

Use of stylistic resources for the construction of deviant characters in telenovelas: an analysis of Rudá, from *Travessia* ["The Path"]

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Abstract

This paper discusses how technical resources from audiovisual media contributed to the construction of the character Rudá, from the Brazilian telenovela *Travessia*, by Glória Perez, telecast by TV Globo. This is a teenager who identifies as asexual and aromantic, defying social, cultural and historical norms on sexuality and behavior. The study employed a literature review on telenovelas and their social relevance, as well as a bibliographic discussion on the representation of sexuality in the media, besides its stylistic analysis of scenes involving Rudá, based on television fiction studies. The analysis showed that the stylistic resources, such as lighting and costuming, were essential to illustrate Rudá's path towards self-acceptance. Scenes with backlighting and dark clothes suggest confusion and anguish, whereas the change to colorful clothes and brightened scenes signals his process of personal acceptance. The stylistic approach, in the case of the character Rudá, helped to build the narrative of the telenovela, making the asexual identity visible in a symbolic way, deconstructing stereotypes and promoting critical reflection upon social and cultural norms. The presence of deviant characters in telenovelas promotes discussion on sexual diversity in the media, and the use of stylistic resources contributes to the complexity in the construction of these characters. In Rudá's case, the narrative of *Travessia* offers media representation of asexuality, which tends to reduce gender and sexuality inequalities and safeguard the right to information and citizenship.

Keywords: television studies; serial television fiction; Brazilian telenovela; character studies; stylistic analysis.

Introduction

Travessia, internationally known as *The Path*, was a Brazilian telenovela telecast by TV Globo from October 10, 2022 to May 5, 2023, written by Glória Perez and directed by Mauro Mendonça Filho. The work tells the story of Brisa, a woman that was accused of kidnapping a child after becoming a victim of fake news. According to data made available by the network (Cardoso, 2023), the production was sold to the international market based on its daily audience of 32.1 million people through open television and its lead in the first five weeks of exhibition on the streaming platform.

In one of the storylines, the narrative follows Rudá, a teenager who faces internal conflicts and external pressure due to his lack of romantic interest in women and men. As the episodes unfold, the young man starts to understand himself as asexual and aromantic, indicating lack of desire for physical contact or marital companionship. With his being a representation that deviates from socially, historically and culturally established norms, Rudá may be considered a deviant character.

Deviant characters are those who break with socially, historically and culturally established hegemonic patterns. According to Araújo (2005), the deviation may occur in aspects present in behavior, financial situation, social class, sexual identity, age range, among several other factors. In a society that is considered patriarchal and hetero-normative, which is characteristic in Brazil in 2023, asexuality is considered a "sexual deviation".

On Rubin's perspective (2017), societies tend to categorize certain sexual practices (or, in this case, lack of practices) as "deviant" or outside the acceptable norms, while others are privileged as "normal" or "legitimate". Even though the concept of "sexual deviation" is relative and culturally determined, as what is considered deviant in a society may be completely acceptable in some other, the contemporary Brazilian society manifests violence and prejudice towards asexual people (Amethista, 2022), which range from stereotypical framing to corrective rapes.

Oliveira (2023) argues that Rudá's story – and his friendship with Caíque, who is also asexual – arose on the audience reactions such as surprise and lack of knowledge regarding asexuality and praising comments about the approach of the theme, expressing satisfaction for finally seeing asexuality depicted on television. Besides the high engagement on social media, the repercussion of the representation on the telenovela extended to other media, such as news portals, TV programs and interviews with the actors who portrayed Caíque and Rudá, who shared their experiences.

With this case in the public eye, the following research problem arose: how did the television style help in the construction of this character? Thus, the aim of this study was to discuss how technical resources of audiovisual media contributed to this poetic process. The methodology consisted of literature review on telenovelas and their relevance to society, a conceptualization of asexuality and a stylistic analysis of scenes that comprise Rudá's storyline, with emphasis on aspects concerning mostly the performance.

Before delving into the main discussion of this article, it is important to highlight some specific issues related to masculinity, asexuality, and adolescence that may contribute to the proposal of highlighting the use of stylistic resources for character construction. Butler (2022), for instance, emphasizes that gender is a repetitive performance shaped by cultural and social practices, challenging the notion of intrinsic characteristics to the masculine and feminine, and proposing that these categories are sustained by social norms that can be contested.

Specifically regarding masculinity in telenovelas, Ortega (2019) reveals a significant evolution in the representation of leading men over the decades, focusing on the Brazilian context. Although television still perpetuates hegemonic masculinity, from the 2000s onwards, leading men began to display greater sensitivity and verbalize their feelings. However, male hegemony has not been completely challenged, remaining relevant in fictional representations. Also analyzing telenovelas, Bohórquez García (2015) presents three classifications for understanding representations of deviant masculinity: the "madman," a stereotypical figure that serves to highlight what is not masculine; the "failed masculinity," which challenges traditional norms of virility; and "masculinity in formation," representing a man's journey towards acceptance of hegemonic standards of masculinity.

Based on previous discussions held at scientific-academic events, we can observe that while Moretti seems to reinforce hegemonic masculinity with sexist behaviors and airs of superiority, and Caíque suggests a threat to the notion of virility by showing that it is possible to be protective and heteroaffectionate without

being driven by the need for procreation, Rudá represents a rupture from young masculinity by not showing interest in carnal relationships and demonstrating sensitivity.

We start from this context to discuss the relevance of the telenovela as a cultural product for Brazilian society and the definition of asexuality and its representation in television media. From there, we delve into the notion of stylistic analysis as a method for analyzing deviant characters in telenovelas, seeking to connect poetic and narrative studies with the sociological and anthropological approaches prompted by the audiovisual, particularly regarding what we know as the pedagogical function of melodrama.

Telenovelas in Brazilian Society

From a text perspective, telenovela is a genre that comprises audiovisual language, through episodic narrative, generally broadcast daily over several months, whose characters frequently reflect upon actions and behaviors of the society (Calza, 1996). Furthermore, when considering historical and social aspects, it is possible to notice that this television format, in addition to enjoying legitimate acceptance within the Latin-American community, works as a resource that mediates political and cultural discussions, allowing for broad access (Martín-Barbero, 1987).

