

Considering Fetishism in João Pedro Rodrigues's *O Fantasma*

ABSTRACT: This essay considers the depiction of fetishism in João Pedro Rodrigues's 2000 film *O Fantasma*. While its unusual and recondite form reflects fetishistic desire in ways that subvert and challenge conventional narrative structures, its presentation of fetishistic sexuality is also embedded in the material world. Thus, the film can be read as an pessimistic statement about the ability of sexual identity politics to effect broad social change. As such, the essay offers a note of caution to recent queer criticism of lusophone cinema.

KEYWORDS: Gay cinema; sexuality; loners; fetishism; João Pedro Rodrigues; *O Fantasma*; *portuguese cinema*

RESUMO: Este artigo considera a representação de fetichismo sexual no filme *O Fantasma*, de João Pedro Rodrigues (2000). Embora a forma estranho do filme reflete um desejo fetichista em maneiras que subvertem as estruturas narrativas convencionais, o filme coloca sua representação de sexualidade fetichista no mundo material. Neste maneira, o filme pode ser lido como uma declaração pessimista sobre a capacidade de políticas de identidade sexual para afetar mudança social. Portanto, este artigo contribui com uma nota de cautela para a recente crítica queer do cinema lusófono.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Cinema gay; sexualidade; solitários; fetichismo; João Pedro Rodrigues; *O Fantasma*; cinema português

João Pedro Rodrigues's first feature film, *O Fantasma* (2000), is something of a puzzle. Putatively, it is a story about social marginalization as experienced by sexual outsiders. Its protagonist, a garbage collector named Sérgio, transforms over the course of the film from a lonely figure who survives on anonymous sexual encounters into a rubber-suited, doglike outcast who lives in a landfill. Interspersed with short sequences of narrative are vignettes that detail his sexual activity; these range from scenes of simulated sex to explicit sex, an aspect of the

film that shocked its early audiences (Mercer 18). Critics were disturbed by and conflicted about the film's content, and scholars remain divided about its interpretation, reading it either as a commentary on the social isolation of gay men writ large or as a showcase for psychological collapse.

The film's major plot points can be summarized as follows. Sérgio works on the streets of Lisbon as a garbage collector and cleaner, mostly at night. One night, during his rounds, he helps a motorcyclist, João, sort through some unwanted clothes. This chance encounter sparks Sérgio's sexual interest, and he begins to acquire elements of João's biker outfit, hoarding them in his apartment and wearing them during episodes of sex and masturbation. Sérgio stalks João, first following him to a swimming pool, then breaking into his house and urinating on his bed. In the final sequence, Sérgio dons a rubber suit, breaks into João's house again, and kidnaps him. But instead of sexually assaulting the captive, he abandons him in the street and hitches a ride to a landfill on the back of a garbage van. Running free amid the trash, he eats spoiled food, chases rabbits, drinks from muddy pools, and defecates in a nearby workshop.

The film resists straightforward interpretation. Some reviewers hold that Sérgio, giving in to obsession, kidnaps João and takes him back to his flophouse bedroom, where he rapes him (Messerli; Rooney 66-68). Others believe that Sérgio kidnaps João but is spooked by a car during the abduction and runs off into the night without raping him (Lee 44; Mercer 18). Identifying this ambiguity, the scholar John Mercer suggests that the film is invested in denying the audience access to the events of its narrative and holding us back from its protagonist and his inner world:

What is most notable about *O Fantasma* is that rather than a particular effect, the film produces a series of denials. In the cold and unknowable Sérgio we are denied a point of identification or recognition within the text. We are denied words, emotions and the emotive cinematic devices that enable us to make the sequence of events easily legible. This in turn means that we are denied a moral compass to navigate us through this ambiguous narrative and in which to situate our responses. We are denied a narrative resolution as the film ends in a manner where outcomes are uncertain. As a result of this denial, we are finally denied the redemptive consolation of love. This denial is really what the film offers us and is the thematic lynchpin around which the narrative is organised and the protagonist's actions are given motivation. Sérgio's erotomania emerges from, and is fed by, denial. (25)

In Mercer's account, the film both invites and denies access to Sérgio's intimate life as part of a broader comment on the sexual marginalization of homosexual desire and those who experience it. Rodrigues continually elicits our interest in homosexual desire while blocking us from witnessing, experiencing, or consuming fully the world we glimpse. He teases us and leaves us frustrated, replicating in the audience the rejection that Sérgio himself experiences.

The scholar Carolina Cucinotta suggests that costuming choices in the film help to mediate Sérgio's narrative of transformation, which is read in terms of a splitting or doubling selfhood:

De facto, as coisas complicamse na segunda e última parte do filme, quando parece que Sérgio perde o controlo sobre o seu corpo e, conseqüentemente, sobre as suas ações. A partir da entrada na piscina (onde, umas cenas antes, Sérgio e João tinham tido um contacto direto, apesar do muito frio), a cena da intrusão em casa de João parecenos uma incessante descida em direção à completa submissão de Sérgio ao Fantasma. (123)

Cucinotta sees Sérgio's narrative largely as a battle between a normal ego and an ultimately successful perverse one. This reading, while intriguing, nonetheless frames Sergio's story in terms of a loss of control, which to some degree strips him of agency (his actions are not his own) and arguably pathologizes his sexual behaviour. While Cucinotta makes a useful connection between the costuming choices in *O Fantasma* and Louis Feuillard's *Les Vampires*, noting the rubber suit's similarity to the Irma Vep's costume, her reading suffers from a tendency to view his fetishistic behavior in pejorative terms (125).

