André Rui Graça, *Portuguese Cinema: Consumption, Circulation and Commerce (1960-2010)*
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REFERENCES


1 Why has Portuguese cinema – widely regarded as a creative, talent-brimming cinema – failed to achieve commercial success? Why has it failed to appeal to audiences over a five-decade period running from 1960 to 2010? Are difficulties in distribution and small budgets enough to justify this “unsuccess” (p. xii)? These are the main questions that Andre Rui Graça asks at the onset of *Portuguese Cinema: Consumption, Circulation and Commerce (1960-2010)*, a book based on the author’s doctoral thesis in Film Studies completed at University College London in 2017, and now published as part of the “Monografías” Tamesis series. In the preface, Graça promises (1) to combine “quantitative and qualitative data, film theory, and history”; (2) to address his object from four major perspectives: audiences, circulation, legislation, and finances; (3) to provide a “more comprehensive, holistic understanding of cinema made in Portugal”; and, ultimately, (4) to contribute to finding solutions (p. xi). All of this, he claims, will ultimately come together and “help solve the enigma of why Portuguese cinema has not been commercially successful” (p. xii, my emphasis).

2 The book is structured into six parts: an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. It also includes a foreword, signed by Stephen M. Hart (Professor of Latin American...
Film, Literature and Culture at University College London, Graça’s PhD supervisor, and editor of Tamesis), a preface, two appendixes and an index. The chapters are outlined in the preface and, in general, meet the plan. Chapter two (on audiences) is the longest. The “contextualising introduction”, by contrast, is short and superficial. The suggestion that we “may skip this part” (p. 3) contradicts the book’s endorsement of a context- rather than text-based approach to film. After all, to understand “the main intellectual and ideological trends in and around Portuguese cinema” (p. 3) is just as important as to grasp the “market context” of Portuguese cinema (p. 1). The book’s conclusion is disappointing, merely repeating what has already been said without opening new horizons.

3 The idea that Portuguese cinema has been a case of “unsuccess” throughout its history is at the centre of chapter one. Drawing on previous studies, the author comes up with the following criteria to measure the success of a film and, by extension, of a national cinema: number of prints; budget/revenue ratio; number of spectators; prizes and awards; visibility in A-list festivals; distribution through different outlets; box-office revenues, to which he adds, “labour conditions, technological resources, and modes of production” (p. 14-15). Graça recognises that some markers of success, such as “cultural value”, are “not measurable in an empirical or quantifiable sense” (p. 16) and that his analysis will take “much more into consideration than just quantifiable criteria” (p. 16); still, his emphasis is on quantitative rather than qualitative criteria. Lest we forget, the point is to discuss the “commercial performance” (p. 15; 17) of Portuguese cinema. Size matters – and the fact that Portuguese cinema has “a minor cinematography” (p. 16) is treated as part of “the problem”. The author sets his eyes on four benchmarks: “the lack of spectators” (pp. 22-36); “international recognition” (pp. 36-37); “problems with distribution, ‘difficult visibility’, and access” (pp. 37-42); and “politics and regulation of the sector” (p. 42). Even before we reach the data and the “diagnosis”, we learn that “there is a consensus that something is rotten to the core” (p. 20).

4 In chapter two, Graça reviews the history of Portuguese cinema. Following a dominant trend in Portuguese film scholarship, he foregrounds the links between Portuguese cinema and “the national question” (p. 44). The aim seems to be to align Portuguese cinema – described as literary, art-oriented, lyrical, poetic, dark, sad, decadent, nostalgic, melancholic, fatalistic and pessimistic – with ‘high culture’ (as opposed to ‘low culture’). Half-way through the chapter, the author decides to include “the history of the common spectator” (p. 98), whose exclusion from Portuguese film history, as he rightly points out, has had a skewed effect on the field. Attention therefore shifts away from the artistic milieu (central to the chapter’s earlier sections) to “popular taste”, television culture (with a focus on the telenovela and the ‘television film’), and “mass-consumed” American cinema, which experienced a dramatic rise between 1980 and 2001 (p. 105). The chapter draws a parallel between the reception of Gabriela, the first Brazilian telenovela broadcast on Portuguese TV, and Oliveira’s Amor de Perdição (p. 99), and offers brief analyses of the three most successful films in each decade (1980, 1990, 2000). In the end, we are left with the impression that the telenovela somehow holds the key to Portuguese cinema’s audience problem (p. 131).

