



**The past in the present:  
personal memory,  
collective memory,  
discrepancies**

*O passado no presente:  
memória pessoal, memória  
coletiva, desencontros*



Ismail Xavier<sup>1</sup>

*To Arlindo,  
who knew, as few others did,  
how to walk new paths, always  
brilliant and cleverly  
in this multimedia field,  
honoring us through his priceless  
legacy.*

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature from the University of São Paulo and in Cinema Studies from the New York University. Associate professor at the University of São Paulo. The Professor has experience in the field of Communication, with emphasis in Cinema, working mainly on the following themes: cinema, Brazilian cinema, modern and contemporary cinema, cinema theory and history, cinema and theater, cinema and painting, cinema and photography. E-mail: i-xavier@uol.com.br

**Abstract:** This article analyzes the central plot of *Body* (Rubens Rewald & Rossana Foglia, 2007), a film inspired in a political event, which took place in the Perus Cemetery (São Paulo periphery): piles of bones of unknown persons buried decades before were found in an unidentified common grave. Among those bones, some were later identified as belonging to ex-political prisoners buried in the 1970's. In *Body*, mixed with the bones sent to a Medical-Legal Institute, a young woman's body arrived exhibiting marks of torture. This body was in a paradoxical state of conservation, as if she had died the day before. This body creates many tensions involving the physician that decides to identify it and his director. He insists and his research ends up involving other characters, who he understands could give him new information about the dead young woman. At the core of those tensions there is a clear conflict between individual memories and the collective social memory. "Thematic motive" is the basic notion that guides this analysis which focus on the "the past comes to present" thematic motive, all around the enigmatic body.

**Keywords:** memory and politics; affection and historical responsibility; professional dignity and its obstacles.

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa a progressão da trama do filme *Corpo* (2007), de Rubens Rewald e Rossana Foglia, inspirado em fato político de 1990: numa vala clandestina do cemitério de Perus, foram encontradas ossadas de pessoas enterradas anos antes, sem identificação, aí incluídos ex-presos políticos. No filme, entre as ossadas enviadas ao IML, está o corpo de uma jovem, com marcas de tortura, conservado como se tivesse morrido no dia anterior. Este corpo gera tensões entre o médico-legista, que decide investigar o caso, e sua chefe. O foco da análise é o conflito entre interesses pessoais e a construção de uma memória coletiva, partindo da noção de "motivo temático", de Tomachevski, aqui centrada no motivo "o passado no presente" tal como figurado no corpo-enigma. Conclui-se que o filme problematiza a postura de quem, de uma forma ou de outra, faz de suas decisões na vida pessoal ou profissional um espelho dos subterfúgios da política de silêncio de um poder político empenhado em esconder os horrores de seu sistema repressivo.

**Palavras-chave:** memória e política; afetos e responsabilidade histórica; dignidade profissional e seus entraves.

## Introduction

The plot of *Body* (2007) by Rubens Rewald and Rossana Foglia takes inspiration from a relevant fact in the Brazilian political setting in the early 1990s. A massive amount of remains was found in a clandestine mass grave at the Perus Cemetery, on the outskirts of São Paulo. In there, in addition to the remains of unprivileged and abandoned people, there were remains of victims of police violence and political prisoners killed through torture during the dictatorship. Citizens who had their bodies buried without the participation of their relatives and official records. Those remains were sent to the State Medical Examiner Office.

The film depicts characters involved in a peculiar circumstance created by a special case by the time the remains arrive at the morgue. Such case is within a greater setting, which frames the tensions involving the main characters in the narrative plan.

### Tensions in the functional body in face of a special case

The opening sequence shows the room where the corpses sent to the institution undergo autopsies. The camera focuses on the body of a young Black man. In the soundtrack, someone describes in voice-over (DOANE, 2018) another body in a “technical report” style, which immediately raises a question “75 kilos, Caucasian, male... Really? After all, when does a man prove that really is a man?”

This is Dr. Arthur’s voice, the physician whose voice-over will be heard along the film when commenting on the experiences he lives, a fact that reaffirms his protagonism as the one who will expose his states of mind and points of view. There are other characters whose voice-over acts as an information channel to the viewer, namely in flashbacks, to which I shall return.

In this opening sequence, his voice follows the items to be listed in autopsy reports, while we see Dr. Lara, his boss, dissecting the Black corpse from the beginning, being watched by him. Now, when his body comes into the scene, we realize that his description fits his own profile: “Caucasian, dark brown eyes, grey beard, and scruffy hair”. He goes on the autopsy report “age not exciting 38 years old; little travelling, no love story, a pale biography in comparison to the excitement of his colleague when seeing a good liver” (the camera follows her action and the compliment to the liver removed from the corpse.) He closures his report with the cause of death that complements his self-irony “he died stupidly either from a heart attack or from acute depression in a lonely place inside a dreary public office.”



