

## ACCESSING EXPERIENCE THROUGH IMAGES OF PEOPLE'S BODIES AT WORK: A COMING TOGETHER OF ETHNOGRAPHY AND FILM

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*In João Pedro Rodrigues' films, people are brought to mind by the unequivocal truthfulness of the images that depict their bodies. This cinematographic existence also became an ethnographic occurrence to me; from then on, my anthropological writing relied on the observation of forms those bodies attained in the moving images. The experience I have just described makes me think that the use of images created by non-anthropologists, as a means to the anthropological fieldwork, is always relevant, should those images provide access to dimensions the anthropologist wishes to perceive. The images (as any image) can be subjected to an anthropological interpretation, despite their ethnographic relevance not existing in the ethnographic purpose of their producers, but within a specific research relationship created by the anthropologist. The excerpts of these films, and the anthropological reflections on them, focus on work situations and the bodies of workers.*

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*Je puis dire n'avoir rien vu du pays et de ses Maoris avant  
d'avoir parcouru et presque vécu les croquis de Gauguin.*  
Victor Segalen, 1903

In 1997 and 1998, I was involved in the making of two films by João Pedro Rodrigues (*This is my home* and *A Journey to the Expo*) and, in 2010, in the making of *Red Dawn* and *The Last Time I Saw Macao*, by João Pedro Rodrigues and João Rui Guerra da Mata. Along the process of filming, both the filmmaker and I were aware that we were doing different things: the director made films, the anthropologist did ethnography. To me, the crossover between ethnography and filming came later on, when the writing began.

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My observation included two kinds of records: my interpretations of the “field”, and its cinematographic images. The reading of this reality in the images gathered by a filmmaker allowed me to access new, and not yet identified, dimensions of it. The ethnographic interpretation was thus subjected to a second interpretive fold.

In João Pedro Rodrigues’ films, people are brought to mind by the unequivocal truthfulness of the images that depict their bodies (Lee 2006).<sup>2</sup> This cinematographic existence became to me also an ethnographic occurrence; from then on, my anthropological writing relied also on the observation of the forms those bodies acquired in the movies. The images of those bodies showed me a new path to the experiences of the people with whom I had worked.



Sequence of “Alvorada Vermelha” by João Pedro Rodrigues (<https://archive.org/details/jp-rodrigues-alvorada-vermelha>). Agência da Curta Metragem, Vila do Conde, Portugal.

## THE PRESENCE OF BODIES IN THE WORLD

When anthropologists work on questions concerning the process of constructing personal identities, they inevitably deal with what Csordas (1994:12) calls “embodiment”: an “indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world”. However, among all ethnographies presented to study such questions, very few encompass an approach to the body. While it is true that, since Marcel Mauss’ *Techniques of the body*, published in 1936, anthropology conceives the construction of bodies as a process integrating the forms of self-construction,<sup>3</sup> it is also true that such articulation, despite

2 “Truth”, not in a sense given by the “cinematographic scientism”, but in the sense of an approach to the physical experience of someone who have been filmed. Victor Segalen dicusses, in a letter written in 1903, a similar personal experience when looking at Gauguin’s sketches of the Maori for the first time. (Segalen 1986: 19,20).

3 Following Mauss’s proposal, Pierre Bourdieu coins the concept of *habitus* (the *habitus* compounds the *body hexis* and the *ethos*) that helped to make more complex the understanding of the role the body undertakes in the

its conceptual acceptance, has always proved hard to operate with. No doubt this is due to many reasons, one of them being the ethnographic impediment that it raises: how does one observe bodies and, most importantly, how does one later describe their experiential dimension? As Marcus pointed out, such *demarche* has failed, even in ethnographic film: “what was missing was not the body but the experience of existing in” (Marcus 1995: 249). Later on, and despite the awareness of such an impediment, Farnell (2011) advocate the epistemological relevance of the use of images and its sounds to capture the moving of “moving persons”.

When, during the 1990s, I started to work with the images regarding the first two movies, the evocations arising from the images created by João Pedro encouraged me to focus my attention on the bodies of the people who had been filmed. I had seen a part of the lives of those bodies – even partly shared their experiences –, but when I saw the images, I understood that I had still not seen everything (or, in other words, that I had not become aware of everything). From then on, I never stopped paying attention to the bodies of leading figures in João Pedro Rodrigues’s movies.

The experience I have just described, leads me to believe that the use of images created by non-anthropologists, as a means to the anthropological fieldwork, is always relevant, whenever those images provide access to dimensions the anthropologist wishes to perceive. As referred by Sarah Pink (2001), the images (as any other images) can be subjected to an anthropological interpretation, even though its ethnographic relevance is not to be found in the ethnographic purpose of whom might have produce them, but within the specific research relationship created by the anthropologist.

Within this assumption, we therefore propose that the cinematographic images displayed here, and the anthropological reflexion that comes with them, are to be treated as a whole.

## THE BODY OF A CRAFTSMAN

José has a cobbler workshop in Paris, where he spends most of his days. The “body of a craftsman” appears in *This is my home*, when José arrives at his workshop and starts working. The images of his work show several sequences of gestures that impressed me mostly for the accuracy and certainty they reveal.