I argue, instead, that the film's unusual and recondite form not only sabotages audience engagement but also reflects fetishistic desire in ways that subvert and challenge conventional narrative structures. The portrait of Sérgio's sexuality is qualified by the substantial attention that Rodrigues pays to the material world. Developing Mercer's comments on the relationship between the film's formal elements and its broader political message, I suggest that what might superficially be understood as Sérgio's total sexual liberation at the end of the film is more convincingly read as his consumption by or dissolution into large-scale social, economic, and material processes. The film therefore gestures toward materiality as a potential blind spot in sexual politics.

Bersanian Fetishism

The depiction of Sérgio's sexual life is clearly the film's major focus. It begins with sex; the majority of the narrative events concern his sexual appetites, habits, and activities; and it ends with a sequence that develops from fetishistic roleplay. Mercer has covered much of the film's content in this regard, with an emphasis on reading Sérgio in terms of gay politics. The film, in Mercer's view, is an effort to communicate gay sexuality to the audience—specifically, the difficulty gay men have when their desire is neither recognized nor accepted by wider society. He suggests that this continual rejection is metaphorized in Sérgio's bizarre obsession with João, which he reads as erotomania (a pathological unrequited love).

While I agree with Mercer's central point regarding the significance of sexuality, I believe that fetishism rather than erotomania better explains Sérgio's behavior—most crucially, when he abandons João entirely. Sigmund Freud's well-known account roots the origin of a fetishist's sexual obsession in a traumatic experience of sexual difference (152–57). The account, which strictly concerns the male fetishist, goes as follows: at some point in early life, the male child who will become a fetishist encounters the fact that his mother lacks a penis. This experience is traumatic, in part because it suggests that the child's own penis might suffer the same fate. To cope, the child denies he ever saw the “fact” of his mother's castration. Instead, he holds to the belief that the maternal phallus must still exist and takes the last item or object he saw before glimpsing his mother's lacking genitalia as an impression or memory of a world “in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic.” This object becomes the basis of the adult's fetish. In fetishism, however, this denial is not the end of the story, for Freud notes that the child also paradoxically accepts that castration took place. To maintain belief in the maternal phallus alongside the experiential evidence of maternal lack, the child splits his own ego.¹ In part, then, he retroactively imagines the last object he saw immediately before the traumatic site as evidence that the maternal phallus did exist. Over time, the object, whether feet, hair, or an undergarment, becomes imbued doubly with thrilling promise (as it recalls or substitutes for the longed-for maternal phallus) and castration anxiety (because it indicates the “reality” of castration) (156).

Sérgio's sexual activity displays some of the basic fetishistic hallmarks insofar as additional objects are indeed used to supplement or accompany sexual arousal, intercourse, and masturbation. For instance, in the image of sexual activity that opens the film, Sérgio's rubber suit could be taken as the fetish that

enables, or at least heightens, his sexual satisfaction. Here I turn to Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, who argue, in *The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture*, that fetishism should be viewed in broader terms. They read it as a sexual structure that stems from a dramatic alteration to the normative story of heterosexual development. Normally, as it were, the child takes the sight of the mother's genitals, and the concomitant experience of castration anxiety, as the start of his initiation into a process of repression and identification (the well-known Oedipus complex). The child accepts that the mother does not have a penis; desire for the mother is repressed to avoid similarly punitive action that the father might mete out on the child. In fetishism, Bersani and Dutoit suggest, the child is so traumatized by the sight of the maternal genitalia that his desire is not repressed but fully "detached" or "cut off" from the normal narrative of sexual development. Instead, it swerves or moves on to objects that are not typically invested with desire. "There can be something ridiculously inappropriate in the fetishist's choice of an object. He works, as it were, with whatever is at hand, with the nearest or most accessible thing.... It is, in a sense, a model of desire detaching itself from one image [maternal genitalia/castration] and moving on to other images" (69). Intriguingly, they suggest, fetishism seems to repeat and transform the imagined act of maternal castration into a liberating gesture: "Freud speaks of the fetishist's detachment from any interest in the woman's genitals, and of his displacing that interest onto another object. But this very denial of castration could be taken as a sublimated enactment of it. Desire is 'cut off' from its object and travels to other objects" (69).

