

Queering *Moby Dick*. Pornography as a political strategy in João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira

Bruno Marques | bmarques@fcsh.unl.pt

IHA-NOVA FCSH / IN2PAST

Ana Catarina Caldeira | anacatarinacaldeira@gmail.com

ICNOVA-NOVA FCSH

Palabras clave

João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, art, pornography, same sex marriage, Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick*.

Sumario

1. Introduction.
2. Adaptation theory: a queer version to expose processes of social repression and hypocrisy.
3. The background: the debate around same sex marriage in Portugal.
4. Pornography or "Pornographic Art"? A film with explicit sexual content that is not sexually arousing.
5. The Sacred Male Couple as foundation of a new, more egalitarian social organization: a world of pure copulation as disintegration of hierarchies
6. Conclusions.
7. Rererences

periférico" que, más de 35 años después del fin de la dictadura (1926-1974), sigue negando el reconocimiento legal del matrimonio entre homosexuales. Basándose en superar la incompatibilidad entre el arte y la pornografía, así como explorar la conexión distintiva entre la idea de *eros democrático* y un *modelo más igualitario de pornografía gay*, este artículo destaca la capacidad transformadora del 'arte pornográfico' para desafiar categorías establecidas.

Resumen

En un momento en que el matrimonio civil entre personas del mismo sexo estaba en el centro del debate social y político en Portugal, la película *Hero, Captain, and Stranger* (2009) de João Pedro Vale (JPV) y Nuno Alexandre Ferreira (NAF) cruzó el arte, la política de identidad y pornografía. Siendo una adaptación homoerótica del libro *Moby-Dick; o The Whale* (1851) de Herman Melville, se enfrenta a una serie de tabúes (y prejuicios) tanto estéticos como políticos. Inicialmente pensada con el propósito de rastrear las referencias a los marineros portugueses de Massachusetts, constantes en la novela de Herman Melville, la película aborda una irreverente provocación a un medio "semi-

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Bruno Marques | bmarques@fcs.unl.pt

IHA-NOVA FCSH / IN2PAST

Ana Catarina Caldeira | anacatarinacaldeira@gmail.com

ICNOVA-NOVA FCSH

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Summary

1. Introducción.
2. Teoría de la adaptación: una versión queer para exponer procesos de represión social e hipocresía.
3. Antecedentes: el debate en torno al matrimonio entre personas del mismo sexo en Portugal.
4. Pornografía o "Arte Pornográfico": una película con contenido sexual explícito que no pretende ser sexualmente estimulante.
5. La pareja sagrada masculina como fundamento de una nueva organización social más igualitaria: un mundo de pura copulación como desintegración de jerarquías.
6. Conclusiones.
7. Bibliografía

in Herman Melville's novel, the project by JPV and NAF is an irreverent provocation to a 'semi-peripheral' milieu, which still denied juridical recognition of homosexual marriage thirty-five years after the demise of the dictatorial regime (1926-1974). Basing itself on overcoming the incompatibility between art and pornography, as well as exploring the distinctive connection between the idea of *democratic eros* and a *more egalitarian model of gay pornography*, this article highlights the transformative capacity of 'pornographic art' to challenge established categories. It unveils a nuanced landscape that encourages a reevaluation of societal norms and moral dichotomies, ultimately facilitating a more inclusive and expansive comprehension of human desire.

Abstract

As same sex marriage emerged at centre of the social and political debate in Portugal, the film *Hero, Captain, and Stranger* (2009), by João Pedro Vale (JPV) and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira (NAF), intersected art, identity politics and pornography in a manner hitherto unseen in Portugal. A homoerotic adaptation of Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, the film confronts a series of aesthetical and political taboos (and prejudices) which have never been analysed in depth despite their topicality. Initially conceived to survey the references to Portuguese seaman from Massachusetts

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If we have the privilege of doing politics with a kiss, then it is fundamental to make it visible so that the kiss itself may exist.¹

Côrte-Real. P. (2012). ‘Pessoal e político’. AAVV, *Dia C. Casamento entre pessoas do mesmo sexo*. Lisbon: Editorial Estampa, 2012, p. 19.

Yet, since obscenity always threatens to undermine authority (whether of an individual or an institution), pornography’s presence in the archive represents a double-edged sword.

Dean, T. (2014). Introduction: Pornography, Technology, Archive. Dean, T., Steven Rusczycky, S., & Squires. D. (Eds.). *Porn archives* (pp. 1-26). Duke University Press.

1. Introdução

As same sex marriage emerged at centre of the social and political debate in Portugal, the film *Hero, Captain, and Stranger* (2009), by João Pedro Vale (JPV) and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira (NAF), intersected art, identity politics and pornography in a manner hitherto unseen in the country. A homoerotic adaptation of Herman Melville’s 1851 novel *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, the film confronts a series of aesthetic and political taboos (and prejudices) which have never been analysed in depth despite their topicality.

Initially conceived to survey the references to Portuguese seaman from Massachusetts in Herman Melville’s novel, the project by João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira is an irreverent provocation to a “semi-peripheral” milieu, which still denied juridical recognition of homosexual marriage thirty-five years after the demise of the dictatorial regime (1926-1974).