In the 1980s, Martín-Barbero (1987) acknowledged the telenovela as an object of interest of applied social sciences, given its popularity and commercial success not only in Latin-American countries, but also in the United States and in parts of Europe. More recently, Lopes (2021) summarized the communicative and cultural power of telenovelas in relation to human rights, as it contributes to social inclusion, environmental responsibility, respect towards diversity and the development of citizenship.

When defining telenovela as a narrative of the nation, Lopes (2021) rescues the idea of transforming the format in Brazil: a product that evolved from being purely sentimental to representing the multiple realities of the country, allowing the public to feel represented in it. In that way, the author had already highlighted the importance of the characters, who, many times, become encouragers of political, union and activist mobilizations, requiring adjustments in the way to conduct actions in fiction for contradicting the public image of the real (Lopes, 2003).

By classifying the telenovela as a communicative resource, Lopes (2021) reminds us that, with its melodramatic structure, the format inherently carries a pedagogical function. The educational power of the telenovela is also highlighted by Baccega (2022), who states that the format may present concepts in an easier and faster way, proposing engagement along with the public and promoting dialogue.

Since the 1990s, by assuming a more naturalistic environment, as argued by Lopes (2021), Brazilian telenovelas take over the role of approaching topics of social and political agendas. Before, the author had defined social merchandising as a deliberate pedagogical action with objectives that included information dissemination, promotion of universal ethical values, induction of mentality change and adoption of new behaviors related to topics of public interest, as well as the stimulation of the debate regarding socially relevant matters (Lopes, 2009).

Topics of social importance in telenovelas, also referred to as theming by Jakubaszko (2019), are those that, in a certain historical moment, reflect worries, generate questions and propose problems to be considered, defined and solved by the social environment in which they occur. The stories that compose such themings

present characters that become complex, internalized and ambiguous, according to Motter (2003), who describes them as living a tense daily life, full of problems, anxieties and impotence. They fall on traps and disputes among agents interested in controlling their perception, opinions, tastes, preferences and needs. Thus, there is, with the Brazilian telenovela, a need to unite the conventional narrative matrixes of the genre with emerging themings of contemporary society. Particularly in what concerns Glória Perez, Gomes (2013) discusses that the writer uses references from melodrama, *radionovela* and *feuilleton*, which comprise the basis of national telenovela, to create stories following an almost-standard plan, contributing to the consolidation of an established model of telenovela, at the same time that she faces the challenge of building a narrative that, within this traditional formula and limits of internal logic of the format, meets needs such as entertainment, commercialization and stance.

Glória Perez's stance has always been linked to emerging citizen themings. As recalled by Abrão (2021), the writer has already explored themes related to sexuality, maternity, conflicts faced by trans women, as well as discussed matters of drug and human traffic. In that way, she stands out as an author that is sensitive towards pressing women's matters in society, treating them in a critical and pioneering way by incorporating social-educational elements in her television productions (Abrão, 2021).

For Santos and Tavares (2021), Glória Perez's image as a strong woman, especially after the tragedy she faced with the murder of her daughter, influenced on the creation of equally strong main characters in her telenovelas and on the centrality of female characters in her pieces. That allowed her to adopt a style of character construction that distanced itself from traditional melodrama, presenting "deviant" main characters with complex psychological traces and less predictable actions.

Specifically in relation to gender and sexuality themes, Fachine *et al.* (2020) observe that these are more common in telenovelas telecast at noble time, such as 21h or 23h on Rede Globo, especially when they involve non-heterosexual characters. Cavalcanti, Ferreira and Sigiliano (2017), in a mapping of the sexuality approach in Brazilian telenovelas, conclude that every time a character is openly identified as part of the LGBTQIAPN+ community, this character will exist as a gay man, a lesbian woman or a trans person, but rarely will they develop a romantic relationship or they will do so covertly.

Mattos (2018), when focusing on the character of Ivana/Ivan, from *Edge of Desire (A Força do Querer*, in the original), also by Glória Perez, shows that the telenovela promoted a discourse in favor of diversity, challenging essentialist concepts of gender and exploring new possibilities of gender identity. Furthermore, for the author, Rede Globo has been strengthening LGBT topics in its schedule, promoting the freedom of expression of gender identity and stimulating inclusive social behavior (Mattos, 2018).

Thus, it is possible to agree that telenovelas have the ability to expand the viewers' repertoire, and acknowledging the lack of asexuality representation in daily media, there is the need for a more in-depth analysis of such matters. This relevance expands when we consider that Brazil is a global hub of telenovela production, exporting its products to a great number of countries (Meimaridis, Mazur & Rios, 2020).

According to Oliveira (2015), who conducted extensive research on asexual young people, broadly available means of communication, such as TV programs, offer a platform for the discussion, exploration and expression of identities, especially those that are marginalized, including sexual identities that do not fit conventional norms. In other words, the ability to question, redefine and attribute new meaning to their own identities as people are exposed to new information or experiences grants contemporary individuals with a significant level of self-reflection (Oliveira, 2015).

In *Travessia's* case, by evidencing the teenager Rudá in his self-discovery process, the telenovela tends to contribute to respect towards sexual diversity.

Asexuality and Its Representation on Television Media

Sexuality is transformed in a regulatory manner, according to Foucault (1988): it starts in childhood within the family, where parents establish rules that limit the expression of sexual life. Butler (2019), from a Foucaultian perspective, observes that sex works not only as a norm, but also as a regulatory way, highlighting a productive power destined to mark, produce and differentiate the bodies it controls.

If sexuality is tacitly regulated by hetero-normative practices and, at least in the West, follows Jewish-Christian regulations, it is understandable why so little is talked about asexuality, a term composed by the affix "a-", which indicates lack thereof. Asexuality, as a form of human sexual expression, has always existed, but went unnoticed by society, unlike other sexualities, resulting in little scientific interest on the matter.

A theme which has only recently been explored by contemporary researchers, asexuality is understood as an identity category by Oliveira (2015), who states that the lack of interest, both sexual and romantic, has been acknowledged as a facet of the wide range of human diversity, representing a unique way of experiencing sexuality which does not depend on the assumption of a sexual and romantic desire that is universal or mandatory.

