



An Antibody Monument: Beyond Organic Tissue in “The Body of Afonso”

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.59514/2954-7261.3125>

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Para citar este artículo / To reference this article / Para citar este artigo
Cevallos Vivar, F., & Camargo de Barros, L. (2023). An Antibody Monument: Beyond Organic Tissue in “The Body of Afonso”. *Revista Calarma*, 2(3), 39–52.
<https://doi.org/10.59514/2954-7261.3125>

Author’s Statement

The authors declare that they have participated in the entire scientific process of this research, including conceptualization, methodology, writing, and editing. They also declare that they have no potential conflicts of interest regarding the authorship and publication of this article.

Abstract

In this article, we study the subversion of corporeality in the film “O corpo de Afonso” by Portuguese director João Pedro Rodrigues. Through this new relationship with the body, we are interested in examining the displacement of heteropatriarchal masculinity from its position of power. The narrative proposes to break away from a hegemonic *somateca* to understand other forms of knowledge and representation that produce the body and move away from the healthy/pathological pathology. Thus, we propose to study the *somateca* as a methodology for producing new knowledge.

Keywords: body; *somateca*; historical pornographic narratives.

Introduction

The body and cinema are so intertwined in contemporaneity that they are impossible to separate. Cinema was the first technological invention capable of giving movement and life to images, generating bodies without flesh (Garcia & Lyra, 2002). This amalgamation of organs and tissues is the fundamental basis for constructing the human image. From this organic support (increasingly less organic, it is true), the ability to create images is imposed. This ability is not a choice: we are born, and an image is produced. There is no human being without an image. But what image will the faces, legs, arms, and torsos produce? What are the implications of the cinematic representation of this object? It is from this deep and porous abyss that this article aims to examine. Through the short film “The Body of Afonso” by Portuguese director João Pedro Rodrigues, we challenge ourselves to reconstruct a counter-narrative of the body to understand its imaginative potentials and stylistic implications.

The study hypothesis of this work is that, through the friction between a hegemonic narrative and strangely dissident bodies, the short film presents another type of corporal object to the world. “The Body of Afonso” starts from a simple premise to question what the body of the first king of Portugal, D. Afonso Henriques, would be like—a tutelary figure and subject to multiple mythologies throughout history. Rodrigues states:

“The Body of Afonso” literally talks about the body of our first king in Portugal. He is a mythical character. We are still determining how he looked. [...] In some descriptions,

it is said that he was over two meters tall. [...] The film is, therefore, a reflection on a casting process to find this king's body. [...] (Rodrigues & Mata, 2013, p. 5)¹.

From this conflict between the majestic body of the first Portuguese king from the past and the bodybuilders who are candidates to embody him in the present, we intend to explore ideas that approach a notion of a contemporary body, polyphonic, amorphous, and expanding beyond organic tissue (Crenshaw, 1989; Preciado, 2008).

This physical bodily space is marked by intersections that tear it apart and allow it to reconfigure in other ways, in other spaces. In the investigation of the body of the first king of Portugal, a fundamental figure in the construction of the myth of the Portuguese Man, we question where the legacy of history ends, and the adventure of representation begins in stories and portrayals.

About this search for a body to represent another, we are interested in introducing the concept of “regimes of control of the contemporary body” to study and analyze the archive in a connected and living manner. This form of a moving archive that uses the body as a source of knowledge is referred to by contemporary philosopher Paul B. Preciado as a *Somateca* (Preciado, 2008). This concept entails considering a new archive² for reconstructing history from a subaltern perspective that reorganizes the body of knowledge and wisdom situated in bodies. As argued by Haraway:

From the 18th century to the mid-20th century, the grand historical constructions of gender, race, and class became organically incorporated into the marked bodies of women, the colonized or enslaved, and the working class. Those who inhabit these marked bodies have been symbolically differentiated from the supposed rational fictitious self of the universal human species and, therefore, from a coherent subject (Haraway, 1991, p. 210).

Therefore, the gesture of this article is to tear apart the film itself to understand the intersected position of men who produce new images with their bodies. It is precisely an opposing

¹ “Le Corps du roi parle littéralement du corps de notre premier roi au Portugal. C’est un personnage mythologique. On ne sait pas vraiment à quoi il ressemblait. [...] Dans certaines descriptions, il faisait plus de deux mètres. [...] Le film consiste donc en une réflexion sur un casting pour trouver le corps de ce roi”. [...] (Rodrigues; Mata, 2013, p. 5). All translations are ours.

