The connection between gays and the femme fatale in cinema in terms of their challenge to patriarchal society goes back to film noir. In this film genre, according to Dyer, “Gays function as both villains and frustrations of the heterosexual development, as do the femmes fatales” (64). Both are dependent on the male hero for their sexual satisfaction, and “their sexual independence from the hero is undercut by the principle that no sexual satisfaction is possible away from the hero” (Dyer 66). Hence, Dyer argues that the male has the power to refuse “the offer” from either of them, but his refusal could mean that his sexual adequacy is not tested. The femme fatale and the male homosexual consequently become a source of anxiety as they put the patriarchal male’s sexuality under scrutiny, regardless of the two characters’ biological sex. For instance, in Madame Satã, João/Madame Satã’s gender performativity poses a threat to patriarchy as he occupies a position similar to that of the femme fatale: both turn the males into their “victim,” and they threaten procreation and marriage, to cite a few of the challenges they represent. As both need the male “hero” for their sexual satisfaction, as Dyer claims regarding film noir, they are therefore intent on seducing the male.

Madame Satã is Karím Ainouz’s first feature film. It is set in Lapa in the 1930s—then a red-light district in Rio de Janeiro. The way the place is portrayed recalls the dark and shadowy settings of the films noirs that depicted the traditional femme fatale, although in this case it is in color, like the neo-noir films. Madame Satã has won a few prizes including best director at the Festival of Biarritz (2002) and the Gold Hugo at the Chicago International Film Festival (2002). The film is based on the story of the real-life João Francisco dos Santos (1900–76), but it “rejects a
linear narrative in favour of a series of imaginary vignettes based on the protagonist’s life” (L. Shaw 87). João was born to descendants of slaves in the northeast of Brazil. When he was eight, his mother sold him to a horse seller but he fled to Rio de Janeiro with a woman who promised him work in a boarding house. Later, in Rio, when he was about 13, he left the house to live on the streets and he started doing small jobs in the Lapa neighborhood to survive. On turning 18, he went to live in a brothel where he worked as a waiter/maid and “served” customers according to their preferences (Green, O Pasquim).

The film, however, omits his childhood experiences and concentrates on the adult João/Madame Satã (Lázaro Ramos) who is involved in crime, works in low-paid jobs (when he manages to get paid), and dreams of becoming a famous performer. The failure to achieve this dream exacerbates his rage toward everything and everyone. João’s commune comprises the prostitute Laurita (Marcelia Cartaxo) and her young daughter Vitória, to whom João acts as a quasi-father (if not “mother”), and Tabu³ (Flávio Bauraqui)—a transvestite who takes the role of the maid in the house and for whom João acts as a pimp. The house is also frequented by Renatinho (Felipe Marques), a petty thief who becomes João’s quasi-boyfriend.

João/Madame Satã was a complex person who became known for challenging roles associated with someone like him: black, poor, illiterate, malandro, and homosexual, which are all portrayed in the film. João’s gender is a performative construct that is “staged” and shifts according to his needs, so it challenges the hegemonic construction of gender roles. His gender performativity deconstructs the notions of categories and subjectivities that are ingrained in the patriarchal imaginary. He refuses to be labeled and plays with different identities that are originally linked to gender and sexual hegemonic binaries. João/Madame Satã challenges these categories by performing gender identities that are not connected to his biological body. That is, he acts as a father, mother, husband, avenger, pimp, and drag queen, among other roles. The ways he performs his gender and sexual identities trouble and deconstruct patriarchal Brazilian perceptions of these. For instance, his performativity challenges imaginarie surrounding the figure of the malandro (an example of hypermasculinity) and the figure of the bicha (the passive effeminate male homosexual), as I discuss in the following section.

Deconstructing Hegemonic Gender and Sexual Roles: Bicha versus Malandro

Green (O Pasquim) argues that the homosexuality of the real-life João made him an intriguing figure (as the film also portrays) because it