On the other hand, Decker (2014) summarizes asexuality in five points: 1) it is a sexual orientation because it describes a person's attraction pattern (towards nobody); 2) it is a mature state because it is not a term for what the person is before developing his or her sexual orientation; 3) it is a description because it is a word that explains an experience, not a decision or choice; 4) it is a healthy state because not desiring, seeking or having sexual attraction is not considered a physical or mental illness; and 5) it is a reasonable possibility because feeling romantic or sexual attraction towards other people is not the norm.

Without entering the discussion on whether asexuality is a sexual orientation, as argued by Decker (2014) due to the lack of sexual interest in anyone, or an identity category, as assumed by Oliveira (2015) precisely due to the lack of interest in others, it is important to understand asexuality as the lack of carnal desire towards another person, independently of gender, and that it is not linked to hormonal matters or traumas. It is important to highlight, though, the existence of a so-called gray area, where graysexual and demisexual individuals reside.

According to Decker (2014), graysexual individuals experience sporadic attraction for other people and may opt for developing sexual relationships without it being a daily or primary trace. On the other hand, demisexual individuals develop sexual interest in people with whom they share an emotional connection, not necessarily romantic. Both categories are considered ramifications of asexuality, as those who identify with them are closer to asexual people than to alosexual ones.

Bogaert (2012) also reminds us that being asexual does not mean necessarily being aromantic. In other words, it is possible to experience romantic involvement without the presence of sexual relationships, since though sex and affection may be connected, they are dissociable. Based on this argument, the author argues that there may be asexual individuals who are hetero-romantic, bi-romantic or homo-romantic. The author also discusses the fact that, in our contemporary society, there are standardized techniques to assess

whether someone fits the traditional gender roles, but these techniques have never been applied to an asexual group (Bogaert, 2012).

The understanding of asexuality, still obscure in social comprehension, is also cloudy in fictional television. Rocha *et al.* (2020), in their analysis of characters, identified some problematic cases: in *Futurama*, on the episode "Fry Am the Egg Man", asexuality is portrayed as synonym of asexual reproduction, where the individual creates copies of him or herself; in *House, M.D.*, on the episode "Better Half", asexuality is treated as a reason to discover a brain tumor on the patient, which diminished his libido; in *Game of Thrones*, on the episode "The Laws of Gods and Men", aspects of an asexual character are explored, but the term itself is not mentioned.

In Brazilian television fiction, Oliveira (2015) remembers the existence of Alexandre, an explicitly asexual character in *Malhação ID* (TV Globo, 2009-2010), who fights against his own sexual attraction feelings, neither for women nor for men. While he tried to understand himself better, he established relations both with women and with men; however, only when he underwent therapy did a psychologist present him to asexuality as an identity option, which relieved his affliction (Oliveira, 2015).

The experience of being an asexual teenager becomes delicate and agonizing, considering that it is a phase of discussions about sex within everyday friendship circles. As explained by Decker (2014), while some teenagers may opt for not paying attention to teasing jokes and harassment that they may face when they do not share the enthusiasm for pornographic magazines or do not participate constantly in conversation about with whom they would like to be sexually involved, the majority does not have the necessary abilities to deal with such pressure when they become the target.

This situation of internal conflict is common for the character Rudá, especially when confronted by his mother or stepfather and pressured to find a girlfriend or assume his supposed homosexuality. We highlight the importance of noticing the character Rudá under the perspective of the central theme, which may generate significant effects to the meaning for the public and contribute to social-cultural development. As a teenager, we may consider Rudá as an individual who has the maturity to deal with the conflicts surrounding him, but who still feels confused about questions that cannot be answered immediately, such as the construction of his sexuality.

According to the Brazilian legislation, any individual aged between 12 and 18 years is considered a teenager (Brasil, 1990). However, it seems restrictive to think that there is an abrupt change in cognitive, psychological and physical functions of a child who goes to bed when they are 11 years, 11 months and 29 days old and wakes up the next day as a teenager at 12 years of age; similarly, that a teenager goes to bed on the day of their 18th birthday and wakes up the following day an adult of 18 years and 1 day of age. For that reason, we opted for reviewing the definition proposed by Calligaris (2000), which describes the subject teenager as capable, well-informed and prepared in several ways – be it through school education, parents' guidance or media influence – to adopt the cultural standards of a community. The subject becomes a teenager when, despite being prepared to compete in all aspects, he or she is not acknowledged as an adult (Calligaris, 2000).

We understand that the "competition" mentioned by Calligaris (2000) refers to the challenge of adult life itself, and we agree that teenagers often demonstrate maturity and critical thinking comparable to those of adults, especially when in contrast with pre-teens who are still in the process of developing these abilities, or with children, who generally have them directed at creative and playful activities. Furthermore, we agree

that teenagers are frequently influenced to follow moral norms that were instilled in them during their upbringing, especially by families and schools. However, we believe that the critical nature of teenagers allows them to explore new paths based on their own convictions, especially when it comes to political and religious matters, for example.

Finally, even though financial and social success may be understood as a goal after adolescence, we understand that, at least in the contemporary Brazilian reality, this success seems to be ever-more distant, with many young people still living with their parents or depending on them – though there are those who are able to balance study and work, or even opt for leaving their studies to dedicate themselves to a career. Similarly, success in love and in sexual life, which might have been more common in the past, is now frequently idealized, given the fleeting or unstable relationships that are common among this age range.

Another aspect that deserves to be questioned is the process of physical maturity, which is a physiological experience, unique for each individual. While some go through their body transformation right at the beginning of adolescence, others experience the so-called late puberty, without it necessarily affecting their cognitive or psychological development. Exploring a broader perspective on the concept of adolescence, Palácios (2004) highlights that this stage is a relatively recent construction, at least in the way it is understood in the Western world.

For the author, a teenager may be identified by: still being enrolled in the school system, in some context of vocational education or seeking a stable occupation; financially depending on their parents and living with them; being in the transition process from a relationship system that is focused on the group of friends to one focused on relationships with people from the opposite sex; feeling part of a teenage culture that has their own tendencies, lifestyle and values; and having worries and questions that are no more typical of childhood, but not yet aligned with adult worries (Palácios, 2004).