Bersani and Dutoit argue that despite the foregrounding of fixation and obsession in fetishism's origin story, Freud's account also points to desire's fundamental mobility: rather than slavishly follow the pathways through which desire is normally channeled, the child is able to tear libidinal investment away from the mother's genitalia and transfer it to other objects. Even though the fetishist is briefly liberated from heterosexual development, only to find his desire fixed even more forcefully onto the fetish itself, this desiring mobility reappears again and again: "For the resolute effort to satisfy the single-minded wish to possess a phallic mother helps to move the child away from the mother, to derange his system of desiring by the absurd, even laughable objects designed to replace the missing phallus" (69). The fetishist starts off with a disturbance to his "system of desiring," which, while not quite a liberated or revolutionary state of being, nonetheless implies the possibility of resisting conventional desiring patterns in

some way. Bersani and Dutoit note another advantage to fetishism: a derealization of the object of desire. Unlike the heterosexual male, who in Freud's account of sexuality unconsciously believes that his female sexual partners are objects possessing qualities that will complete him in some way, the fetishist implicitly recognizes the objects of his desire as fantasy objects. He knows that the fetish is not the maternal phallus, even as he imbues it with desire as if it were the maternal phallus. He ambiguously knows, yet refuses to know. Bersani and Dutoit conclude that, rather than desire centered on the phallus (which would presumably manifest as social behavior that promotes the competition for and possession of women), fetishism contains the potential for desire centered on the discovery of "new surfaces": objects that lie outside normative or phallogentric frameworks (72). Their work also suggests that the fetishist bears a certain reflexive capacity or critical distance from the pursuit of his object of desire insofar as he can recognize that whatever it is he pursues will not really complete him, or truly satisfy his wants. While far from revolutionary, fetishism is argued to contain the seeds of a liberatory, agentic approach to the objects in which desire is invested.

These comments shed light on a number of the ambiguous elements in *O Fantasma*. First, the emphasis that Bersani and Dutoit place on the fetishist's object choice as "ridiculously inappropriate" helps us make sense of the prominence of rubbish in Sérgio's sexual activity, which typically focuses on João's discarded clothing (gloves, motorcycle jacket, swim trunks). The fetishist "swerves" or turns away from objects (the genitals) that are normatively desirable and instead invests his desire in objects that are neither desired nor suitable for the investment of desire. What better figure than rubbish, which, by definition, encompasses objects that are no longer interesting or appropriate for desire? João's rubbish, highly inappropriate as an object of erotic attention, becomes Sérgio's chosen fetish. This, in turn, helps us understand why the landfill is given prominence in the film (beyond its startling aesthetic value). As a repository of unwanted objects, the landfill is full of things no longer normatively desirable but potentially available for the fetishist's investment. Given his willingness to scour full bins for things to masturbate with, to collect and reuse as part of sexual play, Sérgio might well see the landfill as a potential fetishistic paradise. Of course, most of his fetish objects once belonged to João, which arguably provides them with a good deal of their erotic significance. But it is worth pointing out that Sérgio turns away from João near the end of the film (as if João no longer obsesses his interest or organizes his desire in the same way)

yet nonetheless escalates his fetishistic roleplay by beginning a new life in a landfill surrounded by trash. Here, the strange alien landscape into which he essentially dissolves himself echoes the “new surfaces,” which I interpret as referring to novel, unconventional objects of desire. One might read the end of the film as an unconventional moment of sexual liberation or the exercising of sexual agency, given the basic premises of Bersani and Dutoit’s model. This leads us to consider if the film works from a queer political perspective.² Are the sexual norms of life on the margins of the city so stifling that Sérgio must rebel against them to fully articulate his sexuality? Insofar as it constitutes a rejection of an oppressive social order, leaving his life behind for immersion in the landfill would be a rebellious and politically important move. It also leads us to consider if Sérgio’s more general commitment to the expression of a transgressive, fetishistic, and “inappropriate” sexuality also politically radical. Is Sérgio a queer hero? I will explore these questions later in this essay. Certainly, however, Bersani and Dutoit’s thesis helps us understand that Sérgio’s impulse to run off to a landfill is consistent with his behavior earlier in the film.

Bersani and Dutoit’s ideas about the reflexive potential of a fetishistic swerve can help us make sense of significant parts of the film’s narrative structure. The film derives narrative tension from Sérgio’s growing obsession with João and invites us to read his behavior in terms of a progressive escalation of activity. We presume the narrative climax will involve sexual assault, or even murder, which we understandably anticipate when Sérgio kidnaps João. But this does not come to pass. João’s death or rape is avoided when Sérgio breaks off his kidnapping efforts and leaves his victim by the side of the road (disposing of him like waste). Sérgio’s decision to break off here is startling: it takes place without much explanation and surely leaves the audience baffled. Certainly, were we to follow Mercer’s thesis on erotomania, this sudden turning away from the beloved object becomes a thorny issue. However, it is possible to draw a parallel between João’s sexualized destruction at Sérgio’s hands and the knowledge of the mother’s castration in the fetishist’s narrative, as both are violent climaxes framed as narrative conclusions. Like the child, Sérgio approaches a climactic moment of violence but then dramatically swerves away from it toward other objects of desire. The film suggests, at the very least, that Sérgio does not simply follow his desires out to their conclusion but exercises a degree of agency in relation to them. He breaks from a seemingly inevitable and predetermined narrative course. Here, his swerve could be read as narrative violence performed to

diffuse or block the possibility of real violence that would otherwise appear to be the probable narrative climax. In Bersani's terms, it is a "sublimating enactment" of castration of a similar kind to that occurring in the fetishist's origin story itself. By turning away from a violent climax and toward a new life in a landfill, Sérgio interrupts a desiring connection made with another person for desiring connections made with more "ridiculously inappropriate" objects (rubbish).