5 Chapter three is concerned with film circulation, involving issues of “visibility” and prestige-bestowing practices, but also business opportunities (mostly to do with distribution and exhibition). After a general introduction, which discusses the history,
main features and political agendas of film festivals (pp. 133-145), the chapter explores two major aspects: the relationship of Portuguese cinema with film festivals and its overall distribution in the international market. After presenting the case of Manoel de Oliveira (pp. 147-159), the author introduces more figures, lists and tables to illustrate and “put in perspective” (p. 155) the Portuguese presence in film festivals. This comes down to stressing the low number of films screened in international ‘prestige’ events between 1960 and 2010. When that presence did happen, the author considers it negligible since it failed to obtain awards (or the best of them). Graça concedes that “[t]he internationalisation of Portuguese cinema was an undeniable reality” (p. 161), but he concludes that it was not (good) enough. The chapter’s second part, on distribution, elaborates on the idea that Portuguese cinema has always lacked “a solid marketing or distribution structure” (p. 166). The chapter ends with a section on the international reach of Portuguese cinema, with more data (compiled and arranged by the author) on its performance in European markets between 1996 and 2010.

The last chapter reviews the national legislation on cinema between 1971 and 2006, previously presented as the last piece of the “puzzle” (p. xiii). We are offered a rather detailed and complete picture of the laws, regulatory decrees, amendments, and statutes that have been issued from the famous 7/71 Law, of December 1971, up to the bill nº 95/2007, of March 2007. As Graça points out, cinema legislation has reflected (though not in a straightforward way, I would add) historical changes originating both internally, in government shifts and political disputes, and externally, in European directives and technological innovations (p. 178). In the end, we can only agree with the author that there is a “latent relationship between power and cinematic practice” (p. 206) and there remains little doubt that public policies play an important role in shaping this practice.

Being part of a series committed to publishing “scholarship that will make a major contribution to the fields of Hispanic and Lusophone studies” (p. iii), Portuguese Cinema: Consumption, Circulation and Commerce will certainly attract the attention of international researchers, lecturers, teachers, students, and anyone interested in the cinema made in Portugal. The author’s decision to move beyond text-based and aesthetic approaches – which have dominated Portuguese film studies – is appropriate and timely, as is his attempt to bring in a more critical stance. Graça demonstrates good knowledge of both this field of studies and broader international theoretical developments (which are often absent from much scholarly work on Portuguese cinema). Despite ignoring Tânia Leão’s important research on Portuguese film festivals and more recent historical work (the book has very few references after 2015), he shows awareness of the expanding field of film festival studies and brings in some intelligent and unexpected references, such as António Pinho Vargas or Gregory Zinman’s work on “handmade cinema” (p. 124). There are a few repetitions and typos, but overall, this is a well-edited and easy to read book. This reader appreciated the editor’s decision to include the original quotes alongside their translation.

Yet, there are weaknesses that need to detain us. Graça’s account of Portuguese cinema and its development since the establishment of New Portuguese Cinema adds little to what authors like Paulo Filipe Monteiro, Jacques Lemière, Leonor Areal, João Mário Grilo, Paulo Cunha and many others have already written. With a few exceptions (like Cunha), most of this work is concerned with discourse, relying on the rather well-known statements and arguments of a relatively small group of film critics, 'Portuguese
identity’ philosophers, academics who are often also cinema stakeholders, and the auteurs themselves. The same could be said about the chapter on legislation, which considers only scantily extra-textual issues, such as the implementation of the laws and their actual consequences. While treating statistics as “evidence” – even after recognising that they are incomplete and unreliable (pp. 20-21) –, Graça fails to include research on the practices that were being developed in tandem with or irrespective of these discourses (and laws). This absence is especially clear as far as the audiences – a key theme in this book – are concerned. Except for a marginal reference to a focus group survey (p. 98), we never get to know what the audiences actually thought or think about Portuguese films (or Portuguese cinema), since no research on either historical or contemporary audiences is made or cited.

To be fair, this is a general problem in Portuguese film studies, which continue to display a striking indifference to empirical work and sustained case studies, choosing instead to reproduce general notions that are taken for granted without ever being tested. To give but one example, there is little empirical work on Portuguese film practices in the 1940s and 1950s; still, the period continues to be considered a “decadent era” (p. 70), thus merely reproducing the perspective of the 1960s generation of filmmakers that were trying to carve a place for themselves in the field. Graça rightly mentions the negative impact that the auteur/popular cinema divide has had on Portuguese film history (p. 98). Yet, this divide shapes his own research, which lacks an alternative theoretical framework. This is especially evident in chapter two, which, I suspect, may have been originally two separate chapters (cf. p. 61). What I am arguing, shortly, is that it is not just the scholars’ overemphasis on the canon of auteurs that has had a detrimental effect on the field, as Graça suggests (p. 99); the absence of theoretically and methodologically coherent alternatives has been just as damaging, affecting the study of both ‘dominant’ and ‘subaltern’ topics, which the best international film research practices have been examining together, in an integrated way, for a long time.