Palácios's (2004) view aligns with the general conception of adolescence, except for the emphasis on relationships with someone from the opposite sex. It is important to highlight that not all teenagers necessarily follow the heterosexuality path, as they may identify as homosexual (attracted to the same gender), bisexual (attracted to both genders), pansexual (attracted to all gender identities) or other forms of sexual orientation. In the case of the character under analysis in this paper, asexuality means the lack of sexual interest towards other people.

Integrating psychology and literary studies, Coelho (2000) describes adolescence as a development stage characterized by reflexive and critical thinking, when teenagers are involved in exploring the world around them and awaken to a critical conscience concerning established norms. She states that, for teenagers, the desire to live mixes with the desire to learn, understood as an essential element to achieve self-fulfillment. According to Coelho (2000), in this stage, teenagers must open themselves to the world and establish significant relations with others.

In accordance with the author, we understand that adolescence is a period in which individuals intensify their reflection on the world surrounding them, questioning the actions and behaviors of people around them, as well as the behaviors they themselves were taught to adopt. Though it is not possible to generalize, it is possible to observe that teenagers are not merely followers of orders or individuals whose opinions are shaped by third parties, but citizens with critical thinking and a voice of their own. They have distinct interests and seek answers to their own questions and doubts.

In this context, the way teenagers are portrayed on television media may take two directions: the traditional and conservative approach, or a more innovative and disruptive perspective. The work by Coutinho (2009) is an example of research that is dedicated to analyzing how adolescence is represented on television, focusing on the Brazilian series *Malhação*.

In her analysis, the author describes *Malhação* as addressing mainly themes such as the discovery of love and sexuality (usually together), flirting, dating, matches and mismatches, both by the main characters and the supporting characters. The romantic relationships represented in the series are usually interrupted by young villains who frequently are involved in cheating to get advantages, whereas the main characters spend most part of the plot in conflicts so that, in the end, they reconcile and get married, before leaving for some distant destination and finishing the program. The dialogues are mostly full of ready-made sentences, reinforcing moral lessons and behavioral models that reaffirm the traditional social roles of boys and girls in society. Even though the slang used may seem only characteristic of the characters, they may also fulfill a role of consolidating several stereotypes (Coutinho, 2009).

As observed by the author, the representation of teenagers in Brazilian TV series during the mid-2000s frequently adopted stereotypes and clichés, creating characters that seemed to worry solely about matters concerning passions and conflicts between friends. That created the impression that this stage of life revolved around these social-emotional challenges. Furthermore, it was noticeable how the plot surrounding teenagers followed a simplified and repetitive structure, focused on finding love and on romantic disappointments, occasionally with moral lessons included to serve educational purposes.

It was also evident that those representations generally fit the binary model boy/girl, occasionally exploring the duality between heterosexuality and homosexuality, with little consideration towards other identities or identity expressions. However, when we observe teenage characters on TV series in other countries, we notice that they are frequently portrayed in a more complex way, as individuals with social, political conscience and critical capacity to question the world around them, going beyond the conventional worries of the age.

An analysis conducted by Miguel and Freitas (2021) comparing the Brazilian series *Malhação* with international series aimed at teenagers, such as the Norwegian *Skam* (NRK, 2015-2017), highlights that, contrary to previous approaches focused on teenage culture stereotypes, the recent series tend to utilize these more superficial elements as an entryway to explore deeper questions, such as matters of race, gender and sexuality.

In order to further this analysis, it is essential to acknowledge that, besides going through adolescence, Rudá is male. According to Beauvoir (1970), during this stage, boys usually experience a feeling of discomfort towards changes in their bodies, but are also proud of leaving behind the childishness to become manly men. The author argues that, in this context, the value of a young man as an individual is often associated with characteristics of his genitalia, such as the size of his penis, the strength of urine flow, ability to have erections and ejaculate. For many teenagers, these aspects become a measure of their self-esteem and personal value (Beauvoir, 1970).

Rudá does not talk about his penis or deliberately exhibits the hair on his body in the narrative of *Travessia*. Even though these may be generic tendencies for boys, especially during puberty, body changes, which many times involve insecurities concerning one's own physical appearance, do not seem to be the focus of

actions that surround the character. Rudá's scenes, besides the storylines of crimes and family conflicts surrounding him, are more concerned with self-discovery and self-acceptance.

Stylistic Analysis Concerning the Construction of Television Characters

This study initially draws on bibliographical and visibly interdisciplinary research, which gathered studies on telenovelas and sexuality in the aim of establishing the theoretical perspectives that help with the discussion concerning the construction of the character Rudá, from the telenovela *Travessia*, as an asexual teenager. For the analytical part, we followed the orientations of audiovisual researchers who have already discussed poetic analysis centered on character construction.

To gather and select the material to be studied, we followed the guidelines in Pucci Jr. *et al.* (2013), who argue that delimiting the scope of a serialized fiction work is a complex task, as its duration is usually long and does not allow for the observation of each take or scene. As the authors explain, it is sufficient to assess the crucial moments of the plot, i.e. those that may include essential elements to achieve the purpose of the study (Pucci Jr. *et al.*, 2013).

Thus, we accessed the official Globoplay website on March 7, 2023, and on the search box we typed the term 'Rudá'. In the 'Videos' section, which resulted in 150 results, we only selected the scenes from the telenovela *Travessia*, excluding other characters named Rudá and news articles containing topics or places with this name. We ended up with a total of 66 videos, which were collected using the method 'copy link' and organized chronologically using the function 'Classify' on Microsoft Word.

In the initial viewing of these pre-selected videos, we separated the scenes related to the character's sexuality, taking into consideration that his role in the narrative also concerned controversies with deepfake, family conflicts and criminal investigation. Thus, we identified a corpus with 27 videos, encompassing his worries, discoveries and self-acceptance, which were critically reviewed and compared to theoretical contributions discussed in the previous sections.

We used the linguistic field to carry out the analysis, specifically through narrative and stylistic studies, seeking to reflect upon the construction of the character Rudá in the diegetic context of the telenovela *Travessia*, as well as upon the television resources chosen for the composition of his scenes. In order to do so, we followed the condensed guidelines provided by authors such as Bordwell and Thompson (2008) and Butler (2018).

Characters in an audiovisual work are not simply an individual or an entity with human characteristics, but a set of characteristics that include behaviors, capabilities, routines, preferences, mental impulses and other qualities that make them unique (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008). According to the authors, despite being inspired by reality, fictional characters often have more defined and easily recognizable traits, with the plot being an important element in the revealing of such traits to the viewer.

