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The Portuguese Queer Screen: Gender Possibilities in João Pedro Rodrigues's Cinematic Production

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Abstract

The Portuguese filmmaker João Pedro Rodrigues has developed a significant cinematic production that has attained international recognition. The three feature films he made in the first decade of the 2000s (*Phantom*, *Two Drifters*, and *To Die like a Man*) engage with queer identities from different perspectives. This article examines the ways in which Rodrigues depicts these and argues that the films provide a spectrum of 'performatively constituted' identities that represent a challenge to patriarchy's hegemonic subjectivities. It contends that such identities consequently represent abjection in a society that ignores them but also that the filmmaker gives them visibility and shows that their subjectivities do matter.

[**Keywords:** Portuguese cinema, João Pedro Rodrigues, queer, gender performativity, abjection]

The transgender character Tônia in João Pedro Rodrigues's *Morrer como um homem/To Die like a Man* (2009) sings a Portuguese *fado* in the final sequence of the film that opens with the line "Oh, how I'd like to live in the plural!" This line encapsulates how gender identities are constructed and depicted in the three feature films discussed in this article: they are 'performatively constituted' in the sense of Judith Butler's (1990) assertion that "there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (34). In other words, these identities are 'floating' and not restricted to the biologically born gender.

In this trilogy-like set of feature films, which comprises his debut *O fantasma/Phantom* (2000), *Odete/Two Drifters* (2005), and *To Die like a Man*, Rodrigues offers the viewer a number of possible queer subjectivities. Queer means, in this case, all the identities that do not conform to hegemonic norms regarding gender and sexuality, including homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism. Moreover, it can be argued that queer is also what represents "abjection" (Kristeva 1982), which is a view patriarchy exploits to keep heterosexual identities in place. This happens in a rather symbiotic relationship that arguably needs the queer as an opposite to reaffirm what heterosexual identities are (or what they are not). Such a symbiotic relationship is evident in many patriarchal contexts where masculinity is defined mostly in relation to queer: one is either a 'proper man' (whatever that means) or he is queer and thus subject to punishment.

Context therefore plays an important role in queer subjectivities, particularly the urban space where such 'abject' identities are less susceptible to punishment and are, to

some extent, 'freer' from severe regulations. This is evident in the three films discussed herein, which show that Rodrigues's characters become part of the Portuguese urban space, represented in the films by the capital, Lisbon—as will be developed later in this article. However, as Trindade (2010) argues in relation to the Portuguese film *Lisboa, Crónica Anedótica/Lisbon, Anecdotal Chronicle*, such characters are Lisbon dwellers but they do not constitute a collective entity (or identity). This is a crucial point regarding these three films because the characters' 'failure' to represent the identity of a group (a 'category') to the detriment of each individual's has been an issue critics have picked on. In other words, Rodrigues's films show the viewer a spectrum of gender identities but these are based on the individuality of the subjects he portrays rather than trying to create a collective queer identity. Despite this, his approach to queer indicates that such a term can work as an umbrella under which various kinds of gender subjectivities are possible. This is strongly indicated by the director himself stating in an interview that each film is a unique story, even if it could be related to the outside world (Lim 2009).

The aim of this article is therefore to discuss the queer subjectivities Rodrigues constructs in his films and how these are related to the urban space in which the characters are placed. It will refer mostly to Julia Kristeva's theorisation of abjection while discussing the characters' subjectivities because these queer characters are part of an urban environment that allows them to get on with their lives as they are but makes them 'socially invisible' by treating them as 'object' and refusing to see their existence.

The object, Kristeva (1982) argues, is full of ambiguity and represents what does not respect borders, positions or rules—especially those established by society. In her words, the object is "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles" (4). It is associated with corruption and perversion as it is based on "the logic of prohibition" (4). As Creed (1993) points out in her take on Kristeva's theory, anything that "crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is object" (11). According to Kristeva, the object is also perverse because "it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (15). She contends that corruption is the most notorious socialised appearance of the object and that "the subject of abjection is eminently productive of culture" (45). The author also argues that as a representation of corruption, the object attacks Religion, Morality, and the Law, and it is "integrated in the Christian Word as a threatening otherness" (17). As a result, Kristeva states that "abjection persists as exclusion or taboo" (17).