²For a critical perspective on the idea of a moving archive, refer to Barros & Vivar (2021).

gesture to the hegemonic modern-Western thought (particularly of the positivist tradition) that believes the thinking subject has no body. In other words, thought is a disembodied reality (as asserted by Cartesian mind-body dualism). This logic proposes that the body belongs solely to a dense somatic apparatus stratified and saturated with organs. In terms of Oyèwùmí:

If bodies appeared, they were portrayed as the immoral side of human nature. The preferred focus was on the mind, nobly rising above the pain of the flesh. The binary opposition between body and mind emerged early in Western discourse. The famous Cartesian dualism confirmed a tradition in which the body was seen as a trap from which any rational person had to escape. Ironically, even when the body remained at the center of discourse and sociopolitical categories, many thinkers denied its existence for specific categories of people, primarily themselves. Women, primitives, Jews, Africans, the poor, and others labeled as “different” in different historical periods were considered embodied beings, dominated by instinct and emotion, alien to reason. They were the otherness, and otherness is a body (Oyèwùmí, 2001, p. 40).

In contrast to the modern positivist celebration, the bodily condition of experience demonstrates, for example, that empathy, imitation, and imagination are mechanisms for knowledge formation in every experience³. In the short film, disparate and challenging images emerge from the bodies of men who undress in an attempt to be D. Afonso Henriques.

Historical-pornographic narratives

“What would the body of the first king of Portugal, D. Afonso Henriques, a tutelary figure and the subject of successive mythologies throughout our history, be like? (Blackmaria, 2023)” poses the official synopsis of the short film. Commissioned by the European Capital of Culture (CEC) in 2011, this is the penultimate installment of the “Histórias de Guimarães”⁴ series, which includes ten films by Portuguese filmmakers about the city where the narrative of the foundation of Portugal originated. Although there is no precise documentation about his birth, historians consider Guimarães as the probable city of birth of Dom Afonso Henriques, “the Conqueror,” who was the first king of Portugal (1128 to 1185).

³ Somatic practices are governed by the “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1984), the “techniques of the body” (Mauss, 1934), functioning as “subjectivation devices” (Foucault, 1999), and as “processes of incorporation into norms” (Butler, 2003).

⁴ The European Capital of Culture, an initiative of the European Union, aims to promote a city within the economic bloc for a year. In addition to Rodrigues’ short film, in 2012, Guimarães produced works by directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, Peter Greenaway, Aki Kaurismäki, and Edgar Pêra.

The first king of Portugal, D. Afonso Henriques (ca. 1109 - December 6, 1185), was the son of D. Henrique of Burgundy and D. Teresa of Leon. Throughout the centuries, invocations to his figure, many of them not very credible, have created a mist of mysticism and uncertainty around his real persona. In the 15th century, at the height of the Age of Discovery, D. Manuel I transferred his mortal remains to a new and splendid tomb. Fifty years later, D. Sebastião paid homage to him by wielding D. Afonso's "ever-victorious" sword, promising to use it against the Moors of Africa. In the 19th century, D. Miguel decided to open his predecessor's tomb in search of legitimacy. In the last century, Salazar presented himself as the "defender of Portugal," emulating the famous sculpture erected in Guimarães. The most recent attempt to open the tomb of our first king dates back to this century, but it was thwarted at the last moment, leaving its accurate contents unrevealed (Rodrigues & Mata, 2013).

In addition to the battles won and the conquest of territories near the present-day, the myth of the "Conqueror" is formed by many other elements, from an encounter with Jesus in the victory of a battle to his immense physical size. It is from this Portuguese body molded over the centuries based on patriarchy, masculinity, bravery, and patriotism that "O Corpo de Afonso" is composed. In other words, beyond the body of the founding king of the nation, Rodrigues ends up investigating the body of the country itself, the homeland. Crossed by cinematographic and *extracinematographic* data, a simple casting becomes a representation of a national spirit, blending myths and elements that shape Portuguese society to this day. However, according to Rodrigues' testimony, most of the filming took place in Galicia.

I went to Galicia for a reason, and I also chose bodybuilders for a reason. In the legend, this king was a very tall and strong man, capable of lifting a massive sword. It is a mythology that was appropriated by the fascist regime. In the film, there is this image of Salazar, who pretended to be the reincarnation of the first king who founded the country and saved Portugal (...). In Galicia, they do not speak Spanish or Portuguese. It is the language closest to the one spoken during the time of the king, Galician-Portuguese (Rodrigues & Mata, 2013, p. 6)⁵.