Figure 1: Dr. Arthur.

Source: *Body* (Rubens Rewald and Rossana Foglia, 2007).

The Dr. Arthur's self-portrait will be remembered throughout the film, as it helps us to understand his reactions to his boss' systematic boycott against his tenacious determination to investigate this body-enigma, the center of the tensions involving the protagonists.

This way of thinking characterized by what seems to be a “professional habit” is frequent, presenting diagnostic observations not only about corpses, but also of living bodies in a sort of self-played game. When he leaves the morgue and takes the subway to visit his parents – the *Mater Dolorosa* type of mother, the grumpy father –; he spends his time observing the female passengers. He performs a medical semiology on them, reading the signs present in the living body as the basis for the autopsy-style report, including the prediction of the future cause of death.

This scene indicates an obsessive look, but there is relaxation in this playful version of the work that, in the morgue, he competently takes on. Now and then, his thinking is expressed through the diagnosis game, particularly in the case of Dr. Lara, the boss with whom he has a complicated relationship.

Near the beginning of the film, when he requests a leave from work in the afternoon shift, they begin to quarrel over unimportant matters, and the awkward way in which they live out tensions beyond work, signs of a relationship marked by resentment. We guess in them the previous expectation of a love affair that did not work out, reason for an intimacy full of hassling, or for his reflections like “Lara is





Figure 2: The body-enigma.

Source: *Body* (Rubens Rewald and Rossana Foglia, 2007).

Attracted by this body-enigma, Arthur takes on the task of analyzing it and seeking an explanation for the anomaly. The “return of the past in the present” comes to the center of the plot and constitutes the “thematic motif” (TOMACHEVSKI, 1970) that moves the film around this body, whose presence will mobilize the living and their conflicts. In his first examination, Dr. Arthur’s gaze generates a counter-field that brings rapid travelling along the body-enigma, followed by another along the body of a girl lying on the floor of a residential room. The impression is that this is the same girl when alive, but everything is too fast for certainty. In this first of the flashbacks that punctuate their inquiries, we already have an imagery construction that seems to metaphorize the difficulties of interpreting clues. After this quick flash, the cut takes us to a travelling that goes down the dead woman’s body and accentuates the stitches that close an enormous wound in her thorax. The music track underscores a sense of an expert examination in motion as Arthur examines burns and bruises. In over, he comments, “there is damage everywhere, broken fingers.” His attention is drawn to the ring on a mangled finger on her left hand. He tries to take it off. He fails. The essential thing here is to leave engraved in our memory this ring, a central icon in this plot.

<figura>



Figure 3: The icon-ring.

Source: *Body* (Rubens Rewald and Rossana Foglia, 2007).

His efforts to elucidate the case face, at every step, new confrontations with Lara, who does not accept his special attention towards the body. She demands the standard procedure in the case of an “unclaimed body,” since the dead young woman would have nothing to do with the remains: an error at the cemetery caused her accidental inclusion in the batch. Openly opposing her, Arthur advocates a research to explain the enigma.

What is essential is that the presence of this body and its catalyzing force of emotions project outside the sphere of medical science. The nodal point of the plot will not be the anomaly on the biological plane. This soon leaves the center of the conversations. The objection made to Arthur when he brings up the hypothesis of an adipocere that occurred to her, which would explain her condition, even so many years after death, is summary. A doctor mobilized by Lara soon dismisses his hypothesis. The refutation is full of irony. His argument is summary, but in tune with her political interest, who compliments him on his “excellent work.”

The presence of this young, tortured female body bothers her, beyond the implications on a political level. Arthur puts his foot down and insists. He says it is a

serious case of “beating” (this is the term he uses). She says that it is a “dumping” (a gang’s action to get rid of a corpse). Later on, he returns to the subject. Impatient, she repeats, “If nobody shows up until tomorrow to identify this body, it will be buried like any other. He insists, “The press needs to know about this”. She is ironic, “Go ahead, talk about your mummy and leave me alone; tell them that you found Nefertiti...”

At this point, the spectator assumes in Arthur the will to elucidate the case for its political value as material evidence of torture activities. We will see that this is not the main reason driving him. He does not assume to talk to the press in his dispute with Lara. Politics is present more because it is unavoidable than because of a special commitment on his part. In any case, with the help of a colleague who secretly gives him a photo of the girl, he begins his research paying attention to the political dimension of this body: his first step is to go to the DOPS, the Political and Social Order Department, to where political prisoners were taken in the first instance.