The reading of Melville’s novel was accompanied by a book from the field of queer studies: Robert K. Martin’s *Hero, Captain, and Stranger* (1986) –used for the film’s title–, which analyses the homoerotic dimensions in *Moby Dick*, namely regarding the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, the South Seas tattooed “savage”. For this author, the concept of “male friendship”, personified by the *couple* formed by the two characters, offers a utopian “solution” which “favoured substantial and immediate social change” at the time as an “alternative to the ideology of aggressive male domination” at the root of heteropatriarchal power (Martin, 1986, p. X-XI). For this reason, we maintain that João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira have carried into 21st Portuguese reality the visionary social potency contained in *Moby Dick* –in which, due to 1851 censorship, affective and sexual intimacy between men could only be broached under the subterfuge of *metaphor* and ambiguity–, so as to expose the *internalized* intolerance that was still operative at the time in Portugal.

Basing itself on the overcoming of the incompatibility between art and pornography (Maes, 2011), and the specific nexus between the concept of *democratic eros* (Martin, 1986)

¹ “E se temos o privilégio de poder fazer política com um beijo, é fundamental tornar visível esse beijo para que ele próprio possa existir.”

and the model of a *more egalitarian gay pornography* (Clark, 1991; Stychin, 1992, 1995; Lucas, 2006), this article will address the following questions: what are the political implications of *de-metaphorizing* homoerotic sexuality in the Great American Novel? And how does gay pornography serve this affirmative purpose?

Instead of contributing to the “gender oppression” denounced by a certain feminist critique (A. Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon 1993; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988; Itzin, 1992), the use of pornography (or “pornographic art”) by João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira is a subversive strategy to combat the *inequality* that has been historically imposed by the heteropatriarchy which still prevailed in Portugal in the late 2000s.

For a more comprehensive analysis of the subject matter, we have employed a combination of methodologies that allowed us to have a thorough and nuanced examination of the film by João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira. The use of screen ethnography, content analysis and queering enabled us to unveil underlying social dynamics, to dissect themes, symbols, and representations by having a structured examination of LGBTQ+ portrayals and their societal implications. Simultaneously, our methodology seeks to challenge heteronormativity and identity binaries (Sedgwick 2013; Butler 2013). Employing *queering* as a cultural criticism methodology allows us to critically assess the film’s portrayal of queer identities, exploring their influence on intersectional identity formation (Crenshaw, 1989), and self-acceptance (Vázquez-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2020). Our approach, influenced by Sedgwick (1990) and Butler (1991), extends queerness beyond non-cisheterosexuality and encompasses any form of otherness challenging the hegemonic norms. By synthesizing these methods, our analysis comprehensively examines film, deepening our understanding of its cultural impact on gender and sexuality representations.

2. *Adaptation theory: a queer version to expose processes of social repression and hypocrisy*

Figure 1. João Pedro Vale, *Festa Brava (Toiro Lindo)*, 2005. C-print on canvas. 650 x 350 cm. (Courtesy of the artists and Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art).



In tune with the Portuguese LGBT affirmation movement, the work of João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira appeared in the late 1990s with a strong link to the new genre of *queer* aesthetics that had hitherto been all but absent from the Portuguese artistic context (Quinlan & Arenas, 2002; Bran, 2005; Herberto, 2015), but had already taken up its own place in the international historical scene. In this regard, it is important to mention a shared programme which António Fernando Cascais correlates with an “investigation” and/or “recuperation” of history (Cascais, 2004, p. 22) that bring together all the recent explorations aimed at “unearthing a gay and lesbian past”. In that sense, João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira’s work deploys an “artistic and structural archaeology of knowledge pertaining to the so-called “queer universe” (Faro, 2015) that critically intersects various devices and strategies to *deconstruct* the “processes conducting to social confinements and restrictions” (Vale, 2008). Through a skilful and expressive use of “irony” (Reis, 2007) the duo exposes those very processes of repression and social hypocrisy while recovering repressed data and contents that had been condemned to oblivion by the historical processes (Marques, 2022). João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira rescue, decontextualize and recontextualize *forms of resistance* (Foucault, 1994 [1976]; Scott, 1985; Godinho, 2011), *possible practices* (Godinho, 2017) at the experiential and cultural level, albeit still *without history* (D’Emilio, 1983, p. 101) or almost *forgotten* by time (Godinho, 2012, p. 17), to bring back repressed contents and set in motion new connections.

Figure 2. João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, *Vadios*, 2018. Iron, paint and amyl nitrate (Poppers). 380cm x 380cm x 230cm. Col. Antonio Cachola, Elvas. (Photo credits: Bruno Lopes. Courtesy of the artists and Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art)



Following a seven-month art residency in New York to research the traces of Portuguese emigrant communities on the East Coast of the US, João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira adapted Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* to produce the first Portuguese gay porn film presented within an artistic context. *Hero, Captain and Stranger* narrates the adventures of a group of characters onboard a whaling ship as they perform the sexualized categories defined by Robert K. Martin in his eponymous book (1986).

