viu?"). This exchange highlights another dimension of Pixote's fractured childhood, as the absence of familial support compels him to seek an alternative family.

During the Sunday visit, a musical performance draws the attention of the children: a cover of the renowned Brazilian singer Roberto Carlos. The boy performing (Israel Feres David) is physically disabled in one leg, recalling the famous artist (00:29:21–00:30:12). The teenager's nickname, "Roberto Carlos dos pobres," underscores how intersectionality in the film extends beyond gender, race, and class to include disability. Although Roberto's sexuality or gender identity is never revealed, I interpret him as another queer figure, as his body, too, is "foreign" to a world defined by norms and limitations. In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Robert McRuer critiques neoliberalism for marginalizing bodies that fall outside the norm. He argues that the same system that enforces heteronormativity also naturalizes ableism. In this way, Roberto and Lilica can be seen as two faces of the same coin, caught within a social logic that seeks to marginalize them. While Roberto suffers from ableism, Lilica navigates systemic homophobia and transphobia daily. Both face the exclusionary imposition of the Western ideal of a "normal" body, illustrating how these systems of oppression converge and reinforce one another.

From the audience, Pixote predicts that Roberto will become a great artist once he leaves the detention center. This statement, however, acquires a tragically ironic tone, as Roberto is the only one who chooses to stay behind when the other children escape. He explains that he would not survive in the outside world because of his disability (00:59:58). Even if Pixote's prediction were accurate, Roberto is denied the opportunity to realize his talent, since the film leaves uncertain whether he ever leaves the institution. The issue of accessibility resurfaces later when Chico, one of the boys who successfully escapes, enjoys a day at the beach and remarks that Roberto would not have been able to join them because his leg would have gotten

rusty (01:20:44). Thus, while the detention center violates the most basic rights of its inmates, the outside world proves even more hostile to Roberto, who faces exclusion and vulnerability owing to the lack of adequate structures for his prosthetic leg.

On the one hand, Roberto Carlos, a pop icon of the *Jovem Guarda* generation, made his disability part of his public persona. On the other hand, the character in the film is framed by both his disability and his impoverished status, illustrating how these factors intersect and prevent him from fully enjoying his childhood. The lack of a safe space to grow up and the absence of proper education disrupt the idealized notion of the bourgeois family, where children are meant to be protected. This representation in the first half of the film sets the stage for the emergence of a queer family dynamic, embodied by Lilica's subversive motherhood.

The scene then shifts abruptly to the following day, where state agents murder two boys. One of Pixote's friends, Fumaça (Zenildo Oliveira Santos), returns to the detention center gravely injured. This violence unfolds as a man is murdered, and his wife (Beatriz Segall) is brought to the police station to identify the culprit. Struggling to make a clear identification, the widow responds that they all look the same ("Eles são todos iguais," 00:33:48). While this line predates the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, it ironically critiques the constitutional ideal of equality before the law. It also underscores the troubling issue of facial recognition in criminal investigations in Brazil and beyond, an imprecise technique that disproportionately targets poor and Black people (Pinto). Brazil ranks among the five countries with the highest prison populations, and there are numerous cases of innocent individuals being imprisoned because of flawed investigations and poorly conducted trials (Benfica). This reality deepens my argument about the impossibility of a romanticized childhood in *Pixote*, as the children in the film are forced to confront the brutalities of a system that often incarcerates them unjustly, stripping away any chance of protection or fairness.³

³ Angela Davis (*Are Prisons*) and Michelle Alexander examine mass incarceration in the United States, while Juliana Borges offers a critical analysis of this phenomenon in the Brazilian context in her book *Encarceramento em massa*. These works converge in their condemnation of the arbitrary, violent, and racist functioning of the prison system in both Brazil and the United States. Prisons, in most cases, fail to reintegrate ex-offenders into society effectively, often leading to recidivism. Without clear criteria for trials, many inmates remain incarcerated for extended periods, often unaware of the reasons behind their imprisonment.