The swerve could even be read as demonstrating what Bersani and Dutoit call the "profit" of fetishism: despite the intensity of the fetishist's fixation on the object, he nonetheless recognizes it as a mere fantasy object and so, theoretically, obtains a degree of distance from or disenchantment with it and, in a broader sense, gains some choice over his own desires. Sérgio has a change of heart, as Mercer mentions, but one that is most likely afforded by fetishism rather than erotomania, as it parallels the "change of heart" (the swerve away from the maternal genitalia) that is central to fetishism's etiology. A Bersanian model of fetishism therefore suggests that Sérgio, obsessed with bizarre material objects, nonetheless implicitly retains some degree of agency over his own desire.

Sexuality in a Material Context

Fetishism is a form of sexuality explicitly entangled with material objects. Likewise, Sérgio's sexual expression is consistently and often literally bound to, articulated through, and supported by specific material objects: from auto-asphyxiation with a shower hose, to masturbating with João's old gloves, to wearing João's swimming costume. But the material world shapes his sexuality, and the film more broadly, in other ways. For example, Sérgio's job as a garbage collector determines a large part of *O Fantasma*. It is the pretext for his encounter with João and gives him an excuse to initiate their first interaction. (When João points out some items that need to be taken to the landfill, he and Sérgio discuss João's motorbike.) The garbage collectors are shown examining the unwanted objects they take away, which gives Sérgio cover for playing around with and then keeping João's possessions. Sérgio's job also serves as a metaphor for his sex life: his nighttime cruising parallels the tasks carried out by the trash collectors, who work unnoticed before the populace has woken and after they have gone to bed. Homosexuality and garbage collecting are nocturnal activities, excluded to the fringes of society and removed from daily life.

Homosexuality was effectively decriminalized in Portugal in 1982; yet at the time the film was released, expressions of homosexuality were still discouraged

in public life (de Oliveira et al. 1479). As such, Sérgio's consignment to the shadows echoes a broader, pervasive cultural sentiment. The metaphorical association between rubbish collecting and sex also sites both activities at the bottom of their respective hierarchies: unskilled menial labor and fetishistic or anonymous sex lack respect or value according to dominant social conventions (which privilege professional labor and reproductive heterosexual sex, respectively). In the film, the comparison is often signaled in simple visual language. For example, Sérgio is shown leaving his apartment as a cleaner vacuums in the midground, similarly alone, similarly engaged in clearing the waste of everyday life. Moments later, Sérgio himself is shown sweeping leaves, repeating in a near-identical fashion the cleaner's movements. This reminds us that, for all his sexual quirks, Sérgio is also a menial laborer, low paid and of low social status, and must contend with intersecting disadvantages of economic class and sexual identity. He is isolated but nonetheless shares commonalities with other marginalized individuals.

Class and economic standing affect the kind of sex he can have, where he has it, and his safety. This point has often been neglected in queer scholarship. According to John Binnie, the foundational queer theories developed in the early 1990s paid too much attention to meanings in texts and not enough to the production of goods and services, markets and capital accumulation (169). He argues that these latter material features are just as significant, if not more so, for gay and lesbian people in the West: "It must still be stressed that money is the major prerequisite and the greatest boundary for the construction of autonomous, independent assertive gay male subjectivities" (166). Likewise, Mariam Fraser suggests that sexual-identity politics has struggled to incorporate demands for economic justice because it emphasizes recognition and representation over redistribution (121). Elizabeth McDermott points out that while some lesbian women and gay men have secured relative "liberation," the persistent blindness to class in LGBTQ politics means that many have been left behind (66). Living on the margins of society, Sérgio could easily fall into this category. The emphasis that *O Fantasma* places on his material circumstances and his relative impoverishment gestures toward the need for a politics of sexuality to recognize the impact of class. That said, Antonio M. da Silva has argued that Rodrigues's cinema typically associates its characters with abject or marginal areas of urban space, both to indicate their abject social status (as "social pollution") and to show how they resist and challenge the normative frames

that manage sexual and gender identity (75). Thus, although Sérgio inhabits the margins in an economic sense, he is able to exercise some agency as he traces his geography out on the nocturnal streets of Lisbon. In da Silva's argument, *O Fantasma* is to some degree about the capacity of those excluded or outcast from society to reclaim space, to carve out their own sexual existence, and to live life on their own terms. Clues in cinematic language, however, suggest that Sérgio's sexual activity is shaped, even restrained, by the physical, material world around him. In a short vignette midway through the film, he is shown having sex with an anonymous man in the street. The shot is striated by the strong geometric lines of the gate that Sérgio grasps for support. Because Sérgio has sex *a tergo* and the shot is poorly lit, it is difficult, but not impossible, to distinguish which arms belong to which man. His partner's face lies just out of focus, so we only see Sérgio's face, his gaze lowered from the camera. Finally, the bars of the gate are organized in pairs, and this, combined with the fact both men grasp the gate, gives the shot a strange repetitive quality, as if the scene were being viewed through a prism. This lyrical cinematic language could indicate a confusion of identity or loss of self experienced by Sérgio during intense sexual intimacy. The scene stresses the visual parallels between the two men, the pairs of arms, and the bars. More striking is the sense that the material world frames Sérgio, even captures him, restricting or at least defining the sex he has. In other words, although the urban landscape furnishes him with opportunities for sexual encounters, cinematic language suggests that it also determines what those encounters look like and that his sexual agency is restricted or limited.