Butler (2018), on the other hand, explains that when it comes to television narratives, the most appropriate way to understand how characters are constructed is to identify the signs that comprise them. In that way, the author lists data such as name of the character, appearance, objects he or she carries, places he or she lives, dialogue, lighting, videography, actions and previous knowledge of the narrative of which they are part.

When proposing to observe Rudá based on his traits, it is essential to also consider other narrative components, especially time, space and interactions with other characters. Furthermore, it is necessary to observe general aspects of *mise-en-scène*, such as scenography, costumes, make-up, lighting and staging – elements that comprise the technical choices employed on the production, which Bordwell and Thompson (2008) understand as stylistic resources in the audiovisual narrative.

According to Butler (2018), to carry a basic analysis of the television style, it is necessary to start with a description that indicates the key-points of the plot under analysis, camera angles, dialogue, lighting and scenography, so that it is possible to move on to defending one's own interpretations of what may be considered as 'television text'. We believe that such suggestion is essential to understand the construction of television characters.

The proposed methodological approach is in line with what Logan (2015) describes as 'performance', an analytical exercise in which the role of actors in a scene is relevant to understand the style and aesthetic in television narratives. This movement, regarding matters raised on asexuality, is also in line with what Laborde (2017) suggests on the analysis of television text, that is, that it must have an interdisciplinary character and consider, above all, the social representations present in it.

Analysis of Rudá

Rudá, played by Guilherme Cabral, is a technology-enthusiastic teenager who usually does not leave the house – which aligns with what Ferreira (2022) calls 'room generation'. In his first scene on October 10, 2022, we are presented to a boy immersed in the digital world, creating a deepfake using Brisa's picture, making up false information that she is a baby kidnapper, which goes viral on social media – leading her to be pursued and motivating the main plot, which is not our discussion focus at the moment.

Even though nothing concerning sexuality is approached in this first chapter, the audiovisual elements help us have an idea of who Rudá is. Through the extremely closed plan that framed only a part of his face, we notice a white boy with slightly curly hair, a serious expression and the gaze focused on the camera, transmitting intimacy and inviting the viewer to be an accomplice in the criminal prank. Furthermore, through the plan in slow motion that details the touch of his index finger on the sharing button, we notice an emphasis on the viewer's involvement in the action: everybody is sharing the fake picture.

The narrative informs us that Rudá is in Portugal due to his mother's, Guida, wedding with Moretti, living temporarily in the new stepfather's house, under the care of Miss Inácia. On October 12, 2022, Rudá's rebelliousness starts to manifest when he stretches on the couch, wearing ripped jeans, and refuses to tie his shoelaces. It is also the moment when the dialogue emphasizes his comfort, when Guida tells him that she will go on a honeymoon, and he complains about being left alone because he does not know how to cook or move around the city on his own.

A stereotypical view of a dependent teenager is constructed, someone who would not be able to survive without the support of adults, while simultaneously projecting on the parents the reasons to be the way he is, with statements such as 'I'm always a problem for you'. Guida often says common sentences such as 'You are pretty grown up', but that contrasts with her action of asking Miss Inácia to take care of him when

she is away. The Portuguese housekeeper, when trying to spoil him by offering snacks, also asks him to 'tie his shoelaces', showing authority. However, he resists, showing that his personal will shall prevail.

That creates the adolescence limbo presented by Calligaris (2000): while Rudá is already seen as a grown being, he is still not considered mature enough to take care of himself. Although he acknowledges the need for help with daily tasks, he wants to appear autonomous and in control of his own decisions. It is worth highlighting that, in this scene, Rudá is presented mainly in backlighting, keeping a serious expression.

We also observe a change in his stance: when everything seems fine, he spreads on the couch; when he feels independent, he is curved, sitting with the feet on the furniture next to the bed. Butler (2018) suggests that the stance is, in fact, a body performance strategy to emphasize the character's attitudes, which reaffirms the contrast between his comfort in knowing he is being taken care of by his mother and the discomfort caused by the lack of assurance when she leaves him.

On 15 October, 2022, after Miss Inácia tells Guida that she heard Rudá talking about running away from home, the mother figures that he may be planning to run away with a girlfriend. For that reason, she goes into the boy's bedroom, where he is still wearing the school uniform. Guida starts questioning him on said escape and whom he is dating. He vaguely answers the first question, but is serious and direct when he says he is not dating any girl and that he does not understand why his mother and stepfather keep trying to get him a girlfriend.

Annoyed by his mother's pressure, he leaves the room, which leads Moretti to suggest to Guida that maybe the stepson is gay. Guida goes to the living room, where the boy is lying on the sofa, and tells him that, if he is homosexual, she does not have a problem with that and that he can trust her to open up. Still in a sincere and direct manner, he questions his mother's insistence: 'Are you going to try to get me with a boy now?' and then berates her: 'You only think about dating, kissing, making out... what a pain!'

The wearing of the school uniform seems to be a way of showing that, despite travelling to another continent without a definite data to return due to his mother's wedding, the character maintains the school context associated with his age, as proposed by Palácios (2004). According to Bordwell and Thompson (2008, p. 122), when integrated with the setting '[...] costume may function to reinforce narrative and thematic patterns'. Butler (2018, p. 92) contemplates this perspective, by assessing that 'costuming is closely related to, and often overlaps with, our next sign of character'.

Furthermore, the narrative also presents an atmosphere of affirmation of the patriarchal society, as established by Beauvoir (1970), in which teenagers are encouraged to experience their manliness, where their penises need to have a sexual function. Rudá starts to explicitly deconstruct this hetero-normative trend, as described by Butler (2019), rooted into his mother's and stepfather's thoughts.

In this scene, the maintenance of seriousness in Rudá's facial expression is noteworthy, both at the moment in the bedroom and in the living room. It is also striking that, in this scene, as opposed to previous and subsequent scenes in which the character is shown wearing dark sneakers or socks even during moments of unwinding at home, here he appears completely barefoot, which may be related to the fact that this is the first moment in which he lets the façade go and reveals his emotional feeling in front of his mother and stepfather. Also, the use of backlighting on him is employed one more time.