Because of this violent dismantling of childhood, Pixote and his friends exemplify nongrievable lives. This concept illuminates a key moment in the film when Fumaça's mother (Beatriz Berg) returns to the detention center after the police kill her son to inquire about his disappearance. Lilica coldly responds that the desperate mother should "make" another son—"fazer outro filho porque aquele ali já era" (00:36:05). At this point in the narrative, Lilica diverges from the traditional image of a caring mother. Fumaça's death becomes a mere matter of "making" another child, and the choice of the verb *fazer* emphasizes the disposability and interchangeability of peripheral children, positioning them as nongrievable bodies. Expelled from the bourgeois ideal of a safe, nurturing home, these boys are treated as expendable, constantly made and remade, as if their lives are disposable commodities easily replaced by the state's violent disregard.

After this scene, Pixote cleans the bathroom and kills a cockroach. Here, director Babenco draws a powerful parallel between the way inspectors and the state treat these children (00:40:50). Just as Achille Mbembe argues that Western necropolitical policies treat those considered outsiders as less than human, and therefore less worthy of living, the camera's focus on Pixote killing the cockroach symbolizes how those meant to reintegrate the children into society instead treat their bodies like insects to be exterminated. There is no conceivable future in Pixote's world, as they are not even recognized as human in the eyes of the state. This lack of recognition drives the children to seek out maternal care from Lilica, a refuge where they might find some semblance of care and humanity.

Finally, Pixote asks the nurse what happened to his friend Fumaça, who has already died from the policemen's assault. However, the woman ignores his question, acting as if Fumaça never existed (00:45:37). As such, he is not only humiliated, beaten, and killed but also erased from memory—and by a nurse, someone whose very job is meant to provide care. The fact that the word *fumaça* means "smoke" is particularly poignant, as the boy disappears from the film, never to be mentioned again, lingering in our imagination like smoke that gradually fades into the horizon. This act of erasure amplifies the violence Pixote experiences, seeking Lilica's maternal protection. Therefore, I now turn to demonstrate how Lilica transforms into a queer Pietà after the police kill her lover. This pivotal moment divides the film into two distinct sections, marking the rise of Lilica's motherhood as the leader of a new family of outsiders.

The Birth of a Queer Pietà

Having established how the film confronts traditional representations of childhood, I now turn to the ways the main characters form a queer family around Lilica's motherhood. When she tells Fumaça's mother to "make" another child, Lilica's language dismantles the conventional expectations of maternal love. However, the tragic turn of the plot also transforms her into a sort of queer Virgin Mary, as she symbolically assumes the role of Pixote's mother. While in the detention center, Lilica falls in love with a seventeen-year-old Black teenager who is only identified by his initials, A. C. He is wrongfully accused of Fumaça's death, leading to his murder by the police. In his final moments, A. C. dies in Lilica's arms, and she kneels, desperately trying to save him. As she watches the death of the man she loves, the composition of the scene positions her in the role of Pietà. From this moment on, I argue, Lilica subverts the canonical Christian image, embodying motherhood not only as a means of surviving state violence but also as a nurturing force for Pixote.

Pietà refers to the traditional representation of Mary holding the body of Jesus after his death on the cross. Among the numerous interpretations of this biblical image since the Middle Ages, the most famous is Michelangelo's sculpture, created between 1498 and 1499 (fig. 1). It is one of the key icons of the Italian Renaissance, capturing its ideals of beauty, harmony, symmetry, and precision. When the police officers kill A. C., Lilica reenacts this position, disrupting the traditional Christian symbolism of motherhood by representing a queer individual holding a Black man in her arms. While the Christian Pietà has for centuries depicted the mourning mother and her son, Lilica reimagines this trope by cradling her lover instead (fig. 2). Like Jesus, A. C. is persecuted and murdered by state forces. However, Lilica queers the canonical figure in a pivotal way: she is not the mother of the slain man, and A. C. is not resurrected. Instead, it is Lilica who symbolically dies and resurrects, becoming a queer mother capable of protecting the group of children in the detention center. A. C.'s death marks a turning point in the story, triggering Lilica's transformation. She channels her mourning into power, sparking a rebellion against the inspectors and the police (00:52:25 – 00:53:09).