Camera work prioritizes the material world in a number of ways. Often this is straightforward, when the camera fixes on objects over characters. At points Rodrigues foregrounds colorful laundry and shifts the camera focus to relegate the actors to the background; at others, sweeps of concrete subsume the actors; at still others, Sérgio's camouflaged surveillance affords the director an opportunity to present complex arrangements of trees, window frames, actors, and props that work across fore-, mid- and background. One consequence of this focus is that interesting visual correspondences are occasionally made between Sérgio and the material world. About a third of the way through the film, for instance, Sérgio is shown naked after having had sex with an anonymous partner. He leaves the man's apartment by the window, which gives Rodrigues an opportunity to draw our attention toward the visual similarity between Sérgio's set-apart naked legs and the columns of the balcony on which he stands.



Figure 1. Sérgio meets a stranger for sex. © Rosa Filmes.

Here, the erotic or titillating value of the scene—a naked male body—is somewhat offset by aesthetic similarities that emphasize equivalence between Sérgio and elements of architecture. While Sérgio is presented as an object for our contemplation he also seems to subtly flatten into the scenery, which garnishes the shot's erotic charge with a sense of his embeddedness in the world around him. The visual arrangement objectifies Sérgio. It also locates him as merely one object of contemplation among many. The film could even be read as asking audience members to reflexively acknowledge their own role in his sexual objectification. Whatever the matter, erotic contemplation of bodies and aesthetic contemplation of scenery become briefly indistinguishable. Sérgio is not simply imprisoned by the material world but fundamentally part of it, fetishized as an object among objects.

The camera's insistence on the importance of materiality does not just displace or estrange the actors. It disrupts the narrative as well. When the film begins, Sérgio is shown having sex in a rubber suit as a dog barks and whines outside a locked bedroom door. Then we are shown some title credits and a shot of Sérgio working his shift as a dustman. Following this, we see him playing with his dog, Lorde, before he is surprised by a colleague, Fatima. All of this takes place in the film's first few minutes, and up to this point the picture feels relatively realistic. The interaction between Sérgio and Fatima that follows, however, is acutely strange and theatrical. Fatima covers Sérgio's eyes and asks him to



Figure 2. Sérgio spies on João as he watches a movie. © Rosa Filmes.



Figure 3. Sérgio's body mimics the world around him. © Rosa Filmes.

guess her identity; when he responds angrily, she kicks him, and he remains on the floor whining like a dog.

As the acting shifts from lifelike to stylized, both Fatima's violence and Sérgio's doglike submissiveness seem inexplicable. The lack of narrative clues, either in dialogue or in prior material, means that viewers looking for narrative orientation will no doubt respond with bafflement, feeling the "denial" of explanation or grounding



Figure 4. Fatima makes Sérgio guess her identity. © Rosa Filmes

that Mercer discusses. Insofar as this sequence disorients the viewer and disrupts our suspension of disbelief (or prohibits its formation), the staginess could be read in terms of a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekte*, or V-effect: that is, a way of preventing the audience from engaging with the film as a piece of entertainment through the encouragement of reflexive viewing practices. Of course, the film has only just begun at this point and has not had a chance to develop any particular political scenario or make specific political insights available to the viewer.³ What may become more obvious to an audience ejected temporarily from the narrative is the repetition in Sérgio's behavior of elements from the prior scene. We notice how strangely he echoes the submissive behaviour of his sexual partner and how he repeats the whining of the dog trapped outside the bedroom. What Mercer sees as narrative denial could also be understood as the seemingly senseless foregrounding of aesthetic elements: repetition of form over plot development. In other words, the film parallels fetishistic psychic structure. It turns us away from narrative progression and toward its own materiality. Like the proto-fetishist child in Bersani and Dutoit's reading, the audience swerves away from the story's expected course (where narrative sense would be found) toward inappropriate (senseless) objects of apprehension. Following this line of interpretation, the unreal or unnatural shock of Sérgio's doglike mimicry could be seen as an equivalent stimulus to the traumatic sight of the mother's genitals: a moment that interrupts the regular flow of our engagement and redirects our attention to other elements of film composition (its matter).



Figure 5. The screen is dominated by stark lines. © Rosa Filmes.