**Arthur’s research moves forward and new information emerge in flashbacks**

Inserted in the sequence of Arthur examining files of political prisoners at the DOPS, a flashback shows us a group of male and female actors in a performance, their choreography made of tight bindings of several naked bodies, close to the floor, on a theatrical stage. Their body-to-body contact forms a constantly changing unit. The camera, right next to them, follows their evolutions. At a certain moment, we notice the ring, already known to us, now on the finger of a girl whose face we can hardly discern. By the style of the scene, everything indicates that it is an evocation of 1967-1968, in a show whose proposal is based on the movement of free and solidary bodies. Later, another flashback returns to the same theater, showing a girl lying in the center of the stage, at a certain distance from the other actors, as if asleep in the middle of rehearsal: someone comes to shake her to wake her up, and a close-up of her left hand makes the ring visible. These scenes help to compose the profile of the girl with the ring as a young actress, completed by her conduct in other flashbacks. They present us information to which Arthur does not have access, outlining the story of this girl full of life and engaged as a performer.

We are back to Arthur, whom we had left at the DOPS. His research has made him sleep with his face glued to the table full of papers already examined. He wakes up, goes through the documents again, and sees his efforts rewarded. A file from 1973 bears the photo of the face he recognizes. Beside it, the name: Teresa Prado Noth.



He copies the file and, back to the morgue, looks in the phone book for relatives who might be able to clarify the matter. There he finds two Prado Noth surnames, one of them with Teresa's name. This surprise disconcerts him and he immediately calls, anxious to clarify the situation: is she alive or dead? Fernanda answers, who claims to be the daughter of the person who goes by this name. He is surprised. The conversation is confusing, but they agree that she will visit the morgue to identify the body. If Teresa died in the 1970s, her daughter would now be a young woman.

Fernanda arrives at the morgue agitated and, when meeting him asks, "Where is my mother?" She has her back to us and Arthur looks puzzled. Soon after, when she is seen from the front, it is our turn to face the strange fact: her face duplicates that of the corpse; it is played by the same actress.



Figure 4: Fernanda Prado Noth and Dr. Arthur.

Source: *Body* (Rubens Rewald and Rossana Foglia, 2007).

When Arthur shows her the dead woman, she says that "She is too young to be my mother, she could be my sister," and does not show sign of perplexity. He clarifies that the body is not fresh; she died in 1973. She replies, "I was born in 1973". Confused at Fernanda's agitation and incisive answers, Arthur again makes remarks



assuming her mother is dead, which she finds strange. Then comes the question, "But isn't your mother dead after all?" In response, a loud laugh, and there is more joking when he refers to her mother as a missing guerrilla fighter, "No way! She is out and about". She is surprised because he does not know who her mother is, the "well-known sociologist" Teresa Prado Noth. There is a hiatus of silence; she suddenly approaches him, gives him a kiss on the cheek, and leaves, as if she were in a hurry or getting out of the situation. Arthur is left with the riddle of two women with the same name and this special resemblance of Fernanda to the body-enigma.

This scene makes it clear that, within the parabola set up in the film, the use of the same actress for both roles signals that strict realism does not apply. Starting from a structural condition involving the experience of identifying victims of police violence or political repression, the film sets up a laboratory that allows the evaluation of a gradient of personal attitudes. Each one called to the scene will have their reasons and idiosyncrasies for acting, as we will see in front of this body

The identical face - connecting the activist named Teresa Prado Noth in the DOPS file, the inert body in the morgue, and this girl who comes to examine it - makes up the core of this parable built from a hard-earned memory. This same memory inspires in this film an original reflection on the forms of return of the past in the present and, especially, on the relationship between individual memory and collective memory, considered in its connection with the plane of affections, friendship, and politics.

### **The performative Fernanda and the gloomy Dr. Arthur**

Fernanda's mark, since she comes into scene, is the restlessness; agitated hands full of ornaments, vivacious, provocative, abrupt decisions. Such as now, when she suddenly says goodbye, leaves, and, to our surprise, returns to resume her conversation with Arthur. A word or two, and soon the two of them leave together for a restaurant.

At lunch, they were supposed to meet her mother, Teresa Prado Noth, a key moment for his research. Once in the restaurant, she commands the dialogue, leaving Arthur more focused on watching and listening. He even uses a bottle through which he watches her and wonders in over, "Would it be possible two identical bodies without any genetic influence?" At one point, she responds to a comment from him, saying that she is an actress. Later, argumentative, she criticizes the quality of the food and wonders what makes her mother go there so often, she who did not come to the meeting and should pay the bill.