Fig. 1. Michelangelo's *Pietà*. (Jebulon)



Fig. 2. Lilica with A. C.'s body in her arms.
(*Pixote, a lei do mais fraco* 00:50:42)



When examined through the lens of race, the contrast between Michelangelo's *Pietà* and Lilica's *Pietà* becomes particularly striking. The white color of Michelangelo's marble sculpture stands in sharp opposition to Lilica's composition, which depicts two human figures of flesh—dressed in soiled clothing and stained with blood. Equally significant is the juxtaposition between Lilica's white arms and A. C.'s Black body, a visual tension that intensifies the representation of racial necropolitics in 1980s Brazil. Considering the context of the military dictatorship, it is noteworthy that, unlike the classical figure who dies in the embrace of his mother, A. C. has no maternal figure to care for him. In

contrast to the idealized image of the Brazilian nuclear family, the only person who tends to him in his final moments is his queer lover—who, from that moment on, assumes an alternative and subversive form of motherhood.

While the sixteenth-century *Pietà* epitomizes the Renaissance ideals of balance and harmony, Lilica's anguished reaction radically disrupts this serene composition. Whereas Michelangelo's Mary is portrayed with a tranquil expression and composed posture, Lilica's reimagining of the *Pietà* is charged with tension and horror—an affective rupture that transforms grief into an act of resistance and liberation for the incarcerated children. In this moment of defiance, she gathers mattresses and sheets and sets fire to the dormitory, igniting both a literal and symbolic rebellion that marks the beginning of a new journey for the characters and ultimately enables their escape.

The first hour of *Pixote* unfolds almost entirely within the confinement of the detention center, a microcosm of oppression and violence. After Lilica's transformation through her trauma, many children escape, shifting the film's setting to the urban landscape of São Paulo (01:00:31). Once they are free, Lilica asks one of Pixote's older friends, Dito (Gilberto Moura), whether he loves her. Dito refuses to answer, but the film transitions into a scene of intimacy between them, while Pixote sleeps, subverting the "virginity" of the *Pietà* (01:04:05–01:04:11). The director's choice to illuminate the actors' faces at this moment highlights their joy, in stark contrast to the violence of the first part of the film. This encounter signifies their attempt to form a queer family beyond the oppressive conditions of the detention center, suggesting a broader possibility for freedom from social norms that seek to limit their familial bonds.

Lilica's relationship with Dito establishes their family, with Dito embodying a "masculine" position from the point of view of hegemonic gender roles, while Lilica adopts the role of his "wife." Most notably, after the death of A. C., Lilica, a white person, seeks love from Dito, another Black man, which signals a departure from the historical pattern of white women being linked to white male providers. Throughout the film, Lilica's sexual desire exclusively gravitates toward Black men, including A. C., Dito, and Cristal (Tony Tornado). This preference complicates the concept of the "ideal" bourgeois family, traditionally dominated by white men as providers, and highlights the alternative family dynamic that Lilica is creating.

According to Sueli Carneiro, Black men have only recently been allowed to occupy the role of provider in the Brazilian patriarchal society due to the lingering effects of slavery (50). Building on this premise, I contend that Lilica's relationships with Black men bring attention to the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. That is, although Black men have been historically criminalized, particularly through the "myth of the Black rapist" (Davis, *Women* 172), Lilica chooses Black men to form her queer family. In doing so, she not only disrupts the hegemonic expectations of heteronormativity but also embraces a form of resistance against the racial hierarchies that have long shaped Brazilian society.

In this dynamic, Dito assumes the role of the father, Lilica is the mother, and Pixote, as the youngest member, becomes their child. However, although based on a heteronormative structure, this family does not form out of a desire to assimilate into mainstream society, nor to reinforce traditional family roles. Instead, Lilica challenges the stereotypical notion of the white *femme fragile* by making bold, autonomous decisions throughout the film, which include leading the rebellion, escaping the detention center, caring for Pixote, and ultimately leaving the family at the end of the film when she feels betrayed by Dito.

When the family arrives in Rio de Janeiro, they visit the beach—a space that functions simultaneously as a symbol of leisure and family vacation, and as a possible allusion to baptism and rebirth. In a gesture of maternal care, Lilica instructs Pixote to behave properly. She also confides her fear of aging, as turning eighteen represents a dangerous threshold for a queer person: leaving the juvenile detention center only to enter the adult prison system ("o que pode esperar uma bicha da vida?," 01:17:00). This line indicates that Lilica understood the interplay between poverty, gender identity, and sexual orientation in Brazil during the dictatorship—an intersection that exposes the differentiated experiences of violence within a single identity in the 1970s and 1980s (Fraccaroli 36).