According to Tyler (2009), in her engagement with Kristeva's theory, the person and bodily appearance that are deemed object—representing both fascination and repulsion—are subjected to dehumanising violence. In addition, Tyler asserts that the object is 'double'; that is, "It is both within 'us' and within 'culture' and it is through both individual and group rituals of exclusion that abjection is 'acted out'." Consequently, Tyler continues, abjection "generates the borders of the individual *and* the social body" (79). Hence, the author concludes, "Abjection has effects on real bodies; abjection hurts" (90). Putting it another way, abjection cannot and should not be understood just in a 'phantasmagorical' way, for it is embodied, or, to use Tyler's own words, it is not "just a

psychic process but a social experience” (87). Abjection thus represents what is not accepted or what transgresses established social norms and boundaries, and it is because of this that the person deemed abject suffers consequences on personal, social, and/or political levels, as is evident in Rodrigues's films. Indeed, much of Kristeva's argument applies to his three films. His characters cause panic and confuse the borders their society tries to maintain through Religion, Morality, and the Law. Thus, by presenting these 'abject' characters, the filmmaker creates a state of unease for the audience, which is evident in many reviews and receptions of the films, particularly *Phantom*.

The way abjection pervades Rodrigues's films also concerns the urban environment and the relationship between private and public spaces. Although the demarcation of private and public domains has been mostly conspicuous in narratives dealing with sexual and gender identities, it is rather blurred in Rodrigues's 'trilogy' and not as stable as one would think. This is particularly illustrated through public sex¹ (much occurs in *Phantom*, for instance), which is an act patriarchal society condemns, thus making those participating in it abject. For example, the way sex is depicted in *Phantom* has even been criticised by gay audiences at film festivals as they saw such 'depraved' sexuality as a negative portrayal ('stereotype') of gay people. Such a critique, however, seems a refusal of one's subjectivity. That is, unlike the audiences' reception of *Phantom* indicate, subjectivity does not have to be (and should not be) a collective representation of a queer identity—there are indeed gay people who like cottaging, fisting, sadomasochism, to name a few. Thus, would refusing these 'abject' identities not be a replication of—if not a fear of—patriarchal society's view of gay sexuality? As already mentioned, all the characters in Rodrigues's three films are developed as individuals instead of intending to be a staple representation of groups/categories.

Furthermore, although dwelling in the urban space, Rodrigues's characters seem more like *flâneurs* who are in constant movement (symbolised by the presence of trains, cars, taxis, and even just the offscreen noise of these at times). This movement, however, usually exposes the ugly 'abject places' of the urban environment such as waste disposal sites, public toilets, and cemeteries. Places like these are mostly excluded or “muted in the utopian model” (Nichols 2008: 461), but they are salient in Rodrigues's films and play an important role on the way the characters are constructed within the urban space. Their portrayals strongly recall Agamben's argument that the city begins with the exclusion of what he terms “bare lives” (cited in Nichols 2008). Rodrigues's main characters—a rubbish collector, a supermarket attendant, and an ageing drag queen/transgender—are those who the city dwellers look down on and try to ignore and exclude; but they are embedded in the urban life and are necessary in such an environment and other subjects arguably exist in opposition to them (e.g., the macho man and the homophobe). The exclusion to which they are submitted is thus “an inclusion, an embedding in the structure of the city” (Agamben, cited in Nichols 2008: 461). Therefore, Nichols's claim that analyses of the urban space must begin with the sites that are deemed abject—whose omission is symptomatic of the neurosis that is “folded

¹ For a discussion about public sex, see Califia (1994).

into the logical processes of the urban project” (473)—can be extended to the ‘abject’ city dwellers who are all too evident for society despite the latter’s attempt to ignore them, as Rodrigues’s characters show.

Another important aspect to consider is the fact that the urban space, despite harbouring much danger for queer identities (for example, homophobic violence), has contributed to the development of the latter. For instance, the link between the city and gender, as Foster (2003) has pointed out, is evident in the development of both feminist and lesbian movements in such an environment. In a way, the presence of queer subjects in the urban space has had an important role in how the city has become part of the so-called modernist project because their presence is seen as an indication of advancement of the urban space; it is “a strong signal of a diverse, progressive environment” (Florida, cited in Abraham 2009: 292). That is, “gays are an indicator of others’ liberalism” (292); which suggests, once again, the symbiotic relationship between queer identities and other citizens’ subjectivities. This means, in most cases, the negation of the ‘abject’ one (queer) to maintain the hegemonic other (heterosexual). Nevertheless, as Abraham (2009) puts it, because the city has become a place for queer identities to develop, the migration of lesbian and gay men to the urban space continues and they seem to need the urban life to understand their own sexualities. There are indeed migrants in Rodrigues’s films who left small towns in the interior of Portugal to live in Lisbon, a place where social invisibility and subjectivity go hand in hand for migrants, but it is the very environment that allows them to come to terms (if they do) with their gender identities. Moreover, it is not only gender identity but also sexuality that is developed, tested, and experimented with in the urban space. For instance, some sexual practices—despite being known for centuries, particularly in artistic representations—gain more visibility in the now so-called postmodern world.