On the way out, she conducts another theatrical thing by creating a new confusion between them, suddenly leaving, so he is on his own to pay the bill. After leaving the restaurant, he goes looking for her and finds Fernanda in a clothing store. Run-ins, once again. He has come to demand back his wallet, which she took with her. Fernanda criticizes his hesitations and lack of expression, soon walking behind a curtain, where she goes to try on an outfit. On the other side, he says he does not have time to wait, as he has to get back to work and finishes, "I am not an actor." She brings her face out of the booth and answers: "Great, because you do not have the slightest talent". She closes the curtain and returns to her outfit. There is a quick voyeurism thing from him through a gap in the curtain, but haste makes him leave the store.

At this point, a flashback with the militant Teresa appears. Alone, she walks examining a place full of houses, nobody in sight. Shot in hand-held, the sequence is enigmatic; we follow her steps and her attentive gaze; suddenly a ball bumps into her body, and as she holds it, we see the ring in her left hand. She then gives the ball back to two boys, who just appear. A wordless flashback. In the others, we hear Teresa talking over her experience of being a militant to her friend Helena. This is a key plot point that brings the mediation of her comments when alive directed to this special friend.

Corroborating the theatrical vein of the performer in the flashbacks, there are scenes in which she has fun talking about the disguises she used in some actions. Another nod to her pre-militancy condition. The disguise is the subject in two circumstances. In one, Helena tries on her wigs and receives advice about what makes them efficient, "the important thing is the suitability"; in the other, Helena enters a shoe store and, surprised, finds Teresa, under disguise, in the role of an attendant; the latter signals her not to "show off".

The restaurant and the store events kept Fernanda away from the investigation, but she soon reappears at the morgue, where she is noticed when already near the militant's body. Angry, Arthur complains about the "invasion". She gives him back his wallet and, as a sort of punishment, he takes her for forensic medical examination. He explains the origin of the torture marks and forces her to run her hand over each one to follow the description of the wound and its cause.

Once the uncomfortable class is over, Fernanda takes the doctor to her mother's college room, which is empty. In a new performative move, at a given moment, she answers the phone and talks to someone pretending to be her mother.

A new flashback brings the scene of the young Helena at the DOPS, where she went trying to get information about her friend, given Teresa's disappearance and the lack of news. A difficult moment, in which the police chief answer was short

(and unreal) - her friend was kept held there, interrogated, and released the next day. The expression “was released” was worth to her as “was taken to OBAN”, the Bandeirante Operation, a repression organ financed by businessmen from São Paulo, located in the II Army Military Service on Tutóia Street. One can assume that she had information to conclude her friend was dead.

In the teacher’s room at the college, we follow Fernanda’s agitation as Arthur examines books authored by sociologist Teresa Prado Noth. The decisive shot comes when he looks at a photo of Fernanda’s mother as a young girl. A familiar face: it is Helena, from the flashbacks. She sports a ring like the one on the body-enigma, which mobilizes Arthur: is it a coincidence? Or else, was there a friendship between the sociologist and the militant in the past? What does this have to do with the same name? We shall recall that he knows nothing about the Helena of the flashbacks, who we now learn is Professor Teresa, the figure that has come to the center of the charade. Before, the same name; now, the same ring.

Agitated, he returns to the morgue to find a wry Lara stating that relatives came, claimed the body, and took it away. It is a lie. He makes a violent protest, looks for the corpse, and fails to find it. Since the boss has left for lunch in the meantime, he goes after her in the vicinity. While he looks for her, Fernanda is amusing herself in the neighborhood at the stalls of a street fair. Examining jewelry, she looks through the rings on display at a stall and finds one just like that of the “corpse” and sported by her mother in the photo. The stall where she found it shows its condition as a cheap product. This is a sign that its presence may not be as valuable in establishing the connection between people as Arthur supposes, although coincidences should not be forgotten. From then on, what would be the reason for Fernanda, in good spirits, to keep showing Arthur the ring? Another provocation amusing her, as she plays with a relevant information for him.

Arthur’s thoughts in voice-over are fixed on his boss. As he seeks her out, he places her in his game of hypothetical reports, “Lara has a disciplined body. No doubt her atrophied muscles show an advanced state of moral decomposition; there is no longer any trace of the brilliant doctor who passed first in the admission exam.” Later, “...examination of her viscera revealed a high content of bitterness in her bile; all the elements point to the cause of death: pragmatic poly-skepticism.” When he is in this last sentence, an unexpected image comes up: in the foreground, Lara entwined in a long burning kiss with a partner. Total surrender. In the background, Arthur looks through the glass door into the restaurant where the scene takes place. Beside him, Fernanda is curious to see his reaction. The camera lingers on his expression. It is noticeable.