Their conversation is interrupted when Lilica begins to sing Caetano Veloso's "Força estranha" (1979), and Pixote embraces her (fig. 3). Unlike the earlier scene in which Lilica mourned A. C.'s death in her arms, this time "mother" and "son" share a peaceful moment without the shadow of tragic loss, marking Lilica's "rebirth" and transformation from a figure of despair to a loving mother envisioning her son's future. In the documentary *Pixote, in memoriam*, Jorge Julião, who portrays Lilica, reveals that the decision to sing was his own, while Fernando Ramos da Silva, playing Pixote, improvised the hug (00:31:40). This

choice further underscores the film's blurring of the lines between reality and fiction, highlighting a nontraditional sensibility in its themes, but also in its very creation.

Fig. 3. Lilica sings "Força estranha" while Pixote hugs her. They both look at the ocean, sitting on a rock on the beach. (*Pixote, a lei do mais fraco* 01:17:42)



Lilica does not sing the entire song, only the opening lines:

Eu vi o menino correndo.
Eu vi o tempo.
Brincando ao redor do caminho daquele menino.
Eu pus os meus pés no riacho.
E acho que nunca os tirei.
O sol ainda brilha na estrada e eu nunca passei.
Eu vi a mulher preparando outra pessoa.
O tempo parou para eu olhar para aquela barriga. (01:17:09–
01:18:09)

Through the lyrics, Lilica sings about seeing a boy running, with time playing around him. This boy could be Pixote himself, running both as the dreamy child he still is and as one fleeing the police, an image echoed in the film's official poster. Much like the figure of Cronos in Greek mythology, time surrounds Pixote, attempting to devour him. In the following lines of the song, the queer mother

declares that she placed her feet in a stream and feels as though she has never taken them out. Finally, she sings that the sun still shines on a road she has never traveled on. In Lilica's voice, Veloso's poetry takes on multiple layers of meaning. What are the roads Lilica has never been able to travel? The answers are manifold: education, housing, health, dignity, citizenship, respect for her gender identity, and beyond. Her singing at this particular place deepens the significance of the moment, as the beach symbolizes recreation and peace—things absent from their life in São Paulo. Lilica's rebirth at this point in the film is tied to the family's movement from São Paulo, associated with the suffocating detention center, to Rio de Janeiro, where the ocean evokes freedom.

This interpretation underscores the significance of the line in which she sings about seeing a woman “preparing” someone else (“Eu vi a mulher preparando outra pessoa”). Here, Lilica embraces the responsibility of preparing Pixote for life outside the detention center—a particularly poignant moment, especially when recalling how she had told Fumaça's mother to “make” another child. Lilica's attempt to raise Pixote reflects her emerging motherhood. In the next line of the song, she sings that time stopped for her to gaze upon the woman's belly (“O tempo parou para eu olhar para aquela barriga”). In the metaphorical gestation of Lilica carrying Pixote—or carrying a new version of herself—her motherhood halts time itself. The audience, too, is frozen in the moment, watching the poignant scene on the beach, accompanied by Lilica's voice and Veloso's poetry.

If Lilica's grief over A. C.'s death marks the emergence of the queer Pietà, it is in singing to Pixote that she becomes the mother the protagonist has longed for, shaping her motherhood through a *força estranha*—a strange force fueled by the challenges she faces due to her class, gender identity, sexuality, and history of confinement. In fact, the song, composed by Veloso but made famous by Gal Costa's voice, carries a queer undertone in its gender reversal: the lyrics were written by a man, but were immortalized in the voice of a woman. Babenco's decision to linger on the surrounding nature—particularly, the iconic Dois Irmãos mountains in Rio—for twenty seconds, as we hear the sounds of waves in the background, contributes to the sensation of time halting (01:17:48–01:18:08). This focus creates the sense that the improvised scene interrupts the flow of the main narrative, creating a “queer” moment of affection between mother and son.