Visually, the aesthetic and political decisions converge clearly to give concreteness to the myth. The chroma key, evident from the beginning of the narrative, becomes the critical

⁵ Je suis allé en Galice pour une raison, et j'ai aussi choisi des bodybuilders pour une raison. Dans la légende, ce roi était un homme très grand et très fort, qui pouvait soulever une épée énorme. C'est une mythologie qui a été reprise par le régime fasciste. Il y a dans le film cette image de Salazar qui voulait faire croire, d'une certaine façon, qu'il constituait la réincarnation de ce premier roi qui avait fondé le pays et sauvé le Portugal (...) C'est la raison pour laquelle ça faisait sens. En Galice, ils ne parlent pas vraiment espagnol ou portugais. C'est cette langue qui se rapproche le plus de celle que l'on parlait à l'époque du roi, le galaico-portugais.

point for understanding the construction of the body's image. The green background, open to infinite possibilities, is the ideal space for reimagining the body of the first king of Portugal. As the candidates for D. Afonso Henriques are presented and undressed, the bodies of the muscular men also become another kind of chroma key, meaning they can transform into what the director desires. Rodrigues states that the film "is a kind of body with many heads" (Silva, 2012), almost like the Lernaean Hydra⁶, challenging to bring down.

This approach refers to the early cinema made in the late 19th century. In Camargo de Barros' thesis, "Patologias Fílmicas: Subversão formal em narrativas doentes" (2020), the scientific imaged production of names like Marey (1830-1904) and Lorde (1858-1917) is identified, constructing an extensive iconography about the human body. This "cinematographic prehistory" (Machado, 2014) resonates in Rodrigues' work as the cinematic apparatus is fully exposed, just like his aesthetic-narrative gesture. This type of production marked the birth of the scientific iconography of the time and continues to influence filmmaking today.

However, this initial visual approach through photography and pre-cinema had a particular function, destined for the pages of scientific books and magazines (following the model of the *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*). The intersection of these two worlds, the scientific and the visual, was not coincidental; it was in full effervescence (Barros, 2020, p. 21).

While Marey analyzed humans in motion to understand the physiology of athletes, Rodrigues dissects other affects.

"O Corpo de Afonso" is an anatomical exercise, a kind of dissection. It seeks the first king of Portugal, Dom Afonso Henriques or Alfonso I, in the bodies of Galician bodybuilders during a casting. The elements of the film are disarticulated, and dismembered: the men and the severed parts of their bodies are exhibited. All these "Unemployed Hercules" (a reference to the unemployment affecting Spain, and this strange cast shows them naked, idle) are dedicated to the study of both muscle and skin, those apparent contours of well-formed bodies, their apparent solidity upon which the film casts a kind of doubt or suspicion. Does this body hold up well? Moreover, what is it for? (Rodrigues, 2016, p. 210).

This distrust towards these well-formed bodies is where the ironic tone towards these men who will supposedly bring the first king of Portugal to life resides. There is a clear queer gaze

⁶ Monster from Greek mythology composed of seven heads, slain by Hercules.

towards these muscular men. The aesthetic gesture present in “Corpo de Afonso” resembles, among so many queer iconographies, the work of American artist Andy Warhol. Between 1964 and 1966, Warhol produced nearly 500 small 16mm films titled Screen Tests. The intimacy and, at the same time, the arbitrariness of the theatrical game imposed by Warhol on his “tested” subjects is present in Rodrigues’ work.

Although the dry, harsh image, little conducive to technical concerns, insists on removing the layer of desire, it is essential to remember that there is a memory of the body that is material and not just narrative. “These cannot be reduced to language and discursivity, even though they are only epistemologically accessible through language and other forms of linguistically interpretable expression, such as bodily gestures, grimaces, symptoms, and phobias” (Benhabib, 1995, p. 121).

A closer examination allows us to consider the proximity between these productions and homemade pornographic films that inundate the internet as techniques for producing pleasure and our desires. Therefore, it is necessary to “rethink the terms of the pornographic debate and its relationships with the history of art, the biopolitical strategies of body control, and the production of pleasure through devices of intensified looking” (Preciado, 2018, p. 24).

Fernando Curopos and Maria Araujo in “João Pedro Rodrigues ou comment ruser avec O Corpo de Afonso” investigate the relationships of the queer imaginary that the film questions. Curopos and Araujo state that one of the characteristics of the prevailing discourse in Portugal is that the issue of sexuality and pleasure/displeasure is rarely invoked (Curopos & Araujo, 2021). In the same work, Alexandre Melo also affirms: “The body has no place in the common and dominant discourses in Portuguese society, and that is why everything happens as if the Portuguese have nobody.” Rodrigues is one of those directors who break through this barrier. The exploration of a dissenting Portuguese body marks his cinematographic work. It does not seem fortuitous that even when attempting to reconstruct the body of the first King of Portugal, the filmmaker dares to produce a subversive approach to what might be expected.