According to Bordwell and Thompson (2008), the purpose of the technique of backlighting a character is to create silhouettes. For Butler (2018), this is one of the techniques used to obscure identity or, in general,

to suggest enigmatic situations. It is possible to notice that the second meaning of this technique resonates with Rudá's situation, as he lives some sort of enigma with himself.

Interferences in Rudá's sexual and sentimental life occur in several moments of the telenovela: on October 19, 2022, during lunch, Moretti sees a girl in the restaurant and insinuates that she may be interested in Rudá; on October 24, 2022, in a conversation with his mother, the boy unburdens that he could not stand to hear Moretti trying to get him a girlfriend, and Guida says she will talk to her husband again; on October 25, 2022, Moretti breaks into Rudá's room to tell him to put away his phone and look at the beautiful girls outside.

Stressed with Moretti's jokes, Rudá uses his technological abilities to create another deepfake, this time presenting his stepfather saying he hates dogs. The video rapidly goes viral on social media, causing problems for the man and the company of which he is ahead. On October 26, 2022, when Moretti is upset with the situation, Guida notices through her son's reaction that he is involved in the case and decides to talk to the boy.

Rudá is honest with his mother and says he thinks Moretti is 'a pain', but Guida defends her husband's sexist behavior, saying that he is just trying to help the boy. Rudá feels a little ashamed, but explains that he does not like girls nor does he want a girlfriend. Guida shows compassion, says that she had already asked him whether he was gay and asks him to tell her if that is the case. He gets stressed out and emphasizes: 'I'm not gay, is that what you wanted to hear?', turning his back to his mother.

In this scene, Rudá is once again presented with a serious expression, wearing the school uniform and with gadgets, such as cellphone and earphones. Even though his body is not darkened by backlighting, we notice that the framing is directed so that the light that comes in through the blue curtains is partially covered. There is a relation of proximity and distance between Rudá and his mother: the attempt to get close, to find comfort in motherly affection contrasts with the mother's almost vital necessity to see her son with a girlfriend or a boyfriend.

For almost a month, the topic of Rudá's sexuality is put aside to make space for family conflicts in which the boy is centered, especially the love triangle between his aunt, Leonor, who is Moretti's ex-girlfriend, his stepfather, and Guida. With the return of the family to Rio de Janeiro, the strong bond the boy has with his aunt is made evident, and a sense of complicity is established with both Leonor and Cotinha, his great-aunt. With the coming of Miss Inácia to Brazil to take care of Moretti's house in Rio de Janeiro, the level of trust between her and the boy is also reinforced, as she is always spoiling him. During this time, Guida announces that she needs to return to Portugal soon to organize the ongoing moving and that Rudá shall have to spend some time alone with his stepfather, but the boy does not seem comfortable with the situation.

On November 22, 2022, Moretti insists on his stepson going to the pool in the building, to make new friends and find a girlfriend, making the boy feel stressed and go to his room. The stepfather makes prejudicial and sexist comments about this situation with Guida, such as 'One of these days I'll go downstairs, get a girl and bring her here to him' and 'This boy has a problem.'

On the following chapter, on November 23, 2022, Rudá enters his room and is surprised to find pictures of half-naked women, which he rips apart in anger. Dragging a luggage towards the apartment's front door, he picks up the ripped picture pieces and throws them on his mother's desk, announcing that he will not go back to that house. It is worth highlighting that, now, Rudá's clothing includes a long-sleeved shirt being

worn as layer: in this and other moments, whenever the boy is pressed to talk about his sexuality, he covers his arms, suggesting fears, barriers, secrets and disguises.

This conflict leads to a discussion between Guida and Moretti: she emphasizes that she has already asked the husband not to bring up these topics with her son as it is something he does not wish to share, whilst the man makes fun of the boy, suggesting that he may be gay, as this is the only explanation for his behavior towards the pictures. At Cotinha's house, Rudá meets Caíque, Leonor's new boyfriend, who later will reveal himself as asexual and take the role of Rudá's mentor in his process of self-discovery and self-acceptance. On the episode from November 26, 2022, Cotinha decides to have an honest conversation with Rudá about his sexuality and interests. Rudá is sitting by himself on the couch, in backlighting, playing video game, with the sound of gunshots from the game as soundtrack. Cotinha enters to talk to the boy and is framed from a low angle, a technique commonly used in audiovisuals to establish the authority relation towards a submissive being – in this case, the adult, owner of the house, and the teenager, the guest.

Initially, she says that Guida is insisting on Rudá going back home and that she has already talked to Moretti and he will no longer interfere in the boy's life, but Rudá does not believe it. Cotinha gets close to the boy and sits in front of him to talk and try to understand his discomfort towards Moretti's pressure. Rudá asks her to put herself in his place and imagine how she would feel if someone tried to force her to do something she didn't want to do. Cotinha presses in, asking why he does not want to date, which makes the boy feel conflicted and try to avoid the conversation, but he is stopped by her.

Cotinha makes it clear that she is not on Moretti's side, but Rudá, already emotional, retorts: 'Why must I want to date?'. The great-aunt justifies that 'it is natural' for people his age to date, but the boy admits to his feelings, saying 'it is not natural to me', 'I don't like it', 'I don't want it'. Cotinha insists on the topic through a common approach in society: 'How can you not like it if you have never tried?', at the same time that Rudá starts to get desperate: 'I don't like it, I don't want it, it's not that hard to understand'. The great-aunt shows respect and says she will not bring up the subject with him anymore, comforting him by caressing his hair.

In parallel to this storyline, there is Caíque's revelation: he is Leonor's boyfriend and seems to be in love with her, but does not desire to have sexual relations. Initially, she thinks that it may be due to his lack of interest in her beauty, but Caíque explains that, for him, love is more important than physical intimacy, revealing to be a romantic asexual person. On December 17, 2023, when Caíque and Leonor talk in Cotinha's kitchen, Rudá comes in excited and asks for the cake Cotinha made. While Rudá eats the cake, Caíque comments that among asexual people, there is a saying that 'cake is better than sex'. Leonor asks if Caíque thinks her nephew is asexual, to which he nods in agreement.