For this reason, time becomes a key element in interpreting Lilica's queer Pietà. Jack Halberstam argues that queer subcultures “produce alternative

temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to a logic external to the paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2). Halberstam suggests that the biological clock of cisgender women and the bourgeois notion of “respectability” influence the timing of reproduction in heteronormative relationships (5). When Lilica sings through Veloso’s words that “time stopped” (“o tempo parou”) for her to gaze upon “that belly” (“aquela barriga”), it is as if she has interrupted time in favor of a queer temporality. Lilica’s fear of turning eighteen underscores this idea: she wants to stop time because, instead of transitioning into adulthood and adhering to the norms of marriage and reproduction, she faces an uncertain future. Lilica knows that if the police apprehend her again, she will not be sent back to the detention center, but to a regular prison where violence against her could be even worse. This moment offers the possibility of reinventing her motherhood, as Pixote embraces the only mother figure he has ever known. For a brief moment, time freezes, allowing Lilica to envision a symbolic pregnancy—one that does not follow the normative patterns of reproduction but instead uses poetry as the means of reinvention.

Lilica, untethered from the reproductive time of heterosexual cisgender women, harnesses music to reshape time. Music, like poetry, operates in a different pace and rhythm than regular speech, providing a language of expression that everyday communication fails to convey. By singing, Lilica articulates what language cannot, transforming her emotions and desires into a melody. This decision to communicate through song rather than declarative sentences is itself a queer act—one that challenges normative forms of communication and syntax. Lilica’s ability to freeze both the plot and the audience’s perception of time through her song is a “strange” act that encapsulates the nonnormative temporality of her language and her existence.

Additionally, Lilica’s recurring search for a male provider among Black men makes her lament resonate with the realities of other marginalized groups. While queer time disrupts the normative sequence of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death, Black time is also nonnormative, shaped by the persistent threat of death. In Brazil, Black youth are 2.7 times more likely to be killed than their white counterparts (Nitahara), meaning that Black temporalities are often abruptly cut short. In many cases, this constant danger makes it difficult to adhere to the hegemonic pattern of life’s milestones.

Finally, I should note that the film was released in 1980, a moment when the LGBTQ community's relationship with time was gradually shifting given the rise of HIV/AIDS. Although the normative time of modern bourgeois life is closely tied to the collective desire for longevity (Halberstam 4), queer bodies found themselves living within a shortened temporality at this historical moment, constantly confronted by the looming threat of a mysterious disease. While the director and actors may not have been influenced by this at the time of filming—since the first confirmed case of AIDS in Brazil was not reported until 1983 (Campana)—the historical trajectory of the past four decades imbues Lilica's lament with new meaning. Her fearful questioning of what life has in store for her now takes on a poignant resonance.

The Death of a Queer Family

Soon after this delicate moment between Lilica and Pixote at the beach, the sex worker Sueli (Marília Pêra) enters the narrative, adding to Pixote's forced maturation through their ambiguous interaction, which simultaneously conveys both maternal and erotic love. Sueli treats Pixote with a degree of care, yet also with the harshness typical of the underworld she inhabits. After she undergoes an abortion, she shows Pixote the extracted fetus, an experience that leaves him frightened (01:29:45). While Lilica embodies an alternative temporality by rejecting the normative steps of womanhood, Sueli does not follow this conventional path either—her baby dies before being born. As a sex worker, Sueli exists outside the world of bourgeois "respectability," drawing her closer to the nonnormative family that surrounds the protagonist.

After joining forces, Sueli, Lilica, Dito, and Pixote lure men looking for sex to rob them, but instead of buying drugs or weapons, they spend the money on sandwiches and sodas. When Pixote expresses his desire for a chocolate ice cream to "fill his belly" ("completar a barriga," 01:36:44), his childlike behavior creates a paradox. Right after asking for ice cream like a child, the ten-year-old Pixote kisses Sueli on the lips, leading to a disturbing incongruence between childish and adult desires. This moment dismantles the expected representation of childhood and further disrupts the heteronormative nuclear family. When they finish eating, the group repeats their strategy of luring another victim to steal his car. At this point, the appearance of the sex worker threatens Lilica's role as the mother within

their kinship, and she becomes jealous of Dito owing to his closeness with Sueli. This tension quickly escalates when Dito and Sueli have sex (01:45:10–01:45:42), prompting Lilica to decide to leave the family, effectively dismantling the bond they had formed. Having already lost his biological mother, Pixote now loses the queer mother who had embraced him, becoming a double orphan.

Following Lilica's angry departure, Pixote and Dito fight as they attempt to pinpoint who is to blame for her leaving. To offend Dito, Pixote insults him by revealing that Dito's mother had an affair with Sapato (01:47:26)—the inspector who appeared in the film's opening scene, declaring that he is not anyone's father. This insult reflects the film's consistent engagement with motherhood and the disintegration of the bourgeois, romantic family structure, which is explored in multiple layers throughout the narrative.