One of the first images that the casting refers to, according to Curopos and Araujo, is that of an iconography predominant in American and Western European cultures: beefcakes, images of young muscular men in magazines against neutral backgrounds in poses that highlight their sculpted physique (Curopos & Araujo, 2021). However, in “O Corpo de Afonso,” there is a subversion of this gesture:

The close-ups of the lower abdomen, and torsos, indeed, depict a dismembered body, but above all, a “counter-eroticism.” Additionally, this approach is similar to a gay film subgenre called “muscle worship,” which eroticizes the texture of male arms and muscles. In the erotic imagination that Rodrigues puts into practice, no part of the body is privileged because all parts have the potential to become erogenous zones, both receptive and active, testifying to emancipation from the tyranny of the penis (Curopos & Araujo, 2021, p. 231).

The gigantic sword of D. Afonso, the ultimate phallic symbol, is practically omnipresent in the narrative. This warlike/masculine construction is fundamental in this and many other hypermasculine myths.

In the face of them, the aristocratic male body presents itself as a new political-visual hegemony, or we could even say a political-orgasmic one: one that has access to sexual arousal in public, in contrast to those bodies whose gazes must be protected and whose pleasures must be controlled (Preciado, 2018, p. 28).

As Bell Hooks states, “Much of the pursuit of phallogentric masculinity is based on a demand for compulsory heterosexuality” (Hooks, 1992).

Biopolitics, necropolitics, and other perversions

Released in 2012, the narrative arises from the director’s desire to find the first king of Portugal. However, due to the economic crisis, find a dozen extremely vulnerable muscular men. The word most frequently heard in the men’s testimonies is “unemployment.” Although it takes place in Spanish territory, there is a profound Portuguese echo here. 2012 was the year following Portugal’s agreement with the Troika, the agreement with the IMF for the country’s economic recovery through a loan of 78 billion euros (Diário de Notícias, 2012). At that time, the youth unemployment rate in Portugal reached 37.7% (Padrão, 2013).

Those bodies painstakingly constructed in the gyms by muscular men were absorbed by the world and placed in a state of profound vulnerability. The imaginary construction proposed by the director is initially subverted by the extracorporeal constitution of the interviewees, influenced by an extradiegetic element. The muscles no longer sustain the image they should project. While the men read fragments from the “Crónica de El-Rei D. Afonso Henriques,” written by Duarte Galvão (1445-1517) in the early 16th century, the editing describes bodies that contrast with such virility. Here, indeed, is a nakedness of the place of male potency. If these bodies break down within the studio or outside, a whole system contaminates

biological tissues with other issues. It is symptomatic and symbolic that during the economic recovery process, the agency Standard & Poor's downgraded Portugal's credit rating to the BB level, considered "junk." In other words, there are no longer autonomous bodies, but an amalgamation composed due to "neoliberal governance" (Andueza, 2012).

Modern sexuality and its pleasures are the results not so much of the repression of an original desire but of specific configurations of knowledge-power: modernity displaces traditional erotic art where pleasure arises from experience and self-control, in favor of a *scientia sexualis*, a set of scientific techniques (visual, legal, medical) aimed at producing what Foucault calls "the truth of sex" (Preciado, 2018, pp. 25-26).

In this hypermasculine relationship (both in the making of the film and the historical representation of the Portuguese king), there is an evident mismatch between the body of the king (the perfect one) and the bodies of the men (imperfect ones). According to Grosz (1994), the reason for this is the prevalence of the visual sense as the primary cognitive instrument of the "civilized body." Thus, bodies become texts, systems of signs and symbolisms that need to be read and interpreted. The "social body" and the "political body" are embodied and, therefore, susceptible to being read as expressions of an internal psychic matter. They elaborate on behaviors in the social system.

The sword, courage, and muscles symbolically exert power. While the candidates for the body of Afonso struggle to fit into the myth, a discourse laden with hetero-patriarchal power hierarchies becomes evident, placing them in a ruthless position. Rita Segato (2018), an Argentine anthropologist and feminist who investigates issues of gender violence, refers to this process as the "pedagogy of cruelty."

I call "pedagogy of cruelty" all acts and practices that teach, train, and program individuals to transform what is alive and vital into things. In this sense, this pedagogy teaches something that goes far beyond killing; it teaches to kill with a *deritualized* death, which only leaves residues in place of the deceased (Segato, 2018, p. 11).