Figure 3. João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, 2009 Video, (B/W, sound, 68 min.). (Courtesy of the artists and Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art)



Throughout the film some parts of the book are read in voice-over, namely the excerpts suggested by Jennifer Doyle in her essay “Moby-Dick’s Boring Parts”, which attest to the typical boredom of a sea voyage (Amado, 2011), while the set and props include paintings and sculptures that evoke a 19th century fishing vessel. In the words of Portuguese curator Miguel Amado, these images frame desire as a source of human relationships in the light of an “alternative reading” of a literary classic at the core of the western imaginary (Amado, 2011).

Figure 4. João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, 2009. (Courtesy of the artists and Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art)



As in many other works by the Portuguese duo, what is at stake is not representing a “strategy of authenticity”, or evidencing “a meaning, hypothetically undisclosed”, or to ‘describe precisely the most correct truth of the issues dealt with’ (Jürgens, 2005). Instead, and vis-à-vis the *original*, this is an “attempt to transgress our view of them” (Silvério, 2006), “through teasing out hidden or potential meanings” (Sharp, 2007); i.e., these are recreations which, by “making it possible for different types of understandings” (Vale *apud* Jürgens, 2005) “dislocate and pervert” (Vale interviewed by Lapa, 2008) the original to tease the spectators consciousness as to their prejudices, or even to provocatively activate their bodies (and desire). In this claiming gesture, the deliberate *archaeological* strategy of the artists (Faro, 2015; Bullock, 2017) cynically exposes the frailties and hypocrisies inherent to the marginalizing of homosexuality. As Pedro Faro points out, by exposing the “fissures of mainstream discourse(s)”, João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira question “the stifling process of normalization and institutionalization enforced by a certain historical (heteronormative) orientation” (Faro, 2015).

Therefore, within the scope of the motivations leading to the making of the film *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, JPV questions himself at once about the common and well-known, albeit seldom talked about, circumstance of seamen (not necessarily homosexual) who maintain intimate relationships with other men dictated by the long sexual deprivation and lack of affection that they endure onboard with the absence of women. (Vale, 2013b).

This aspect that JPV points out invokes the *queer* thought and its praise of identity fluidity for the sake of an excessive fixation of categorization aimed at overcoming the ‘essentialism’ of exclusion (the hetero/homosexual divide). If, according to Annamari Jagose (1996), the notion of ‘queer’ appears as non-aligned with any specific identity category – thence antagonistic towards more stable and knowable categories, such as ‘heterosexual’, ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’– the activities experienced onboard the whaler (described by Melville) could be the target of a ‘queering’ process, a process proposed by the Portuguese duo as establishing an irreverent (and bold) debate among those who claim that this process erodes the last traces of an oppressive gender coherence.

This question –‘what is this sexuality?’ (Vale, 2013b) –is pervaded by a critique of the very notion of sexual orientation as failing to account for the plurality of ways of living sexuality, especially when considering certain *homosocial* contexts. This is indeed a profound questioning of the subjectivity that starkly defines the difference between practicing certain (homo)sexual acts and transforming (homo)sexuality into a category that criticises heteronormativity². At the same time, this questioning seems to invoke an historical context

2 “Heteronormativity” is by and large understood as the social system of gender and sexuality organization that establishes heterosexuality as the norm and homosexuality as deviation (cf. Vale de Almeida, 2009, p. 12, note). Miguel Vale de Almeida, a Portuguese anthropologist who has been studying hegemonic masculinity since the 1990s writes that “Symmetrically, the homophobic system – a system that guarantees normative heterosexuality and gender asymmetry that operates through structures of kinship and representations of the sexed body and its activities – functions through invisibilization and silencing”. (Vale

that still appears to misunderstand the greater specificity of relationships of power based on sexual orientation; a fact that immediately translates the constitution of *homosexuality* as *invisibility* or “negative-identity”³.

In this regard, Portugal is still pervaded by a long history of stigmatization and persecution, which has recently started to be *written* and be taken up –in terms of its memory and historiography –as a matter for questioning by the Portuguese duo. In spite of some major civil rights and individual freedom conquests that have recently occurred, JPV made his position abundantly clear in an article by Kathleen Gomes (2010):

The film has a political character: [João Pedro Vale] recognises that he felt ‘the moment had come to make it because the issue was being raised’, referring to last year’s debate on the legalising of homosexual marriage in Portugal. His conversation with Ípsilon took place a day after the protest to defend traditional family values in Lisbon. The artist points out that the event ended with the protestors singing the disco-sound track *We are family* by Sister Sledge, a well-known gay anthem – the kind of irony that can be found in Vale’s work; sometimes reality eclipses art. (Gomes, 2010).

3. The background: the debate around same sex marriage in Portugal

On the plane of the social and associative movement, it was necessary to wait for the second half of the 1990s to witness the emergence of a true Portuguese LGBT movement (cf. Cascais 2006, p. 109–126). According to Miguel Vale de Almeida, it emerged out of two realities that were obvious in many other countries: the AIDS crisis and the global nature of LGBT culture (Vale de Almeida, 2009, p. 16). According to the Portuguese anthropologist, two “lineages” came to the fore in this context. One is more empathic towards “*queer* perspectives of deconstruction of the sexual orientation category”, the other is more attuned to the political trend to recognize conjugality and parenthood” (Vale de Almeida, 2009, p. 17-18).