Shortly after, the group attempts to rob Sueli's only American client. During the robbery, Pixote tries to shoot the foreign man but misses, accidentally killing Dito before ultimately shooting the client (01:50:35), an event that brings about the complete dissolution of their improvised family. Babenco may be offering a subtle commentary on the pervasive influence of the United States in Brazil during the dictatorship. As a Latin American filmmaker with both theoretical awareness and lived experience in the United States, Babenco's choice to include a white American client—depicted as the only figure the Brazilian children fail to rob—is deeply suggestive. The scene begins with Sueli mocking the client in Portuguese, confident in her linguistic advantage because the man is unable to understand her. By its conclusion, however, Dito is dead, Pixote is devastated, and Sueli is inconsolable. Their apparent control collapses, implying that, since 1964, US hegemony in Brazil has remained inescapable.

Situated in the final moments of the film, Dito's assassination warrants close attention for its symbolic resonance with the act of killing one's father. While such an act might signify an initiation into manhood—particularly through the phallic symbolism of the gun that makes Pixote feel momentarily adult—the protagonist's reaction to Dito's death reveals the opposite: he regresses into loneliness and a yearning for maternal protection in Sueli's presence. With Lilica's disappearance and Dito's death, Pixote is left alone, without the parents that his alternative family had given him. The movie ends with Sueli and Pixote watching television together, when suddenly the boy vomits and then suckles at Sueli's breast like a newborn, regressing to a childlike state. While she initially embraces him, Sueli violently

pushes him away from her body, shouting that she is not his mother (01:55:42). Pixote's attempt to breastfeed, another improvised scene (*Pixote, in memoriam*, 36:25), further highlights the film's queering of the act of storytelling itself, prioritizing spontaneity over a rigid script.

After losing his biological mother and his queer mother, Sueli becomes the third and final mother that Pixote cannot have. The film's final line, spoken by Sueli to Pixote—"cada um se vira como pode" (01:55:59)—encapsulates its depiction of the profound challenges faced by incarcerated children attempting to forge a life beyond the detention center. In the end, the film suggests that the only maternal figure the boy could rely upon was the queer Pietà, who, despite the pervasive violence they both endured, sought to protect him. Equally significant is Lilica's autonomy: unlike the boys, she neither dies nor is abandoned. She leaves the story when she feels disrespected, deciding to run away in an act of agency that the other characters do not possess. For this reason, Lilica and her transformation into a queer Pietà are central elements of the narrative. She is the only character who determines her own future and the only one who could truly try to be Pixote's mother.

Final Thoughts

In *Pixote, in memoriam*, Babenco reveals that the film was almost titled *The Survivor* (40:05). However, since Pixote ultimately survives, the film was named after its protagonist. In the opening scene, Sapato declares that he is not the children's father, and in the final line, Sueli refuses to be Pixote's mother when the boy instinctively seeks breast milk. Pixote has no father, mother, siblings, or anyone else to support him. The melancholic closing scene focuses on Pixote walking alone on the train tracks, balancing on the rail like a tightrope walker (01:57:48). As the audience watches Pixote on the "tightrope," Dito is dead, Lilica is gone, and Sueli has rejected the boy. This scene was also improvised, and Babenco decided to include it after seeing Fernando Ramos da Silva playing there during his lunch break. In the director's words, this moment represents the universal need to find one's path and maintain balance (*Pixote, in memoriam* 39:40).

This article explored Lilica's presence in Héctor Babenco's *Pixote, a lei do mais fraco* to argue that she embodies a queer representation of Pietà. I examined

how the film portrays the struggle of outsiders attempting to construct an alternative family, leading to a discussion of race, class, gender, disability, and sexuality at a time when these issues were rarely addressed in Brazil. There are still numerous important elements in the film that warrant further exploration and could inspire future research, such as the representation of Black men as potential “providers,” the role of disability in the portrayal of Roberto Carlos dos pobres, and the power dynamics between Sueli and Lilica. With this study, I hope to demonstrate that revisiting *Pixote* decades later provides an opportunity to reflect on the enduring norms and oppressions that continue to resonate in Brazilian society.

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