Figure 5: Arthur watches Lara and her kissing.

Source: *Body* (Rubens Rewald and Rossana Foglia, 2007).

Beyond surprise or irony, there is disgust printed on his face. The passionate kiss bothers him. It is as if the scene comes to shake a conviction that supported his lack of initiative to change the *status quo* of this on-again and off-again relationship full of resentment. Why? Perhaps because this awkward inaction signals a sexual insecurity mitigated by rationalizations. Among them, the sense that Lara is a woman without sex appeal, incapable of attracting a man. The scene in the restaurant forces him to face an issue experienced in silence: his difficulty in breaking through loneliness.

This reaction closes a circle started in a more relaxed way at the opening, when we hear a voice-over of him saying his own report, “Male... Is it really? When does a man effectively prove that he is a man?” Constant tension, within the scope of an unresolved intimacy, is the rule throughout the film. At the end of the public display of affection, Lara goes to the bathroom. While she is examining her teeth in the mirror, we hear another shot from Arthur, “... the rigidity of her dental arches prevents any candid smile”.

Then, the scene Fernanda puts on by the door of the bathroom stall where Lara is follows. The young woman says she is armed and shouts, “hand over the purse, bitch...”. At first scared, Lara reaches for a revolver, but hands over the money under the door. When Fernanda says, “This is a revolutionary operation to recover the corpse you

kidnapped”, Lara realizes they are Fernanda and Arthur. She denounces the hoax. They smile and return the money the same way they received it. It is time to leave.

Having them out of sight already, we first hear a comment in Lara’s voice-over about Arthur. She expresses her irritation, “Arthur, you are a dead man: your brain and liver should be removed for the study of depression; your heart and genitals for the study of impotence; [...] you are a dead man.” The final part of Lara’s diatribe overlaps with the image in which Arthur and Fernanda are on the subway already, in silence. His face is still under the effect of the restaurant scene. Immobile, absorbed, he does not even pay attention to a happy and showy Fernanda with her new ring.

Arriving at the house where she lives with her mother, Fernanda cannot find her. Alone with Arthur in the living room, she notices his despondency sitting in a corner. Her game of seduction opens up and begins with the display of her breasts as she changes clothes in the middle of the room. He watches her and stays still. While Caetano Veloso’s voice repeats the “it’s a long and winding road...” chorus on the record player and Fernanda moves around the room half-naked, Arthur remains impassive.

In a quick flashback, we see the young Helena reclining on a rug as she looks happily at a baby (Fernanda?) on a nanny’s lap. An interregnum of innocence that punctuates the creation of the climate between the two. Already lightly dressed, she goes into another room. He follows her, and there is the key moment when she lies down on a narrow bed, assuming the posture of the corpse in the morgue: eyes closed, arms stretched out. Motionless, she waits for her strategy to work.



Figure 6: Fernanda standing as a corpse.

Source: *Body* (Rubens Rewald and Rossana Foglia, 2007).

He approaches her, settles down next to her, begins to feel her under her clothes, caresses her, and joins the role-play with a “medical” gesture. Leaning on one arm, he lifts her torso and, with his free hand, taps her on the chest as one does to a dying man to make him breathe. She completes the shot with an emphatic intake of breath, and just as we await the new rapture, a symptomatic cut denies us the continuation. It is as if a scene of visible pleasure was denied to him (we can suppose there are spectators who wonder if there would be this new rapture anyway).

The hard cut takes us to another couple embracing and kissing, more excited and receiving more attention from the camera. Once the sex is over, the dialogue identifies the female figure: the older professor Teresa Prado Noth, without Helena’s naive face, all ears for the militant. Her partner is a young former student. We have already seen him working as a waiter in the restaurant that Fernanda criticized (and judged unworthy of her mother’s taste, unaware of her love motivation), and he now announces to Teresa his move to London.

Having defined the extent of the relationship between these two, we return to Arthur and Fernanda, now in a new mood. They are quiet, without tension, nibbling snacks and drinking in silence. Suddenly she says, “Call my mother and tell her I died”. She brings him back to the primary reason why they are together and understands that the mother’s disappearance will only be overcome by an extreme measure. It is necessary to overcome Lara’s boycott, to make the body visible. Cleverly, Fernanda uses the reason that, in the opposite situation, took her to the morgue. The expectation is created before a key scene: Helena-now-Teresa examining the corpse of her friend Teresa to see if it is Fernanda.