To outline the background against which the film *Hero, Captain and Stranger* emerges we should immediately highlight the operative “closet key”, to quote Miguel Vale de Almeida’s felicitous expression in the title of his 2009 book⁴, precisely one year before the Parliament

de Almeida, 2009, p. 14).

3 Miguel Vale de Almeida writes that “Even in contexts where discursively constituted gay or lesbian identity does not exist, like in pre-modern Europe, there is a social code for the punishment of homosexual acts which in itself constitutes a negative identification.” (Vale de Almeida, 2010 [2009], p. 42).

4 According to Vale de Almeida, “across various contemporary, liberal democracy contexts the access to marriage and/or adoption are the last barrier against formal equality between gays and lesbians and the rest of the population.” (Vale de Almeida, 2010, p. 105).

approved same sex marriage in Portugal. However, “Dia C [C-Day]” –henceforth the designation of 8 January 2010–, is backed by a history and story that Paulo Côrte-Real tells in the following words:

After the initial impulse in 2005, the two following years were crucial to consolidate the claim, promote the visibility of same sex couples and broaden social and political support. In terms of party politics, Bloco de Esquerda [Left Bloc], the Ecologista Os Verdes [Ecologist Green party] were joined by Juventude Socialista [Socialist Youth] in 2006 (after the latter had been harshly criticised for having reject marriage equality on 10 October 2008) who finally changed the official position of Partido Socialista [Socialist Party]. On 19 January 2009 [Prime-minister] José Sócrates motion was made known, in which he defends marriage equality “unequivocally and definitely”, promoting it across the country. (Côrte-Real, 2012, p. 26).

Although this was not a direct response to the claims for the juridical recognition of same sex marriage, JPV and NAF recognise that they did take the context of the time into consideration, a context that was marked by all sorts of manoeuvres and polemics. This normalization (as certain sectors called it at the time) did not imply that the equality of rights that was claimed for would simply be resolved through a mimicking of canonical heterosexual, monogamic and reproduction-driven conjugality. When questioned by us on the subject the artists are very clear:

JPV: [...] we see marriage as a heteronormative institution. Which is why we never wanted to get married. [...] Although we were always very vocal in defending that it [marriage] should be consecrated, I want to be able to say that I do not want to marry because I disagree with marriage.

NAF: Number one: I like the idea that people might want to get married. Number two: I am glad such people exist so that I can say: “I will never, ever get married!”

JPV: Which is to say that at the time the film was not thought to dialogue with the ongoing situation, although the importance of the film in that context became obvious to us. (Vale & Ferreira 2021).

For the Portuguese duo, the issue of same sex marriage is *key* in the sense that it reveals the true debate on the social acceptance and juridical legitimacy of homosexuality in terms of equal rights⁵; i.e., that the arguments against marriage between men reveal an internalized, endemic and repressed homophobia. That is precisely the account of Helena Pinto, a feminist activist and then leader of Bloco de Esquerda:

5 “In Portugal – like in other countries – equality in access to marriage was the issue that brought discrimination against LGBT people to the centre of the political debate and, above all, to everyday discussion. This was the issue that managed to break the silence which fed the taboo, and it was the first crucial step to counter the utterly traditional –and violent– ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ attitude.” (Preface, in AAVV, *Dia C. Casamento entre pessoas do mesmo sexo*. Editorial Estampa, Lisbon, 2012, p. 9)

[These arguments] have always been put forth to reject the centrality of rights in politics, and were aimed at delaying change. [Those who resort to these arguments] prefer the discriminatory label of the Law even if it contradicts social reality and so as to maintain a model of family and marriage based on a hierarchy of power and oppression. Same sex marriage, with its symbolic force, would be too deep of a change, which the conservative and reactionary sectors were not willing to accept. (Pinto, 2012, p. 62-63).

4. Pornography or “Pornographic Art”? A film with explicit sexual content that is not sexually arousing.

Melville does not explicitly state any sexual activities in *Moby-Dick* but, as already mentioned by several authors, many passages of his text can be interpreted in this way.⁶ An important device that is used to represent sexuality are phallic puns and symbols, as in the chapters “A Squeeze of the Hand” or “The Cassock”. In “The Serious Functions of Melville’s Phallic Jokes”, Robert Shulman realizes that these sexual puns often seem to be used for no reason. However, if examined carefully, an underlying critique of Western religion, society and norms can be detected (Shulman, 1961, p. 503). One of the chapters where we can find more sexual innuendos is “A Squeeze of the Hand”. Ishmael and his coworkers are squeezing the cooled and agglutinated sperm back into the fluid. Soon after, Ishmael falls into an ecstasy triggered by the sensation of the squeezed globules:

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say, Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humour or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (Melville, 1851, Chapter 94).

This passage can be taken as a hidden indication for masturbation. Bearing in mind that sperm can be used ambiguously, it is not too risky to say that, in this context, squeezing sperm easily becomes a metaphor for male sexual self-satisfaction. At first, Ishmael masturbates alone. In doing so, he reaches a “suspended consciousness” (Martin, 1986, p. 82). This means that his perception is not confined anymore to his own mind and body and he “almost melts into [sperm]” (Melville, 1851, Chapter 94). In this perspective, we can safely state that *Moby-Dick* deals with issues of layering, encoded messages and sexual identity.