According to Segato, acts of gender-based violence are the final stage of a much deeper process that celebrates and demands violent masculine power. The reproduction of heroic myths (always male or masculinized) echoes this heteropatriarchal pedagogy of cruelty through the domination of the public sphere and in the politics of the nation-state. The conflict between the image of the myth and the image of the naked male bodies is an attempt to strip the Man and the heteropatriarchal knowledge of their monumentality (at least symbolically),

questioning the solidified structures of the institution, the archive, and the Eurocentric knowledge that supports it.

As the men strip off their clothes, they also shed the *hypermasculinized* layer that their bodies could impose. Their stories of unemployment, anecdotes of scars, histories of incarceration—indeed, it seems that all their narratives serve the purpose of dethroning them. These men are not in positions of power, quite the opposite. They find themselves in subaltern positions, being easy targets of an economic organization that corrodes dissident bodies like theirs. More than the mighty men of the “beefcake” images, the relationship here seems to refer to another type of amateur pornographic production: “gay-for-pay.” In this genre of homoerotic cinema, typically, an off-screen director offers money to the interviewee, who is assumed to be heterosexual. The power dynamics are laid bare. In “O Corpo de Afonso,” the evident socio-economic vulnerability of the interviewed men directly contrasts with the political power that D. Afonso once represented.

Rather than being ironic, the abyss between representation and the represented is the exact representation of the subalternity of these men and many other marginalized identities. According to Achille Mbembe, more than the notion of biopower is needed for thinking about contemporary forms of oppression and practices of separation. Foucault states that “relations of power are not in a position of exteriority concerning other types of relations (economic processes, knowledge relations, sexual relations)” (Foucault, 1999, p. 114).

For Mbembe, the subjection of life to the power of death is crucial for understanding the reconfigurations of political relations of sovereignty. In other words, it is the capacity to decide which bodies can live and which must die that determines the social configurations in which “worlds of death” exist, where numerous populations are subjected to conditions of existence that render them “living dead” (Mbembe, 2011, p. 75). In this sense, the *subalternized* body, from the perspective of the modern-Western tradition, whether sick or pathological, does not have an ontological status. The men in the casting of “O Corpo de Afonso” seem truly dismembered from their subjectivity.

Final considerations

In this assemblage of so many bodies, another one emerges, a sort of anti-myth. According to Donna Haraway (1991), the contemporary body is a *technoliving* entity encompassing multiple connections with technology. The subject is composed of vulnerability, multiplicity, and the contingency of each individuality. Neither nature nor culture. Neither organism

nor machine. There is an understanding and representation of these other bodies that carry subaltern identities.

Building upon the opposition to Freud's idea of the subject, Preciado, in their research and teaching program titled "*Somateca*: Biopolitical production, feminisms, queer and trans practices," proposes an even more subversive reading of the body. Preciado states that the modern subject does not have a body but is a "*somateca*": "a dense and stratified somatic apparatus saturated with organs managed by different biopolitical regimes that determine hierarchical spaces of action in terms of class, race, gender, or sexual difference" (Barros, 2020).

Through this new relationship with the body, we are interested in reading about the subversion that Rodrigues achieves with his dismembered men. With the men displaced from their position of power, the narrative proposes to break away from a hegemonic *somateca* to understand other forms of knowledge and representation that shape the body and move away from the dichotomy of healthy/pathological (Gilbert & Tompkins, 2002).

Feminist, anti-slavery, decolonial, queer, transgender, and disabled movements and others can be reinterpreted as somatic rebellions, forming part of a process of uprising by bodies excluded from the democratic contract. The general critique of the *somateca* also allows for critical connections with architecture, the history of technologies, photography, computer science, video games, or the city's history, among others, as spaces of somatic production (Andueza, 2012).

Here, a methodology is proposed in which intersubjective processes are mediated by the body, where emotions, sources of pleasure, desires, or sufferings form the basis of micropolitics (Hooks, Brah, Sandoval & Anzaldúa, 2004). In "O Corpo de Afonso," these residues of *subalternity* are evident, from its kinship with a "cursed" queer iconography to the state of marginalized men, considered by *hyperfunctional* society as sick. This sick body results from a biopolitical and necropolitical framework determined by discursive, epistemological, scientific, economic, media, and visual practices. In other words, the medical, political, and audiovisual discourses that represent the body produce the normality or pathology they seek to describe. By attempting to reconstruct a sacred 12th-century body with men in front of a green screen of infinite possibilities, Rodrigues ends up representing bodies torn apart by the affects of the 21st century.

Acknowledgments

This work is funded by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., within the framework of the projects “CEECIND.2021.02636” and “bd.2022.11420”.

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