Narrative progression is foiled in similar ways later in the movie. When walking his dog, Sérgio encounters a police car with a policeman handcuffed in the back; Sérgio opens the door and hesitantly engages in oral sex with him. This is strange because we are given no explanation for the policeman's bound state (we might imagine that it somehow forms part of his own erotic game) or any indication that Sérgio's attention has been invited. Nonetheless, it does not disturb narrative realism as immediately as a later scene does, an episode for which it arguably lays the ground. About two-thirds of the way through the film, Sérgio breaks into João's house and, as he is about to leave, is arrested by the same policeman. Rather than Sérgio ending up in a police station, as we might expect, the arrest turns into an erotic scenario. Here, the audience is diverted from the story twice, first by the commencement of a sexualized interaction, then by the *mise-en-scène*. Sérgio leans back against a tree while the policeman stands opposite to the trunk on the other side of the frame. This visual composition is crisscrossed by another tree trunk in the midground and the arm and baton of the policeman, both forming strong geometrical complements that divide the frame at forty-five-degree angles.

Not only is the eye distracted by the strong formal components of the shot, but we cannot help but connect this sequence to Sérgio's first encounter with the policeman and view it as both a repetition (an unexpected sexual encounter in which Sérgio is the receptive partner in an act of oral sex) and a reversal (now

the policeman is in control while Sérgio wears handcuffs). The film's narrative, a plot about breaking and entering, is interrupted before it comes to its conclusion. We are diverted toward a seemingly ill-fitting erotic scenario in which the viewer's attention is partly taken up by an unlikely sex scene and partly by the formal composition of the shot itself. The erotic relationship seems to be dominated by or subsumed within the aesthetic composition of the shot; the baton of the policeman closely parallels the tree trunk as if the policeman is deliberately posed to produce a sense of visual symmetry for the viewer. Again, a swerve comparable to the swerve in fetishism operates at the level of film form: the viewer swerves away from narrative resolution toward the contemplation of objects (fetish gear, handcuffs, leather, rubber) and the material components of the film.

As these examples demonstrate, sexuality is shown to be embedded in differing material contexts throughout the film. More precisely, these examples show how materiality shapes, stalls, restrains, interrupts, and enables the articulation of sexuality and eroticism. The film makes a consistent effort to show how Sérgio's rebellion is bounded by a broader context. Conversely, the repetition of a fetishistic swerve at a number of key points suggests that Bersani and Dutoit's insights are useful for capturing the film's entanglement of sexuality with the material world.

The Final Sequence: Limitations on Rebellion

O Fantasma's bizarre, lyrical, and dreamlike final sequence brings together the major themes I have outlined: fetishistic sexual activity and an effort to present Sérgio as situated in the material world. This sequence might be read as a rebellious moment for Sérgio, an articulation of his agency, when he breaks free from an oppressive society. However, I see this rebellion as limited. By combining his flourishing sexual exploration with visual evidence of his extreme physical precarity, the film makes a more general comment on the diminished capacity for transgressive and affirmatory gestures of sexuality to affect the status quo. As I have suggested, the final sequence might be initially read as a disconcerting but triumphant moment for Sérgio, as he rejects the society that rejects him and begins a new life outside of its rules. It is worth exploring exactly what sort of triumph this is. When Sérgio abandons João halfway through his kidnapping, he returns the rejection he has suffered throughout the film, becoming the abandoner and—in a way—reclaiming some agency. His subsequent transformation might seem, therefore, to be personally empowering. He casts off social expectations, norms, morality, and relationships for an isolated but ultimately more

liberated life. There are obvious parallels with conventional narratives around coming out and sexual self-discovery that frequently form part of a key story about western gay identity (Plummer 2002), although the persistent use of the rubber suit seems indicative of a deeper transformation. We might be inclined to read Sérgio as a queer figure, one whose sexuality critiques, challenges, or rejects the social rules around sexual identity, who stands outside of the norms that control and manage sexuality more broadly (Warner; Bersani, *Homos*).

Sérgio resists interpretation. Is he playing or serious? Is he sane or mad? Is this change temporary or permanent? Is he still human or psychologically beastlike, as some critics have wondered? We are unable to tell for sure. He seems to take the pursuit of a rabbit seriously, for example, as if he really thinks he is a predator chasing prey, but then does not deliver the killing blow and looks at the animal in confusion. Likewise, he seems committed to wearing the rubber suit and gimp mask but later removes the mask. (Does he remove it for reasons of comfort? Why not remove the suit itself? Why not return home?) The uncertainty of his intention (his desire) could occupy the audience's thoughts as the film closes. Bersani and Dutoit's account of fetishism helps explain the ambiguity that surrounds him. The fetishist is beset by ambivalence: he looked away from the mother's genitalia "too quickly": "Having both seen and not seen, he will insist that he saw what he did not see [a maternal phallus] and yet also insist that he saw what he in fact did see [the actual maternal genitalia]. And all this troubled seeing will go on elsewhere—with an irrelevant object perhaps there and not there, perhaps a phallus and perhaps a knee or a piece of fur" (71). This ambivalence of desire deprivileges the phallus, and so long as the fetishist is able to continually seek out new surfaces for his desire, he could be thought of as a "hero of uncertain desire, of undecideability" (71). After Sérgio abandons João, his motivations and desires become seemingly impenetrable, and as such the Bersanian interpretation holds true here. At the very least, as Mercer points out, the audience has to make sense of his actions with very little guidance, and they could plausibly be understood in a number of ways: as part of elaborate fetish play; as evidence of a wish to become closer in form to the trash or to the dogs on the margins of Lisbon; as the embodiment or emblem of the abject social position held by sexual minorities; as a dramatic rejection of the norms around self-presentation; as the uncertain, non-phallic Bersanian fetishist whose unwillingness to compromise his sexual expression defies prescribed cultural imperatives to know himself and rejects the identitarian demand for sexual and psychic intelligibility.