In Rodrigues’s films, sexuality pervades the atmosphere and reeks of ‘perversion’; it is wild, it is a refuge, it stands for all and nothing at the same time. His characters seem to reach their subjectivity through actualising (or not) their sexual desires—in their sadistic, masochistic, liberal, or conservative engagement with their bodies, which are crawling for attention, for being desired, used, impregnated, hurt, ejaculated upon, ignored... all these fused together as an enmeshed complex of subjectivity formation that is constituted on the borders of abjection. The characters’ ‘abject’ sexual acts indeed show, as Califia (1994) argues about porno films, that there are “other folks out there who like to do cunnilingus, anal sex, gay sex, get tied up, have threesomes...” (245). The ways the characters deal with their own sexual identity also support Plummer’s (1996) claim that human sexualities “have to be socially produced (no human can ever just do it), socially organized, socially maintained and socially transformed” (ix). For the author, because cultures change, so do sexualities. The latter is actualised in a variety of forms, which lends sex various definitions:

Sex is, among many other things, an achievement, an act, an aggression, a boredom, a body, a chase, a commodity, a form of filth, an expression of love, a feeling, a game, a gender, a hormone, an identity, a hunt, a hobby, a medical problem, a microdot, a pathology, a play, a performance, a perversion, a

possession, a script, a scarred experience, a therapy, a mode of transgression, a form of violence, a form of work, a kind of war. (Plummer 1996: xi)

The sexual practices of Rodrigues's queer characters reflect the myriad of ways Plummer defines sex, in particular, filth, boredom, perversion, and transgression, which are pervasive features of the characters' sexual acts in their urban sojourn, and impact on their sexual and gender identities. The ways the filmmaker engages with the characters' sexualities show that human sexuality is destabilised, decentred, and de-essentialised, as Plummer (1996) argues in another context. In other words, sexuality is not for the sole purpose of building a family (procreation): it is part of each character's subjectivity. Yet again, it is about the characters he portrays in each film, not a collective queer sexual identity, although many of their acts will surely have audiences who identify with them. What Rodrigues shows is that each character's sexual and gender identities are fragments of a complex spectrum of possible subjectivities, which although not disavowing hegemonic constructs through confrontation is not claiming to be *the* identity to be followed. His films give voice to one's right to be who he or she is as part of a given society but without adopting an essentialist position that is restrictive and ignores anything beyond what is proposed as possible subjectivities.

The Rodriguean characters thus reflect Plummer's (1996) point about the development of postmodern sexualities. These may become, among other possibilities, more and more "differentiated and variable" (in which a "plurality of meanings, acts, identities will emerge"), and "indeterminate", pervaded by "a supermarket of sexual possibilities" (xv)—all down to individual subjectivities rather than representing a group's category. Such possibilities also show, as Plummer further argues, that changes in self and identity are not restricted to a single context: they are taking place everywhere. The author therefore concludes that these identities "are no longer stable or fixed" (xvi) in the postmodern world, which is particularly true regarding the urban space, where one's anonymity and isolation clearly contribute to such identity instability. Even the 'urban environments' that are deemed abject and are often depicted in 'gay narratives'—such as public toilets, night clubs, sex clubs, saunas, dark alleyways, and red light districts—offer various possibilities for all the different gender and sexual identities to exist. Rodrigues's films illustrate this as they offer postmodern gender and sexual possibilities that echo the conception of gender as being performatively constituted (Butler 1990) because they not only challenge hegemonic identities that are understood based on the 'biological destiny' but also give life to those identities that are deemed abject and thus treated as invisible in their society.

Additionally, through Rodrigues's depiction of 'abject places' and characters, issues of social class also come to the fore. The characters occupy a subaltern position in their society. They work for a living so that they can survive in the urban space. For example, although Tônia seems to have enjoyed the life of a star (as a drag queen) in 'her environment', it is now in decline because she is ageing (her manager even says to her during an argument: "the costumers are looking for nice legs, not for talent!"). It can be argued that the main characters' jobs in the three films are connected to some extent, even

though they are in distinct stories during different timeframes: Tônia provides entertainment as a drag queen (leisure), and Odete—as a supermarket attendant—sells the products (consumption) that will later become rubbish (waste) to be collected by Sérgio (cleaning). Such a connection implies that, despite being invisible in their urban environment, these queer subjects are part of the machinery that keeps the city going and they are the people through whom one gets to know aspects of the city that are not normally what one would like to see: garbage, dirtiness, ugliness, drug addicts, and so on. Rodrigues thus brings these characters to prominence and shows that they and their subjectivities matter. He also makes it clear that they are there to stay, even if their presence is disturbing for their society (and possibly for some of the viewers).