6 Masturbation as presented in the novel is linked to the imagination and to the power of art to create a world in the mind.

JPV and NAF subject Melville's story to the devices of hardcore pornography. At every moment, the film establishes a contrast between two extremes, two opposing approaches: the *indirect* domain of metaphor, ambiguity and suggestion and the *direct* domain of the sexually explicit and realism. The images literalize the text in an absolutely radical manner based on the sexual categories defined by Martin. *Porn* is the central element that enables the artistic duo to transform the original narrative from *utopian desire* into a really dramatized vision of an *alternative world* that may come to replace the rule of Captains, colonial governors and missionaries. If Melville's narrator does not have the permission to deal fully with the sexuality of the tales he himself relates, JPV and NAF take a giant step forward. In this sense, the use of the pornographic approach is part of the unveiling effect, of course, and we can use it as a way of presenting truths otherwise hidden by metaphor and ambiguity. By showing sexual acts between sailors, *Hero, Captain, and Stranger* has the potential to transform it from dream to reality. It is that potential that is so frightening.

Guided by a mostly political intention, JPV is adamant on this matter: the film *Hero, Captain and Stranger* "was not made for people to become aroused" (Vale *apud*. Gomes 2010). Instead, its objective is to, as the artist puts it, *analysis* and *questioning* (Vale 2013a). In this regard, NAF points to yet another reflexive dimension:

I think there is an issue which is always at the core of matters linked to pornography or pornographic art, i.e., maintaining a status. [...] Everyone has already seen everything, so these things should not disturb anyone. [...] I think that there is a powerlessness, a vulnerability, which, again, transforms the thing into a problem. (Vale & Ferreira, 2021).

According to Robert K. Martin, *Moby-Dick* enacts the conflict between opposing forces. On the one hand, there is the utopia of a "democratic eros" which finds its greatest expression in *male friendship* manifested in a "masturbatory sexuality" of a communal kind, i.e., no longer subject to *control* and *production*, or to *reproduction* imposed by marriage on the heterosexual couple. On the other hand, there is a stabilized "hierarchical eros" manifest in the social forms of male power⁷, and well exemplified by contexts such as whale hunting, factory management, military conquest and heterosexual marriage (cf. Martin, 1986, p. 4). Which is why the scene of the tub in *Hero, Captain, and Stranger* (2009) brings to fruition, to use Martin's words, "the transformation of primal, unformed (oceanic) sexuality into a world of pure copulation" (Martin, 1986, p. 4). The strict homology between the task of squeezing the whale sperm and mutual masturbation enacts a process of self-organization (horizontality) and collaboration in order to generate a hierarchy-free social space.

Following the screenings at Cine Paraíso, a porno movie-theatre in Lisbon, and at the Bernardo Collection Museum, an insurance company cancelled an exhibition by the Portuguese

7 For Marie-Jo Bonnet, the patriarchal repression of homosexuality did not prevent its sublimation by the Patriarchy, in institutions such as the Church, the Army, etc., a notorious fact in the differential treatment between male and female homosexuality. (Bonnet 1998).

duo because it allegedly dealt with a homosexual theme. In this regard, João Pedro Vale pointed out that: “I felt people were disturbed, but I do not know if this was because the film was pornographic or because they think that pornography and art should be separated”. Reading Hans Maes’ article “Drawing the Line: Art Versus Pornography” we might understand the way in which the film deliberately pushes the conventional boundaries that *supposedly* separate “art” and “pornography”.

In *Hero, Captain and Stranger* there are various strategies that come together in order for the two dimensions to cohabit to the point of diluting a set of boundaries that separate(d) them. For instance, explicit and objectifying shots (a staple of hardcore films) intersect with subjective elements as voice-over excerpts of Melville’s book reveal the characters’ thoughts and emotional states are read to us. On the other hand, and as Kathleen Gomes pointed out, the film, which is inspired by Jennifer Doyle’s essay “Moby-Dick’s Boring Parts” (2006), shows how one of the greatest novels in Universal Literature does contain “boring parts” which are merely “descriptive” and “factual”, leaving no room for “metaphor” and “imagination” just like in the pornographic industry. In fact, in various chapters of *Moby Dick* the narrative is suspended by long, painstaking descriptions that disintegrate any diegetic sense and destroy the reader’s imaginary construction. We cannot but agree with Doyle in this respect when she considers that Melville’s novel is moved by a “realistic impulse” towards “detail”, which is especially evident in its obsessive attempts at visually reconstructing the whale’s sexual anatomy as dreadful (and boring) as that gesture may seem. This aspect can be explained in the light of what we could call a “reality effect” supplied by the excitement with the excess of detail or with the *part for the part*, which point back to Sade’s exhaustive recitations (and measurements) during the orgies, much like a veritable close-up. Or, also, as a sequence of small discontinuous spectacles, which are valuable in and of themselves, and remain independent from the general narrative thread.