The “body of a craftsman” is a body that happens to be sure of itself, and assertive of its existence within the world. In a sequence in which José appears, and then receives payment from a customer, we realize that in such context of social interaction the body of José expresses an affirmative confidence that never shows up in other contexts. In my view, this is related to the fact that his work, which still bears a quite significant handcraft dimension, is based on the certainty of “a job well done”. This certainty has two dimensions. One of them, which I’ll call the “intellectual dimension”, concerns a way of thinking that does not strive for novelty or invention, but rather to the implementation of clear solutions (Tessenow 1983), shared by several members of one community (in this case, the cobblers). When delivering a piece of work to a customer, José is sure of having done it exactly as it should have been done. Despite being based

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construction of personal identities.

on this “intellectual dimension”, this certainty manifests itself, and also gives form, through the craftsman’s body.

The second dimension has to do, in a more straightforward and obvious way, with the relationship between body and matter. If, as proposed by Jean-Pierre Warnier (Bayart 2004), we consider this behaviour-in-motion as a matrix of subjectivation, we then realise that a gesture that has been recurrent and therefore accurate, takes part in a corporeality that participates of that same quality. The body of a craftsman is the “body *hexis*” (Bourdieu 1979, 1980) that keeps up, within a *habitus*, with an ethos that encompasses this certainty of “excellence” so characteristic of any handcraft (Sennett 2008).



Sequence of “Esta é a minha casa” by João Pedro Rodrigues (<https://archive.org/details/jp-rodrigues-esta-e-a-minha-casa>). Rosa Filmes, Lisbon, Portugal.

In the movie *A Journey to the Expo*, shot in Lisbon, one can see a wide shot in which José and Johnny, his son, are wandering through Alfama’s neighbourhood, and they find the workshop of an old cobbler. Slowly, and at the same time revealing curiosity and respect, they enter gradually, until a moment when they start talking with the owner. When the conversation settles, the body of José changes and assumes once again the confident and assertive form of the Parisian craftsman. The way he handles the shoes, and his comments, express that self-confidence, built upon work, but that almost seems ontological.

They talk about technical things, the repair prices and the fact that the trade is no longer as the old cobbler once knew it, and this is the main reason he is now prepared to abandon it. In the end, José reveals that he has the same profession; he too has a workshop, but in Paris. That scene, in which two craftsmen, one at the dusk of his life, the other at the height of his

adulthood, find themselves in a dark and degraded Lisbon alley, is in my view the film's most moving scene. It is the only one evoking death, in a movie that shows us the pleasure of living.

## BODY WITH BODY

The movie *Red Dawn* is shot in Macau, within the historical site of the local Red Market. It begins with the opening of the market, at dawn, and it presents us with successive images of the slaughter, handling and selling of animals. As had happened in José's workshop, in Macau I also followed the shooting of the scenes inside the Market. And despite having already written down my thoughts on the subject – and being therefore available to look closely at the gestures, the bodies and the tools –, when I saw João Pedro's images I had once again the feeling that they unveiled for me a reality of which I was not previously aware. The absolute accordance between the craftsmen's bodily movements, the handling of tools and the handled bodies of animals was visible and it impressed me as soon as I visited the market. However, that same synchrony is, in the moving images, transported to an emotional dimension that places it elsewhere. I think the images in *Red Dawn* can give us access to what Tim Ingold (2013) calls a poetic on the use of tools.

The situation observed in Red Market bears a particularity: it is not exactly about craftsmen who build things by changing matter, but rather craftsmen who make "food" from living bodies. But despite the fact that the final "artefact" here are the edible fragments of animal bodies, the issue of the relationship between craftsmen, tools and matter presents itself just as Tim Ingold raises it: "The artefact, in short, is the crystallisation of activity within a relational field, its regularities of form embodying the regularities of movement that gave rise to it" (Ingold 2000: 345).

What a craftsman does with his tools is grounded on a relationship with the animals that is itself based on manipulation – knowledge – of their bodies. It is, in Kuchler's and Were's terms, a practice developed within an "empathy" (Kuchler and Were 2009) or a "resonance" (Rosa 2018) with matter. Just as Tim Ingold's basket makers build the form by following, with matter, the curves that are better fitted, so the butchers and fishmongers of Macau cut the bodies following or "feeling" the lines suggested by them: "The craftsman feels his raw material, as the potter feels clay or the turner feels wood, and out of that process of feeling there emerges the form of the vessel" (Ingold 2000 : 23).

The empathy between bodies – of the one who cuts and the one being chopped – is so tactile that sometimes the look is absent (there are moments when the craftsmen look at the camera, carrying on with the same certainty, their handling of animal bodies).

Just as had happened with the images of José, the cobbler, the people here are the bodies at work. People do not precede their bodies. The bodies belong to them and they are themselves the bodies. They are people shaped in, and by, work, in the relationship with the tools and the animals they slaughter, cut and prepare for human consumption; the making of their *selves* integrates the relationship with the animals handled by them. Just as the basket craftsman constructs himself (Ingold 2000) by incorporating the intertwined fibers and the huntsman constructs himself when he incorporates the animals he kills: "At that crucial moment of eye-

to-eye contact, the hunter *felt* the overwhelming presence of the animal; he felt as if his own being were somehow bound up or intermingled with that of the animal” (Ingold 2000: 25).

Unravelling reality is not something exclusive to social scientists. On the contrary, those other means of perception can expose things that were inaccessible to us, but which then become part of our own ethnographic “facts”. João Pedro Rodrigues’s films, for instance, can give us access to thinking about the bodies when they are in labour situations – i.e. in some kind of relationship with objects and animals – as part of the performance dynamics that usually lead to the process of building up the self.

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