On the following chapters, Rudá gains space in the family conflicts that rise from his mother's divorce from Moretti, except on January 7, 2023, when the boy brings a girl friend home and is embarrassed by his mother and great-aunt, who want to know more about the girl. On January 9, 2023, when Cotinha tries to find out more about his friendship and insinuates that soon he will be dating the girl, Rudá feels intimidated and compares her to Moretti, observing that even one of his confidants has become annoying.

On January 10, 2023, while Cotinha and Leonor get ready to meet Guida, Caíque and Rudá are alone in the living room when the topic of the boy's lack of affectionate-sexual interest comes up. Caíque shares part of his own history: how he was considered eccentric by friends and family when a teenager, simply for not wanting to date. It is at this moment that Rudá finds his mentor, someone who will help him walk the path

the best way possible – in this case, helping him to discover his sexuality and distance himself from the hetero/homosexual binary. It is one of the rare moments in which, even though talking about his sexuality, the boy is not presented in backlighting.

Several other moments of Rudá involved with family conflicts are presented, until the chapter on January 26, 2023, when Caíque confides to the boy that his relationship with Leonor is troubled because, even though he likes kissing and hugging, he does not like sex. Caíque asks Rudá if he feels the same towards women, and the boy, a little shy, says yes. Caíque chooses his words carefully, saying that he needs the romance, but Rudá seems to be 'strictly asexual', which, in the words of the character, means that he does not 'miss sex or hugs and kisses'.

At this point, we observe a contradiction with sexuality studies: the term 'strictly asexual', which does not appear in studies by Bogaert (2012), Decker (2014) and Oliveira (2015), is generally understood by the asexual community as someone that does not have sexual interest, but can still get involved in emotional relationships, including physical contact. In summary, a 'strictly asexual' individual would be someone asexual who does not identify as gray or demisexual.

In Rudá's case, the fact that he also has no interest in emotional bonds, represented by caressing, allows him to identify himself as a potential aromantic asexual. According to Decker (2014), aromanticism may be a characteristic within the asexual spectrum, when the person prefers to be single, does not have romantic impulses or finds satisfaction in friendships.

Despite the terminological mistake in the script, we can notice that, when labeled, Rudá's gaze seems needy, directed towards the void. The white boy with curly hair from the beginning of the telenovela seems paler, more mature, with visible acne on his face, maybe indicating a maturity process besides the mere passage of time. The rebellious and phone-dependent boy becomes a young man in the process of self-discovery, in need to digest information on who he really is.

On the same chapter, Rudá decides to talk to his mother to tell her about the conversation he had with Caíque and how he is finally finding the answers to his longings. When considering the possibility of her son being asexual, Guida is harsh and tells Rudá that he is being influenced, that her brother-in-law is trying to impose a problem on him. She also tells her son he needs to talk to a psychologist and that she would accept him if he were gay, but not asexual, because, for her, this orientation 'is not normal'.

On January 30, 2023, Guida scolds Caíque for, in her opinion, having 'confused' Rudá. The woman claims that the son is 'shy', 'reserved', 'absolutely normal'; that he is 'easily influenced' and has no 'problem'; that all he needs is a 'good psychologist'. On the following chapter, Rudá argues with his mother for being rude to Caíque, but she insists that asexuality is a 'psychological problem', a 'trauma' or even a 'hormone problem'. Rudá gets sad, but does not back off and reveals that all asexual people to whom he talked heard the same words from their parents.

On February 1, 2023, Guida insists that Rudá talks to a psychologist, but the boy decides that he needs a conversation with people who understand him, not therapy. To Leonor, Guida confides that she does not understand 'this asexual matter' and that she would prefer it if Rudá 'said that he is gay'. In these statements, there is something we may call 're-desconstruction' of hetero-normative thinking, as pointed out by Butler (2018): whilst Guida seems to be sufficiently deconstructed to accept a gay son, she shows prejudice towards the idea of the son being asexual.

Guida's comments, full of limitations and prejudice, help us understand Rudá's narrative composition. According to Butler (2018), not only what the character says but also what other characters say about him are elements that help us understand him better. In this situation, there is a boy who, in search of acceptance in a situation that is confusing even to himself, finds resistance and rejection from his own mother.

Later, on February 4, 2023, Caíque and Rudá talk again about asexuality, and the boy confesses that his aunt's boyfriend confuses him a little for not having interest in sex but liking kissing and hugging. In this scene, Rudá seems lighter, without clothes covering his arms and a serious or sad expression; being with Caíque allowed him to break free, wearing T-shirts and smiling, learning to acknowledge the happiness of daily life.

On February 17, 2023, when pressured by his friends to kiss a girl, Rudá is once again framed in backlighting, as if all feelings of fear and insecurity had returned. One of the friends, framed on the right side of the pair, looks at both, seeming to work as an inspector, someone who is there to guarantee that socially established guidelines are followed, if a man and a woman will align their lips and become a hetero-normative couple. Caíque shows up suddenly near the kiosk where Rudá and his friends are. Realizing the boy is in a tight spot, he calls his name and says he needs him to run an errand at his house. Rudá leaves the group of friends to follow Caíque. At this moment, Rudá smiles again and it is possible to notice his face is lit up. The following chapters keep exploring Rudá's development as he accepts his asexual identity, along with family conflicts and police cases in which the character is involved.

Discussion

Resuming the theoretical discussion, asexuality is an identity where an individual does not feel sexual attraction to others, or if they do, the interest is minimal, regardless of the gender they identify with (Oliveira, 2015), as seen in both Rudá and Caíque. It can also be understood as a sexual orientation where the individual does not feel physical attraction to anyone, except in some possibilities of affective relationships, as emphasized by Caíque's statements, and does not require medical or psychological treatment (Decker, 2014), which highlights the prejudiced behavior present in Guida's reactions and Moretti's attitudes. According to a study by the Institute of Psychiatry of the Hospital das Clínicas in São Paulo, it is estimated that in Brazil, approximately 8% of women and 2.5% of men over 18 identify as asexual (Berlinck, 2023). A report by the Brazilian informational content site UOL (Stefanelli, 2018) shares various experiences of asexual people, highlighting the challenges they face in dealing with social expectations related to sex, as the telenovela also portrays by showing Caíque's difficulties in maintaining an affective relationship without sex or Rudá's struggle to make people understand that it is normal not to want sexual relationships with others. The text also points out that in Brazil, the country of production and main circulation of *Travessia*, the approach to this topic is considered timid compared to the United States, where the Asexual Visibility Parade takes place.