**Outcome: the assembly of those involved**

The editing does not wait for Arthur’s response; immediately, a straight cut brings us Fernanda’s mother driving her car across the city. It is night already. In voice-over, we hear the militant Teresa in yet another speech addressed to her friend Helena. Is the professor remembering, or are we, the spectators, the only ones hearing this speech? Her cell phone rings and the present imposes itself. Another hard cut takes us straight to the morgue, where Lara is already servicing her. She says her name and the reason for her coming. She describes her daughter and is led to the morgue room. We are not surprised as the body that is at the origin of the whole plot is brought in. Lara sees her chance to settle the bill. Helena-now-Teresa examines the body closely, reacts when she sees the ring on her left hand and, at a certain moment, her hand touches the dead woman’s face. She is shocked. She is perplexed to wonder

how this body could bring back, some twenty years later, that friend from her youth who was arrested and then disappeared? No, it would not be possible for her body to be preserved. Yet, would not the face, the ring, and the torture be evidence, albeit paradoxical? Or else, is she shocked from the start because she has come across her daughter's body dead and in this state?



Figure 7: The professor inspects the body-enigma.

Source: *Body* (Rubens Rewald and Rossana Foglia, 2007).

A new flashback prolongs our wait. In a daytime sequence, we see images of the city center and hear Teresa telling Helena not to come to São Paulo. She complains a lot about the city. Do we have there a sign of a memory generated because Helena-now-Teresa is in front of this corpse in the morgue?

We return to the living room. Lara is waiting and hoping for confirmation that it is her daughter, which would save her from embarrassment and make her right in front of Arthur. Through the window of this room, we see Fernanda, who just arrived, watching the scene. Then Arthur arrives. The professor remains silent, and when they enter the room, upon seeing her daughter, her face changes slightly, but the camera movement does not give us time to clearly discern a sign of relief. We have the general shot of the room, with the two newcomers by the wall in the background.





Helena-now-Teresa immediately retorts, saying that she is not so similar. She tries to deny the obvious, bothered by the evidence of Fernanda’s enormous resemblance to the dead girl.

There is no time for the dialogue between mother and daughter to continue, because the mother’s attitude triggers Arthur’s intervention, who sees that the time has come to consummate the confrontation. He not only supports Fernanda’s observation, but also brings new evidence captured by his “clinical eye” (the similar bone structure) and shifts the discussion to the question of the name, pulling out the file copied from the DOPS, where the photo and the name of Teresa Prado Noth appear. His effort is concentrated on unmasking the professor, instead of focusing on the question about the identification of the body at the center of the scene. He displays the chart to everyone and asks her “Who is this that has your name on it?” Having such evidence, he starts acting like a police chief: “Who is this? She is Teresa Prado Noth. Who are you? Are you really Teresa Prado Noth?”

The professor feels the blow and, to buy time, asks her daughter if he was the one who called for her to come over. Chance given to Lara who accuses him of an irregular act, giving Helena-now-Teresa time to pull herself together. Firmly, she disputes his “improper” attitude, “Are you crazy; is this an interrogation?”, - and reaffirms that she is Teresa Prado Noth. She then shuts up, looking indignant. She knows that he has no way of immediately spotting the appropriation, since she got the documents from Teresa herself, something we learn about through one of the flashbacks.

At this point, she receives support from Lara who, in order to close the case, takes the opportunity to say that the file is not evidence of anything, forcing Arthur to back down, giving the act of identification as already solved: “unclaimed body”.

Fernanda does not speak out, accepting Helena-now-Teresa’s posture with whom she seems sympathetic, which does not prevent a tense look at one moment or another. Her action suggests that she preferred to work on this circumstance and its unfolding with her adoptive mother, who tells her, “Let’s go, I don’t like this place”. Fernanda accompanies her, but says goodbye in a final performance that, to our eyes, comes again to suggest her affinities - which she herself is unaware of - with what we saw of performative in her mother, the militant Teresa. She emphatically raises her hands to Arthur and shows him the ring on her finger.



Figure 9: Fernanda's hands showing the ring.  
Source: *Body* (Rubens Rewald and Rossana Foglia, 2007).

Would it be to recognize her connection to that body that she now, perhaps, understands as being that of her tortured and killed mother in 1973? She leaves the room looking at the doctor. It is worth her decision not to align herself with Arthur in the way he acted at the time of the confrontation and, on the other hand, to leave this sign that she carries with her this symbol of an alliance that he would have helped seal.