Figure 6. João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, 2009. (Courtesy of the artists and Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art)



This obsession with corporeality and “touch” – which Doyle detects in Melville’s novel – is clearly felt in *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, where we become palpably aware of JVP’s and NAF’s declared (and shameless) interest in physical contact. The various extreme close-up sequences of mouths, lips, tongues, penises and anuses that touch or unite in the heat of the sexual act consubstantiates a singular, literal and highly detailed shift vis-à-vis *Moby Dick* text, in which the body (no longer the whale’s but that of the seamen) is fragmented without any ambiguities or subterfuges in an objectification typical of stag-films as its surface becomes sensual and highly tactile. However, even resorting to the combination-structure typical of porn films (a+b, a+c, b+c, a+b+c), which is geared to renew sexual interest and excitement, JPV and NAF’s film adds to this recipe a strategy that removes the sound from the scenes and thereby eliminates the sexual charge that is naturally present. Inspired by the experimental French film *Chant d’Amour* (1950) by Jean Genet, against the grain of typical porn film tropes, this deliberate omission of sound promotes a contemplative temporality and a reflective density.

Figure 7. João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, 2009. ((Courtesy of the artists and Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art)



In one word, *Hero, Captain and Stranger* demonstrates that the prerogatives which divide the universe of artistic creation from the domain of pornography do not always make sense. In this instance, literature and pornographic film are no longer absolutely distinct and irreconcilable entities.

In the face of the old, but still widespread, presupposition that art and pornography are irreconcilable, Hans Maes (2011) refutes a set of established antinomies (*suggestion vs. explicitness / subjectivity vs. people as objects; beauty vs. non-aesthetic and ‘smutty’; contemplation vs. sexual arousal and lustful feelings; complex and multi-layered vs. one-dimensional; originality vs. a copulation of cliché’s; imagination vs. fantasy*) through a series of counter-examples (Chretien de Troyes’s *Lancelot*, Francesco Petrarck’s *Sonnets to Laura*, or the *Roman de la Rose*, Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*, Jessica Nilsson’s *All About Anna* among many others). After overcoming such putative incompatibility, Maes proposes the category “artistic pornography”, defending its legitimacy and positive function against (the representation of) a non-egalitarian sexuality:

Indeed, if we accept, as we have argued elsewhere (Maes 2011, 2012, 2013), that the distinction between art and pornography is not an absolute one, and that there is in fact a middle ground between these two domains of representation, it is only to be expected that most works of radical egalitarian pornography will be situated in or very near this middle ground and may legitimately lay claim to the status of pornographic art or artistic pornography. This easy confluence of radical egalitarian and artistic ambitions is only to be encouraged, we believe. For one thing, achieving art status would grant these films prestige and a special sort of authority that would help to undermine the influence and authority that inegalitarian porn still has in matters of sex. Moreover, it will help to pave the way for an open discussion of such works in the public domain and for a proper art critical analysis of this specific genre. (The fact that there is no public porn criticism—in the way that there is film criticism or art criticism—is probably one of the reasons why prejudice and misinformation can so easily spread and thrive here.) (Maes, 2017, p. 217).

5. The Sacred Male Couple as foundation of a new, more egalitarian social organization: a world of pure copulation as disintegration of hierarchies

In his analysis of Melville's novel, Robert Martin reveals a controlling structure that emerges from three fundamental characters: the Hero, the Captain, and the Stranger. Martin examines this pattern to explore the way in which sexually charged relationships between men are employed in a critique of power in the society that Melville depicted. Martin argues that the Captain, a figure of authority, represents the Western world in its search for control over people and space and its sexual imposition of the male on the female. Martin explains this as follows: for a man, the "acquisition" of a woman represents the "highest conquest", as he is therefore "trained to compete rather than cooperate". However, from the moment in which he enters into a homosexual relationship he "abdicates, in part, his role in the economy of power" (Martin, 1986, p. 14). By representing an alternative to *male-female domination*—which in turn mirrors the colonialist imposition of white over non-white culture—, what is at stake here is thus a "non-aggressive form of homosexuality". For Robert K. Martin the recurring use of the words "engagement" and "wedding" in the novel *Typee* anticipates Melville's use of the "marriage" metaphor to unite Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* (Martin 1986, 26). In fact, for this author, Melville presents the male couple⁸ as an inherently democratic union of equals that could serve as the basis for a new social organization. (Martin, 1986, p. 11).

As the narration of the story progresses in time, the film *Hero, Captain and Stranger* moves toward a more direct depiction of sexual intercourse. After the couple Ishmael and Queequeg has been formed, an authoritarian man takes advantage of his place in the hierarchy

8 "Upon waking next morning about daylight, I found Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife." (Melville, 1851, p. 30)

to brutally sodomize both of them. At this moment they are almost exclusively relegated to the role of submissive and feminised “bottom” with the sole purpose of pleasing the Captain.⁹

Figure 9. João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, Hero, Captain and Stranger, 2009. (Courtesy of the artists and Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art)



Figure 10. João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, Hero, Captain and Stranger, 2009. (Courtesy of the artists and Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art)



The Captain embodies the grotesquely aggressive as in the adaptation of phallic energy to colonial conquest, where a sense of retribution never takes place. This is the moment when the figure of the Captain represents an exemplary phallic aggression that makes evident a well-known dichotomy:

⁹ Often coded as heterosexual, the Captain is presented as dominating the other performers and penetrating them, almost feminising them to a degree, which is meant to imbue an insatiable sexual appetite.