An article from the renowned Brazilian newspaper Folha de S.Paulo (Balloussier, 2019) highlights the effort of asexual individuals for inclusion in the LGBTQIAPN+ community, which had been showing resistance regarding this aspect of sexuality, and the concerns about violence committed under the pretense of "cure,"

something reflected in Guida's behavior, who is sympathetic towards homosexual individuals but repudiates asexuality, emphasizing that Caíque has "problems" and is manipulating Rudá, who is a "normal" boy. Balloussier's article (2019) indicates that reports of "corrective rape," "stigmatization," and "pathologization" show that asexual people have suffered verbal and physical violence because of their identity. In response to these issues, institutions like Coletivo Abrace and apps like AceApp emerge to assist in the process of identification, acceptance, and the fight for recognition, something signaled by Rudá when he tells his mother that he is in dialogue with others on social media who are like him and understand him.

In an interview with the major Brazilian communication portal G1 (Polato, 2021), lawyer Walter Masteralo, who has identified as asexual since adolescence, emphasizes that even within the LGBTQIPN+ community and among healthcare professionals, asexuals are often mistakenly classified as sick. He highlights that human sexuality is complex and that hormonal variations generally do not affect the libido of asexuals in the same way they affect people with constant sexual interest. Moreover, he mentions the need to increase understanding and acceptance of asexuals, who face a heightened risk of corrective rapes.

In line with the lawyer's perspective, the telenovela sought to reinforce this struggle for understanding and acceptance, offering what can be termed a "socioeducational action" (Jesus, 2013). As pointed out in previous work (Hergesel, 2023), on social media, platforms like Facebook and Instagram were flooded with comments reflecting a mix of curiosity, support, and misinformation. Many users expressed surprise and interest in learning more about asexuality, while others showed skepticism or prejudice. The discussions often extended to broader topics about identity and sexual orientation, with debates on what is considered "normal" or "acceptable."

Comments on news platforms highlighted the polarization of the topic. Publications like Yahoo! Brasil and Purebreak Brasil received a variety of opinions, from sarcastic criticisms of the current generation to serious discussions about social pressure to be sexually active. Many readers recognized asexuality as a legitimate part of human diversity, while others dismissed it as a "fad" or "nonsense," revealing the resistance still present in society.

It can be stated that these dialogues on social media, even though many comments were filled with prejudice and disbelief, helped bring the topic of asexuality to light in society, promoting greater awareness and understanding. It is plausible that *Travessia*, by bringing this subject to the forefront, encouraged critical reflection on social norms and cultural values, facilitating conversations that might lead to greater acceptance and inclusion of sexual diversity.

Final Considerations

In this paper, we seek to discuss how stylistic resources may help in the construction of a telenovela character, focusing on Rudá from *Travessia* and his diegetic context. The carrying out of this research study is justified by our belief that this storyline in the telenovela, which develops the teenager in his process of discovering himself as an asexual individual, has at least two social functions: reducing gender and sexuality inequalities and safeguarding the right to information and citizenship.

To reach appropriate results, we discussed the relevance of telenovelas as cultural and popular products in Brazil, the way asexuality is represented in television media and the construction of male adolescence in

television fiction, drawing on authors such as Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes, Elizabete Regina Baptista de Oliveira and Simone de Beauvoir. Next, we analyzed scenes in which the character is directly connected to his sexuality, based on principles by David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Jeremy G. Butler.

We realized that bringing up the discussion on asexuality tends to broaden the perspectives concerning a series of existing identity characteristics, deconstructing socially established guidelines. Despite part of the audience being able to identify with Moretti's sexist perspective (as he insists that the teenager must be sexually active) or with Guida's prejudicial perspective (as she believes that asexuality must be a psychological trauma or a hormonal problem), this storyline in the telenovela allows for reinterpreting, revising and updating thinking.

We notice that Rudá's construction is gradual: initially, we see a teenager who is very technology-oriented (even creating montages of people's faces in socially unacceptable contexts) and dependent on adults (with statements that show his inability to be alone during his mother's trip). However, this composition is broken as the narrative progresses. Rudá becomes a critical teenager with his own opinions, refusing to bow down to family conflicts and ever more confident, leaving home when he is tired of living with his stepfather or choosing friends with whom he wishes to spend time, regardless of his mother's wishes.

We observe that when the asexuality topic becomes central to the character, Rudá is always seen with a serious expression, wearing dark and long-sleeved clothes, even under the sun on Rio de Janeiro's beaches, as he goes through his process of anguish and distress for not fully understanding yet his emotional-sexual identity. However, when the boy discovers he is asexual, smiles start to appear and his clothes become more colorful and short-sleeved. Furthermore, the lighting shows the self-acceptance process path: rising from the shadows (scenes in which his body is in backlighting) and following the direction towards self-brightness (scenes with natural light or his face in focus).

We also acknowledge that, due to the limited space of a scientific paper, we chose to prioritize, in this study, the discussions on the television style as assistance to deviating character construction, presenting the adopted methodology and the results obtained from the analysis, as we understand that they are direct contributions to television studies.

With the aim of expanding the debate, we present some paths we wish to follow on research: discussion on narrative functionalities, exploring matters such as melodrama and emotional weight that seek to establish connections with the viewer; investigation of recurrence, in Glória Perez's poetics, of characters that raise discussions on sexualities; understanding of violence contexts against asexual people, especially in Latin America, and the negotiated meanings arising from the telenovela; reflection on the destabilization of hetero-normative masculinity and the tensions concerning hegemonic patterns in relation to what is proposed by television fiction; debates on innovations and ruptures – as well as stereotypes and clichés – in teenage representation in serialized works; observation of how specialized television critics assimilated the existence of an asexual character in this specific telenovela; verification of how the public received Rudá's actions and behaviors, especially through social media engagement; as well as other topics that seek to expand our understanding of this topic that is relevant to television studies.

Finally, it is a motivation to continue to invest on research concerning the character Rudá, due to his complexity and to social-cultural aspects present in this character. We reinforce the relevance of such studies, especially because this type of production – which, as it is common in Brazilian telenovelas, reaches different territories around the world – tends to incite reflection and critical thinking on the audience.

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