The filmmaker also shows how his characters' subjectivities are nevertheless connected to the external world, and that they are impacted by it. This is evident in the films through the issues of religion, death, ageing, gender identity versus the biological body, hysteria, and motherhood—which connect the constitution of the characters' subjectivity to abjection; in other words, they cross borders that have been used to limit one's non-hegemonic subjectivity. In this case, it is crucial to consider the fact that the films are mostly shot during the evening—constituting then 'nocturnal identities'—which again suggests that these characters are pushed to the borders of existence, to the shadows of urban identities. This also implies that these 'undesirable' identities inhabit the unconsciousness of other citizens because the latter know that these 'abject' subjects are there somewhere so the borders of such citizens' existence have to be delineated to avoid being contaminated by the abject or, in Douglas's (1966) terms, the 'dirt'. This is when the borders that limit what one can do and what one cannot do are established; that is, seeing such urban subjects getting involved in acts and behaviours that are deemed abject shows the limit to which one should go, the division between right and wrong, the allowed and the prohibited, the healthy and the sick—all those things that establish what *one* is and what the *others* are. The interesting thing about Rodrigues's three films is that they give voice to these characters but at the same time, as already argued, construct their subjectivities as individuals rather than as an identity that represents queer as a whole—each of these films shows different gender possibilities, as will be discussed now in the last part of this article.

The rubbish collector Sérgio (the protagonist of *Phantom*) works night shifts in the dark streets of Lisbon. He gradually becomes someone whose sexual pleasures are those that patriarchal society condemns, such as sadomasochism and public sex. His 'dirty' pleasure is found not only in his sexual acts but also in the very things he selects from the rubbish he collects (e.g., rubber gloves, old swimming trunks), which he makes objects of fetish. Sérgio is a good example of a Rodriguean character who, as Picard (n.d.) points out, "blur[s] the line between gender and personal identity, human and animal, and life and death" (n.p.), which is particularly evident in a sequence he behaves like his dog. His gender constitution is therefore related to dirt: his body is 'on heat' for other males and his hormones exude from him, 'contaminate' the screen, and reach the audience. Moreover, he gets pleasure from cottaging (i.e., going to public toilets for sexual

encounters), having public sex, wearing leather gear, and stalking a motorcyclist with whom he had become obsessed.

Sérgio lives on the margins of Lisbon society, which is indicated by him being mostly portrayed in abject places of the city, especially in the rubbish disposal site. All the places Sérgio frequents are not the most attractive places to see, but it is in them that he lives his subjectivity as the person he really is. However, this subjectivity goes against patriarchal society as a whole, so the latter pushes Sérgio to its margins and thus makes him abject. This additionally implies that he is a social abject not just because of his 'dirty' sexual practices but also because of his relationship with the city's waste—the rubbish. Sérgio thus represents "dirt" and consequently "social pollution" so he "offends against order", to use Douglas's (1966) words. But as with Rodrigues's other two films discussed herein, *Phantom* "reveals the filmmaker's willingness to veer into dangerous territory by challenging not only moral and ethical boundaries, but also those of taste. The film's ritualistic push between seduction and repulsion speaks to the unspeakable in matters of desire" (Picard n.d.: n.p.). Although these 'dirty' pleasures are deemed abject and are consequently condemned by patriarchy, they play a role in all Rodriguean characters' constitution of their subjectivities, especially as sexual beings. As Monassa (n.d.) puts it, "the sick obsessions of the characters become just different forms of existing" (n.p.). By the end of the film Sérgio becomes more and more alienated from society but increasingly truthful to his subjectivity: he is a 'phantom' who continues, as Marx (n.d.) states, his "odyssey of sexual dysfunction and cruelty" (n.p.)—from a patriarchal point of view, of course—in the city's garbage dumps.