This dichotomy is rooted in the concepts of ‘object’ and ‘subject’ first explicated by Mulvey (1975). Kendall explains that the male who takes on the insertive role during anal intercourse (i.e. ‘top’) is, by definition, the subject in contrast to the receptive partner (i.e. ‘bottom’) who is the object. Both performers are ‘coded’ in different ways, with the ‘top’ being larger (in terms of physique and penis size), and more dominant and aggressive than the ‘bottom’. As the former more closely approximates hegemonic standards of masculinity, he is subject to certain privileges denied his ‘submissive’ counterpart. (Bishop, 2015, p. 10).

The film ends up abandoning the myths associated with the typical active/passive (top/bottom) dichotomy inherent to most gay pornography (e.g. “only masculine men are ‘tops’”) insisting instead upon sexual reciprocity between performers.¹⁰ As the narrator describes the scene, we realize that, in the film, the “sperm-squeezing” episode culminates in a “benign phallic world” guided by a full ‘kindness’” (Martin, 1986, p. 35) which comes to dominate *Moby-Dick*. This same scene included a collective and mutual masturbation ostensibly performed by the three men, but now certainly presided over by the spirit of *democratic eroticism*. Here the Captain ignores the fundamentally hierarchical nature of the ship that prevents any human relationship from developing between ranks. No more relegated to a submissive “bottom” status in his roles, this would allow for a more egalitarian gay pornography where all men are awarded the sexual versatility experienced by their counterparts. Here we can acknowledge that role reversal (i.e. when gay partners are “versatile” and alternate between the roles of “top” and “bottom”) subverts the power differentials at work within society. This stance meets the viewpoint expressed by Stychin (1992, 1995) and Lucas (2006) who contend that such versatility is the sine qua non of truly egalitarian sex.

Figure 11. João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, 2009. (Courtesy of the artists and Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art)



As we have stated before, the “sperm-squeezing” scene serves to emphasize Melville’s use of the novel to explore a critique of social organization and sexual convention. After dis-

10 In “Pornography without power?” Chris Clark argues that sex sans power is typically portrayed in gay pornography by virtue of the participants maintaining the option of versatility if they desire (Clark 1991).

mantling the aggressiveness of male domination, the whaler becomes, finally, the place where male friendship is accomplished. By making fraternity at once erotic and social, we now can recognize its fullest potential against the abuse of power.¹¹ These ideas are inseparable for the understanding of Melville's novel. They are precisely the elements that enable the Portuguese duo to transform the writer's material from a utopian vision to an accomplished dramatization that could replace the authoritarian role of the Captains: it remains only to find the courage to love instead of hate.

The analysis of Ahab behaviour is interesting, as well, since it demonstrates JPV and NAF's growing interest in the psychological portrait. Ahab hatred has its source in power, above all the power; he abuses Ishmael - an ordinary seaman - because he is young, handsome, and powerless. And this main difference is presented essentially in terms of hierarchy. But at the same time the tyranny of his authority makes him an ambivalent person, whose deep melancholy comes from his human isolation and lover-less-ness. Although Ahab, in his authoritarian role, possesses the typical attributes of the tyrannical captain¹², JPV and NAF dramatically shift the structural pattern. Finally, he recognizes his place in a brotherhood of men. And all of them - the male couple presented in the first place along with their captain - become part of a new configuration of three. The Portuguese duet view this amalgam of varying ethnicities and sexual reciprocity as emphasizing a form of egalitarian brotherhood, one where men are not confined by internal or external borders, cultural differences, or, above all, social hierarchies of any kind.

Figure 12. João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, 2009. (Courtesy of the artists and Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art)



11 By drawing on the traditional figure of the captain, JPV and NAF can connect the abuse of authority. Ships, like cities, are places where friendships are quickly lost, and those in authority serve only to deceive the innocent. At once lover and victim Ishmael is the perfect figure for a violence that is generated and perpetuated.

12 Stereotypic representations also are evident when White American Captain men appear in gay pornography, with members of these groups typically depicted as dominant and hyper masculine (Mahawatte, 2004; Ortiz, 1994).

In the final scene, one can read the entire story as Ishmael's dream (or nightmare). We realize that Ishmael comes from a sea voyage which could be seen as an exploration of the Self and a profound study in human relationships. This image reinforces his role as the masturbator/dreamer. But at the same time, the same scene is structured around a transformation: a rebirth that occurs after the fall or "plunge" into the sea as a necessary step in the process of liberation.