Figure 6. Sérgio disappears into the landfill. © Rosa Filmes.

O Fantasma is not simply concerned with depicting a sexual outlaw, and any argument about the political and strategic validity of Sérgio as a queer or transgressive subject must be qualified by the film's persistent, cross-cutting, thematic interest in material culture. Representations of desire are consistently located in materiality, whether in a literal sense (the fetish object that snares, focuses, and amplifies Sérgio's sexual desire) or in terms of film form (in which the narrative progression is briefly suspended when the film signals its own constructedness). This is no different as the film comes to a close. It is obvious that Sérgio's capers have made him exceptionally vulnerable. While playacting as a dog, he eats spoiled food and becomes sick, which reminds the audience of his bodily vulnerability just as it reminds us that he has human needs (including hunger and health), despite his dehumanized and objectified appearance. Moreover, he is swallowed up by the landfill site.

The film's use of cinematography might lead us to read this as a subversive transgression of social and cultural norms, but it just as easily and perhaps more convincingly provides stark visual evidence of straightforward material impoverishment. For all of Sérgio's rejection of convention, he becomes as disposable as trash. His sexual particularity is located within a material, social, and political system, the material fact of which is shown to engulf him. In this sense, the film embeds life-changing ideas about sexual liberation and self-realization into an indifferent context. To some degree, the pessimism displayed here approaches

Bersani's thoughts on sexual-identity politics, which consider true social change possible only when the underlying affective and relational systems on which social life is built are disturbed or transformed in some way. He is famously critical of efforts to legalize gay marriage, for example (*Is the rectum a grave? And other essays* 85–86), which he takes to be a consolidation of an oppressive sexual and relational status quo. Elsewhere, he argues that, without radically dismantling the hierarchies built into our erotic relationships, “all revolutionary activity will return, as we have seen it return over and over again, to relations of ownership and dominance” (128). Bersani often relies on queer “heroes” of undecidability to illustrate his political visions, the fetishist being a case in point. This has led to criticisms of his work as overvaluing, in Jack Halberstam's words, the potential of “new social forms that supposedly emerge from gay male orgies or cruising escapades or gender-queer erotics or sodomitic sadism or at any rate queer jouissance of some form or another” and as being problematically masculinist, inaccessible, and exclusive (149–50). Some critics have included Bersani alongside other queer theorists who champion transgressive sexual imaginaries but downplay or ignore broader social structures, constraints, and contexts. Steven Seidman puts this point succinctly: “Underlying [queer] politics of subversion is a vague notion that this will encourage new, affirmative forms of personal and social life, although poststructuralists are reluctant to name their social vision.... Insofar as discursive practices are not institutionally situated, there is an edging toward textual idealism” (132).

Of course, neither the film nor Rodrigues ever uses the word *queer*. But with its focus on a rebellious, ambiguous sexual outsider, *O Fantasma* evokes the atmosphere of the debates around the transgressive potential (or not) of sexual expression and sexual freedom. In that light the film could be seen as working to correct the idealism that Seidman identifies in queer politics through its final emphasis on the staggering force of large-scale social, material, and economic processes. As I have argued, the use of Brechtian shock effects consistently reminds us of the matter that makes up the film: its formal composition. In this sense *O Fantasma* works hard to emphasize the significance of the world in which Sérgio moves. But when it essentially dissolves its rebellious sexual “hero” into the overwhelming vistas of a manmade landscape, the film could be taken as alerting us to the fact that the material, social, and economic forces shaping our lives may well be beyond one individual's capacity to affect, no matter how radical, daring, ambiguous, or transgressive we are. This reading has a

final implication: on our own, camouflage and assimilation are all we can do, but *O Fantasma*'s pessimism could also function as a redirection (perhaps even a fetishistic swerve) away from the individual toward the importance of a collective response to the problems of contemporary life.

O Fantasma tells two stories about Sérgio: one about his sexual particularity (fetishism), one about the significance of the material context to his life (in the sense of place, economic position, and material precarity). In doing so, the film raises questions about the feasibility of the former to affect and shape the latter. Indeed, the overall impression left by the film is that, despite Sérgio's embrace of his sexuality, the material context is a significant limitation that restricts the possibilities for desiring fantasy, shapes the fantasies he has, and remains unaffected by the most outré gesture of sexual rebellion he can muster. In that sense, *O Fantasma* is a pessimistic film. This is not because of Sérgio's loneliness or the persistence of homophobia. Rather, the film's pessimism derives from his disappearance into the alien landscapes of its final sequence: the enormity of social and political processes represented by the landfill (including globalized, waste-producing, consumer capitalism) seem to swallow up and render moot any efforts to rebel against it. The film's effort to return Sérgio's sexuality to a material context should leave us skeptical both of affirmatory sexual politics, represented by lesbian and gay identity movements, and of the transgressive queer models that followed.