### **A free body**

An important fact to evaluate the way Helena assumed Fernanda's motherhood was reserved for the end, once Arthur's defeat was consummated, who, after the departure of mother and daughter, still had to listen to Lara's "magnanimous" consolation just before she left. Arthur stands motionless, alone and gloomy after everyone is gone. At this moment, a flashback appears, which, had it come before the decisive assembly scene, would have altered the effect of the constellation of unsaid that marked it.

In a plaza, we see Teresa walking with her baby, a newborn, on her lap. In a voice-over, she says, "A life going around, a free body," and comes toward the

camera, which frames her from Helena’s point of view. When she comes to her friend, once again in a voice-over, she explains that her daughter does not have a name yet and underlines her fragility. The friend takes her in. Teresa had already handed her documents and, at that point in her militancy, knows that this surrender of her daughter is radical. The scene closes with a shot of her sitting on a bench in the plaza facing the camera, all alone. The hand-camera moves away while her voice over reaffirms her impulses and decisions: “a life going around; the freedom to walk around without identity, without shame; a free body.”



Figure 10: Teresa handling the baby over to Helena.  
 Source: *Body* (Rubens Rewald and Rossana Foglia, 2007).

At this moment, still over the image of Teresa solitary in the plaza, Arthur’s voice-over comes to confirm the formula “a free body”. This finds in his voice a different tone, a kind of sad irony of one who takes stock of what has resulted from all the tenacious insistence of this body even so many years after death. The cut takes us to the doctor still in the assembly hall in the same position, clearly depressed. The formula of the militant Teresa, this one who took on her free body and committed it with all courage in the sacrifice of the fight until death, finds a tragic answer in the next image: her body stretched out on a table is in another room, totally isolated.

A morgue employee gets closer and wraps her in plastic, marking a technical step that prepares and symbolizes her definitive burial as an indigent. We have here the ultimate icon of this parable when the process of erasing the collective memory of the dead militant is taken to the limit.

That leaves one last shot of the morgue corridor empty and silent.

### Personal memories *versus* collective memory

This ending confirms the decision to leave many central aspects of the drama open, an effect expressed throughout the film in the editing itself. The scenes are woven in a movement of calculated scarcity of information to avoid cathartic revelations brought by some protagonist, as happens in a conventional drama or, with the protocol exaggerations, in a melodrama. This calculated scarcity leads us to so many questions before the assembly of those involved, stimulating our reflection. If there was one or another revelation, it was in the flashbacks, through the voice-over of the militant Teresa.

In all this convergence of characters, one of the issues kept off the agenda is the absence of the father figure, never the subject of any mention or question. It remains an unknown. In this aspect, a significant moment is the most unusual narration by Teresa in one of the flashbacks. She tells Helena about a passage she lived through at the Cine Paissandu, in the city center. Having set up a “meeting point” (a place chosen by militants to meet, exchange information, and articulate actions) in front of the movie theater, there was a mismatch, and she decided to enter as if she were going to see a movie. What marks the episode is her peculiar liaison with a stranger who followed her into the movie theater bathroom, a moment of a sex-theater in which she “stoop herself to various roles”, a sex lived with intensity. For how long? She cannot know for sure. This may have been the origin of her pregnancy, a not at all absurd hypothesis in a context in which no mention is ever made of a male figure beyond this fortuitous and singular affair. Neither Teresa (always loquacious in the flashbacks with Helena) nor her friend touches the subject outside this circumstance. Fernanda never refers to the father figure. There is no information to indicate that the professor invented a story to explain Fernanda’s father absence.

Preserved by a strange anomaly, the “free body”, like a return of the past in the present, came about 20 years later to mobilize an effort to reconstitute its history, generating around it a dramatic mobilization restricted to a small group. It will remain alive in their memories because of an experience that, however, did not reach the public sphere. Arthur gave full attention to this body and “made a case out of it,” but did not make the decision to take it to the level of social and political memory. Would he not have done it because the residue of doubt about the validity of

his diagnosis of the body was stronger? Or else, was there really a lack of commitment to this dimension of his battle?

A relevant fact in this matter is that Lara's pressure gave Arthur a very short time (a single day) to search for information, after which she would send the body to the cemetery, a threat she followed through with to the letter. In this framework, he immediately took the most promising lead, but ended up entangled in the personal relationships of this adopted path. For instance, he did not consult the list of missing persons available in the 1990s, even if incomplete. It was likely fruitless. Teresa should not be on it, for there was Helena living under her name without problems, in a profession where information of a political nature circulates and she had already established herself as a well-known name, a professor, and author of books. Arthur had against him not only Lara's opposition, but also Helena-now-Teresa's interest in keeping her secrets. Failure struck him when he pressed her too hastily. As a result, another blow suffered in this picture of isolation and depression.