After overcoming isolation and hatred, JPV and NAF strive to understand the frustrations that follow upon the failure of love (and the fall of paradise) as we come back to reality. The fact that it faces the shore of Beach 19 - the most popular gay nude beach in Portugal, located at Costa da Caparica near Lisbon, Portugal - is no accident. Unlike Melville's novel, here Ishmael returns home. According to Martin, if in the world of ships - were Melville recognizes the existence of homosexual practices - the friendship of sailors can exist, it is impossible to imagining it on land (cf. Martin, 1986, p. 52). But instead of the melancholy of the lost love, the film gives our hero the opportunity to find it on land. Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation becomes, due its long duration, a *salvific kiss*. Certainly the movie makes us want to believe that Ishmael will find a new personal love to correspond to his awakened social conscience. In short, *Hero, Captain and Stranger* ends as an optimistic film that portrays the possibility of a renewed spirit of human relations through the recognition of friendship and sexuality between men.

6. Conclusions

Let us look again at the central question behind our article: how, and for what reason does JVP and NAF's film *Hero, Captain and Stranger de-metaphorie* the homosexual relationships contained in the Great American Novel? If, as Martin himself states, "metaphors convey truths we are frequently unaware of" (1986, p. XI), by *unhiding* homoerotic sexuality, the Portuguese duo brings to the fore a reality that is still *stifled* and *repressed*.

We have seen how JPV and NAF oppose the realistic literality of sex to Melville's realm of metaphor, pun and ambiguity. Before the challenging gaze that art cast upon itself, the duo parades not so much a definite object (the book in which a dissident sexuality is suggested), as it had once been, but mostly a daring inter and transdisciplinary notion that "in-disciplines" the classic compartmentalization between "art" and "pornography", forcing them into novel configurations of confrontation and mutual cooperation. Without any metaphors or other subterfuges, the film embodies 'Melville's celebration of a polymorphous and undirected sexuality' (Martin, 1966, p. 36) that is directly related to an alternative social order. It is significant that the one passage of triumphant brotherhood is presented in terms that are once political and sexual. The visionary conceit is a moving image of universal affection. It's a visionary democratic passage that reminds us of Whitman's sense of a democratic future based on manly love against the backdrop of a rigid authority. To that end, the film ends up abandoning the myths associated with the typical active/passive (top/bottom) dichotomy inherent to most gay pornography (e.g. "only masculine men are 'tops'") insisting

instead upon sexual reciprocity between performers.

For that reason, we must recognize that the use of “pornography by art” may serve as a subversive strategy with a positively provocative purpose in order to undermine stereotypes and orthodoxies of a social, moral, political, sexual and gender nature. Nevertheless, it is precisely this category – the pornographic – that determines our perceptions, totally re-signifying Melville’s novel. At the same time, the fear of the *art* and *pornography* combination automatically activates prejudices that could a priori discredit (and for some actually discredit) the film as an artwork. The “pornographic” content is employed by the duo as a deviating strategy to disturb the spectator’s social, psychological and cultural presuppositions and engender a crisis in aesthetical taste and cultural values. In that sense, in order to fully enjoy the film spectators must confront themselves, overcoming prejudices associated with the purportedly opposed categories of art and pornography, of hetero love (seen as normative) as opposed to homosexual love (seen as deviant) and of monogamous love in contrast with free or group sex (often considered as libertine, promiscuous and irresponsible).

As we have seen in JPV and NAF’s film, and despite its unabashedly explicit and pornographic content, it has less to do with sexual excitement as finality than with the intention to analyse, question and subvert censorial mechanisms – mental blockages, taboos and prejudices – which in Melville’s (and today still) operate in us regarding the irrepressible fear (or discomfort) that repressed and stifled desires generate in the collective unconscious. At the same time, regarding our reaction as spectators, the film teases our critical and political consciousness of situations in which hierarchies, powers and rigid social and gender roles are shattered, questioned or challenged.

Hero, Captain and Stranger celebrates homoerotic sexual desire as an assumption of a territory still under dispute which allows artists to raise some of the hardest, most embarrassing and disturbing questions in a critical historical moment that saw a debate on unequal access to civil marriage in late 2000s Portugal. As we think we have demonstrated in this article, “pornographic art” may expose the tensions, confrontations and conflicts between artistic freedom and the repressed desires that to a large extent haunted and still haunt the so-called “minority” or “subaltern” sexual identities. By unveiling the homoerotic desire inherent in one of Western Literature’s most significant works, the foundation of this political resistance lies solely in the vision of a superior world, a fantasy of newfound erotic bliss, a sexual dystopia that serves as a reminder of how “pornographic art” can be constructive in challenging the categories that we still commonly employ to delineate the boundaries between the acceptable and the obscene, the virtuous and the wicked, and other associated dichotomies tethered to the perilous terrain of age-old moral notions like good and evil.

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Objetos artísticos, tecnológicos y culturales

João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, 2009. Video, (B/W, sound, 68 min.). Variable dimensions. Written and Directed by João Pedro Vale and Nuno Alexandre Ferreira. With: Anton Dickson, Tecco Ribeiro, Drako and Thomas McKean. Participation: João dos Santos Martins, Rui Ferreira, Carlos Almeida, Bruno Abreu, André E. Teodósio, Nuno Alexandre Ferreira, João Pedro Vale, Pedro Rodrigues, Luis Royal, Ynaie Dawson, Ana Pérez-Quiroga, Miguel Faro and Tiago Borges. Music: Pedro Gonçalves. Cinematography: Pedro Diniz Reis. Poster: Sylvia Gruber.

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