Some general lines for further study are opened up by this paper. First, the connection between same-sex desire and fetishism reoccurs in Rodrigues's work, notably in his 2016 film *O Ornitólogo*, which features striking examples of Shibari rope play and urolagnia. A comparative study that assesses his wider corpus for consistencies and variations on fetishism would be important for grappling with how the theme figures in his work more broadly. Second, this essay points to the need for scholarship on the complex entanglement of sex and material culture—in particular, the sense of the limitations of sexuality in contemporary lusophone cinema. Given the uneven but nonetheless dramatic changes in the social acceptance of homosexuality in western countries, it is clear that studies exploring the situatedness of lesbian, bisexual, and gay desires in specific geographical and material contexts will continue to provide necessary, novel insights.

NOTES

1. In this sense the denial is not truly a psychotic denial (whereby the child would totally reject the possibility of castration) or a neurotic repression (whereby the “fact” of castration would be rejected from consciousness but accepted into the unconscious), but something in between. As Freud writes, “He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up. In the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise has been reached” (Freud 154).

2. Here I take queer to indicate a perspective or critique that aims to expose and deconstruct norms, values, and beliefs that uphold the privileged position of heterosexuality in contemporary discourse and culture (also known as heterosexism or heteronormativity). See Jagose for an overview of *queer* in this context (Jagose 3).

3. See Johnson for a number of examples in which the V-effect is successfully used in cinema to reveal a political critique (97).

WORKS CITED

- Bersani, Leo. *Homos*. Harvard University Press, 1995.
- . *Is the rectum a grave? And other essays*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Bersani, Leo, and Ulysse Dutoit. *The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture*. Schocken, 1985.
- Binnie, Jon. “Trading Places: Consumption, Sexuality and the Production of Queer Space.” *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, 1995, pp. 182–99.
- Cucinotta, Caterina. “Origens Possíveis e Consequentes Desenvolvimentos Contemporâneos Da Longa-metragem O Fantasma, de João Pedro Rodrigues.” *GerAção Invisível*, p. 105.
- da Silva, Antônio M. “The Portuguese Queer Screen: Gender Possibilities in João Pedro Rodrigues’s Cinematic Production.” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2014, pp. 69–78.
- da Silva, Simone Cavalcante. “The Space of Queer Masculinities in Karim Ainouz’s *Praia Do Futuro*.” *Space and Subjectivity in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema*, Springer, 2017, pp. 169–83.
- de Oliveira, João Manuel, et al. “The Workings of Homonormativity: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Discourses on Discrimination and Public Displays of Affections in Portugal.” *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 60, no. 10, 2013, pp. 1475–93.
- Duggan, Lisa. “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism.” *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, 2002, pp. 175–94.
- Fraser, Mariam. “Classing Queer: Politics in Competition.” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1999, pp. 107–31.
- Freud, Sigmund, and James Ed Strachey. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 1964.

- Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Hodgson, James. "Possibilities for Queer Revolution in Glauber Rocha's *Barravento/ The Turning Wind* (1962)." *Studies in Spanish & Latin American Cinemas*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2018, pp. 25–43.
- . "Selfish Mysticism, Queer Utopias: 'Homo-Ness' in Carlos Hugo Christensen's *O Menino Eo Vento*." *Journal of Lusophone Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2019.
- . "'Você quase ganhou um orquídea viva!': Dissimulação queer e desejo homosocial em *Os Cafajestes* de Ruy Guerra." *Via Atlântica*, no. 33, 2018.
- Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. NYU Press, 1996.
- Johnson, Randal. *Cinema Novo x 5: Masters of Contemporary Brazilian Film*. Vol. 60, University of Texas Press, 1984.
- Lee, Nathan. "Mysterious Skin: João Pedro Rodrigues's Cinema of Carnal Transcendence". *Film Comment*, Jul. 2006: 42–44. Print.
- McDermott, Elizabeth. "The World Some Have Won: Sexuality, Class and Inequality." *Sexualities*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2011, pp. 63–78.
- Messerli, Douglas. "João Pedro Rodrigues: O Fantasma, Dark Pleasure." Rev. of *O Fantasma*, dir. by João Pedro Rodrigues. *World Cinema Review*, Nov. 2017. Web. 3 Jul. 2018. <http://internationalcinemareview.blogspot.com/2017/11/joao-pedro-rodrigues-o-fantasma.html>.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Springer, 1989, pp. 14–26.
- Penney, James. *After Queer Theory*. Pluto Press, 2014.
- Plummer, Ken. *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*. Routledge, 2002.
- Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Seidman, Steven. *Queer Theory/Sociology*. 1996.
- Subero, Gus. *Queer Masculinities in Latin American Cinema: Male Bodies and Narrative Representations*. IB Tauris, 2013.
- Warner, Michael. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Vol. 6, U of Minnesota Press, 1993.

JAMES HODGSON is an early career postdoctoral researcher based at the University of Manchester, working on sexuality, relationships and personal life. He has published on same-sex relationships in lusophone cinema and has a growing research interest in states of 'being alone' - from loners, loneliness, me-time or alone-time, to solitude and voluntary social isolation.