These are questions that *Body* leaves for us to debate, once the reflection proposed by the parable is done, not forgetting the essential role that the flashbacks played in bringing the solidary relationship between the two friends, with Helena, Teresa's confidant, always all ears showing her affection and charm for her friend. This was always evident, but assumed a strongly emphatic form when Teresa recounted her experience in the unusual situation at the Cine Paissandu. In a long close-up, Helena's face listened very attentively to her friend's words, made minimal nods, and her watery eyes expressed the singular impact of this experience.



Figure 11: Helena listens to Teresa's story.

Source: *Body* (Rubens Rewald and Rossana Foglia, 2007).

Years later, when the past has asserted itself in the present, there was this awkward reunion with Teresa's body, a moment in which the distance between the naive young girl dedicated to her friend and the scholarly teacher became clear. The question now is the gesture of having changed her name as a tribute to her friend and a measure deemed perhaps necessary to give the girl the chance to grow up without the burden of her missing mother's story. After this essentially apolitical gesture, she now faces the imperative of assuming the political fact of her tortured and dead friend, recovering at the level of citizenship and history a memory that she helped bury all these years. Such an imperative, she well knows, involves the cost of facing the problems generated by the appropriation of her friend's civil identity and the reaction of the entire community in which she circulates. Closing the circle of reparations, she has to battle so that the experience of this day has been the first chapter of an effective "Bildungsroman" for Fernanda, to quote one of the paradigms of the novel genre, initiated by Goethe in *The Learning Years of Wilhelm Meister* and present in the works of other great writers (Moretti, 2020). That is, to act in such a way as to take on the effective history of the one who gave her life; and takes it up to another level of experience. It is not an easy task for the professor, because, for that, her current knowledge and experience are not enough. It will be necessary to recover the openness and the spirit of donation typical of her youth. Will she succeed? Or rather, is she up to it?

Lara showed once again her expertise in exempting official responsibility in the case of deaths in which the repressive apparatus is guilty. In the dispute with his boss, Arthur did not bring the political dimension of the case to the center of his concern, even after having gone to the DOPS in search of proof. His findings led to a great advance, but in the decisive confrontation, his rashness did not help the truth to come to light. The meeting concluded in a way contrary to what had been desired. His loneliness becomes more radical and he leaves the scene devastated.

### **The silence trap**

The issue of the remains found in the clandestine mass grave at the Perus Cemetery was under debate and generated effective measures between 1990 and 1993. *Body*, in 2007, in constructing its parable, evokes that moment and conducts its well-woven plot instigating our reflection on issues related to facts that occurred between the Institutional Act Number 5, dated December 1968, and 1974. Finally, the period of greatest closure of the dictatorship, observed in its effects in the 1990s,

i.e., the period of the New Republic prior to the installation of the National Truth Commission in 2010.

The sensitive point that the film touches on is the conjuncture lived at a time when there was no perspective of struggling for situations of this kind to reach a procedural evidence capable of generating an official act of recognition of the death of political prisoners, the so-called “disappeared”. A category of persecuted by dictatorial regimes invented in Latin America: militants or suspects whose arrest and death were not officially recognized. The result was a new form of suffering for people close to the victim, especially those most intimate, condemned to live the nightmare of hope of an unlikely reunion. A painful impasse inhibiting the effective work of mourning, a necessary process to overcome an irreparable loss.

Working on this delicate issue, *Body* generates a reflection on the influences of the past in the present from the tensions experienced by the protagonists in face of their reactions to the unusual presence of Teresa’s tortured body. Thematizing the confrontation with truth, the film problematizes the posture of those who, in one way or another, make their decisions in their personal or professional lives a mirror of the subterfuges of that policy of silence of a political power committed to hiding the horrors of its repressive system.

## References

DOANE, M. A. “A voz no cinema: a articulação de corpo e espaço”. In: XAVIER, I. (org.). *A experiência do cinema*: antologia. Rio de Janeiro: Graal, 2018. p. 371-387.

MORETTI, F. *O romance de formação*. São Paulo: Todavia, 2020.

TOMACHEVSKI, B. “Temática”. In: TOLEDO, D. O. (org.). *Teoria da Literatura*: formalistas russos. Porto Alegre: Globo, 1970. p. 169-204.

## Referências audiovisuais

CORPO. Rubens Rewald e Rossana Foglia, Brasil, 2007.

**Submitted: April 16, 2021 | Approved: April 30, 2021**