The alienation of Rodrigues's characters from Lisbon society is also evident in *Two Drifters*. The film begins with a night sequence (a key feature in his films): a heterosexual couple, sex, naked bodies, a rejection, a gay couple, a farewell, a kiss, a car leaving, a phone call, a car crash, blood, a death, tears, another kiss, suffering. These events are the starting point for the depiction of each character's subjectivity. The heterosexual couple is Odete and her boyfriend, Alberto. She insists that he impregnates her, but he refuses to do so. Pregnancy becomes an obsession for Odete and drives her into hysteria as all her life comes to revolve around a psychological pregnancy. The chosen 'father' of her baby is Pedro, who was Rui's boyfriend. Pedro lived in the same building as her before he died in a car crash. These events establish a link between life and death, which is particularly suggested through the use of baby clothes, a pram, and a cemetery. Despite cemeteries being considered an 'abject place' that causes fear and disgust in many people, this is where Odete 'lives her pregnancy', and she even abandons her rented room and moves to Pedro's grave to be close to the 'child's father'. As a result, a kind of love triangle is formed and a rather hostile relationship between Odete and Rui (who is devastated by Pedro's death and attempts to kill himself) develops, which is evident, for example, when Rui tries to expel her from his beloved's grave. Accepting Pedro's death proves to be a difficult task for them and it interferes with their subjectivities.

Death is prominent throughout the whole story and it is through it that abjection is mostly suggested in the film. This is particularly illustrated through Rui kissing his

deceased boyfriend on the mouth during the latter's funeral and Odete removing Pedro's engagement ring from his finger with her mouth (each happening at different moments of the funeral). Odete's act is the epitome of abjection in the film and leads to a new development in the story. She goes through a whole metamorphosis in which she 'abandons' her identity of a hysterical woman who wants to be a mother for one in which she is obsessed with the deceased man to the point of transforming herself into him. Odete acquires gender and sexual identities in which she not only dresses like the deceased man and has a haircut like his but also plays the active role during the sexual intercourse she ends up having with Rui. This suggests a gender identity that is even more confusing for patriarchy: she is performing 'a male role', in theory, but with another man, which is another possibility of queer gender and sexual identities in Rodrigues's films.

Rodrigues's 'confusing' queer gender and sexual possibilities are also evident in *To Die like a Man*. One of the most striking scenes that illustrates this is when Tônia confronts her son, José Maria, who she had before she was transgender (he is in the army and is seen having sex with another man there, but he is homophobic towards his father/mother). José Maria seems rather perturbed by his father's transgender identity and avoids being touched by or listening to him/her. It is rather puzzling that Tônia ends up trying to impose some authority by exclaiming "I am you father!", yet the person both her son and the audience see saying this is a woman. Her gender identity nevertheless causes confusion for not only her son but also her young boyfriend, Rosário. He is adamant that Tônia has her sex reassignment surgery so that she becomes a 'true' woman and not, in his words, "neither one thing nor the other". Despite being a transgender woman most of her life and making her living out of it (by doing her drag queen shows), Tônia refuses to have the surgery because of her religious beliefs. When she is approaching death (it is implied that she has contracted cancer from her bad silicone implant in the past), she wants to reconcile with her born gender and 'to die like a man' so that she deserves heaven.

An interesting aspect of *To Die like a Man*, unlike the other two films, is that the characters interact more with other people, even if these are part of the former's 'own world' (they all seem alienated from the rest of the city). Moreover, gender and sexual identities in this particular film are discussed and the views connected to them are also explored through the characters' behaviours. For instance, Tônia's understanding of gender and sexuality is actually very confusing, as illustrated in a sequence in which she is having an argument with Jenny, a black drag queen/transgender who is researching to duet with her on an interpretation of Bonnie Tyler's *Total Eclipse of the Heart*. Jenny is wearing Tônia's blonde wig but the latter does not accept that there should be another blonde on stage: she claims she is the only and solely truthful blonde. Jenny then takes each piece of her clothes off as if she were doing a striptease and Tônia's boyfriend Rosário stares at Jenny's naked body. For this, he is told off by his girlfriend: "Have you never seen a naked *male* body before?" This is once again a rather confusing but noteworthy moment in the film as both Rosário and the audience are indeed looking at a *female* body—Jenny's. Tônia's comment therefore suggests that her understanding of gender and sexuality derives from the binary hegemonic matrix that dominates the

society where she grew up, which is a further possible explanation for her desire to 'die like a man'.

To conclude, this article sought to demonstrate that Rodrigues's films provide an array of characters that, although occupying a subaltern place in their society, become protagonists in his work. His films engage with behaviours, places, and people considered abject in their society, but they show that these are part of such a society and that there is a kind of symbiotic relationship between the queer characters and the other city dwellers. Even if their society refuses to acknowledge these 'abject' subjects, they are real enough not to be seen. They can be pushed to the social margins of such a society, but they will not cease to exist. Hence, abjection is evident on at least two levels in the films: on a social level, in terms of the characters' relationship with the external world, and on an individual level, where they fight against their own abjections in order to constitute their own subjectivities. Finally, it is necessary to look at films such as Rodrigues's from different perspectives because they are complex and should not be put into boxes (e.g., a 'gay film'), which could produce important debates in future research.

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