This problem merges into my last – and main – criticism of the book: its “problem-solving approach” (p. 3) and the undisclosed political undercurrents and implications it entails. A problem, in research, must be defined theoretically and methodologically in relation to a certain field of studies and takes the form of a research question. Similarly, research objects are built during the research process; they are not empirical givens. There is no research question in this book (despite otherwise stated, p. 43). The author simply borrows a ready-made “problem” from the public sphere – the (alleged) “unsuccess” of Portuguese cinema, defined as “the vicious cycle of economic failure” (p. 17) – and assumes it to be a research problem. Graça strives to “corroborate” this “problem” with quantifiable evidence, but it is clear from the first pages that his “object” originates in a long-drawn, polarised public debate, most fully exemplified by the 2012 exchange between journalist João Pereira Coutinho and filmmaker João Salaviza (pp. 17-19).

From early on, we realise that Graça is interested in delineating the two sides of a “barricade” (p. 8; 83) that opposes those who are for the state’s constitutional mandate to support the arts to those who are against it (pp. 8-9). We also realise that this study is being marshalled to prove the ‘objective’ superiority of one of these sides. We are, in other words, in the midst of political (and ideological) dispute, not academic inquest. Graça overtly aims to replace “an established narrative” – which states that Portuguese
cinema is successful abroad (p. 11) and has been aesthetically successful (p. 17) – with a new one that strives to demonstrate its “unsuccess”. Amongst the author’s rhetorical strategies is hyperbole. Far from being “the elephant in the room”, “a delicate and inconvenient subject” and a “social taboo” (p. 17), the limited circulation and exposure of Portuguese cinema (not to mention its small budgets) have been well-known to anyone studying it, let alone to those working in it. This has not always been regarded as a “problem” (much less, as “the problem”). There are, of course, good practical reasons for social actors and political stakeholders to regard it as such, but it is less clear why a film studies researcher, dedicated to enhancing the knowledge of Portuguese cinema, should do it. Why see this as a “problem” rather than a social fact that requires historical, sociological, and anthropological explanation – or any other type of (inter)disciplinary investigation?

The author’s liberal bias emerges fully in chapter four, where he describes cinema in Portugal as having “very little liberal leeway” and as being “at the mercy of [state] policies”, which he links to a “totalitarian and propagandistic tradition” (p. 179). But what emerges from his (otherwise rather competent) “chronological and critical” (p. 177) survey of the Portuguese film legislation is that these laws were made to provide the fledgling film sector with infrastructures and operational conditions, thus in practice attempting to do for capitalist film entrepreneurs what the market alone had never been able to do. Even “the tight norms” that promised to curb the power of multinationals, as Graça concedes, were hardly ever put into practice (p. 180). The author also recognises that the regime’s proudly autarchic stance (orgulhosamente sós) had little correspondence with the 1971 law, which encouraged international co-productions, treating them less strictly than domestic productions (p. 180). Although Graça concludes (and strongly decries) that the legacy of the 7/71 Law has remained very much the same as far as state intervention is concerned (e.g., p. 202), it is impossible not to notice the trend, which settled in the wake of the 1983 International Monetary Fund intervention, away from a national protectionist and tax-redistributive legislation towards a liberal economic agenda. That this trend was not devoid of contradictions is a sign of the country’s new democratic arrangement, which had to accommodate different, often inconsistent, social projects resulting from the measuring of forces by rival political and sectorial players.

Despite his acute analytical skills, Graça’s liberal bias against state regulation thus prevents him from acknowledging one of the key paradoxes of liberal capitalism, namely, its reliance on a centralist state to build industries and markets where none would otherwise spontaneously flourish. That may well be the case of cinema in Portugal, a country that has proven (for reasons that are yet to be completely probed) a remarkably difficult terrain for film industrial and commercial practices. But, perhaps, not so much for other, non-commercial, amateur, and experimental practices, which are conspicuously absent from this study. After reading Graça’s book, we can only conclude that further research on cinema made in Portugal is needed. We know far too little about it and should therefore seek to take full advantage of the scant funding available in this area to pursue the mass of empirical work that remains to be done.
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