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NATIONALLY CORRECT: THE INVENTION OF PORTUGUESE CINEMA

1. Portuguese cinema always existed

In December 2007, the Cinemateca Portuguesa (the Portuguese Film Museum) ended a yearlong programme dedicated to ‘national genres’ with a selection of 18 Portuguese films not associated with any particular genre, but with the category of ‘Portuguese cinema’ itself. It seemed an odd choice, even if one took into account the very loose definition of ‘film genre’ of the previous months – who could deny the relationship between the western and the United States, or even the *polar* film and France, but what of the more dubious associations of ‘metaphysical cinema’ with the Nordic countries, of ‘realism’ with Italy, or of ‘historical cinema’ with Japan? The programme’s curator and Cinemateca’s director, João Bénard da Costa, argued that contrary to other countries, Portuguese cinema never had a predominant film genre, nor had it developed any specific film style that managed to gain any international relevance. What Portuguese cinema had excelled in, Bénard da Costa maintained, was in portraying Portugal, or rather in mirroring the country’s imaginary on film. The central argument of the curator was therefore that, «less paradoxically than it might seem, one could state that *the dominant genre in Portuguese cinema is Portuguese cinema itself.*» (Um País um Género)

The idea isn’t new and, for better or worse, it has become consensual over the last 30 years or so. Apart from the Cinemateca’s director – who devoted two books to the subject during the 1990s (Histórias do Cinema; O Cinema Português Nunca Existiu) – the issue of Portuguese cinema’s singularities has been the object of in-depth analyses by film critics and film studies scholars such as A. M. Seabra (1988: 3-18; 189: 1-10), Paulo Filipe Monteiro (2004: 22-69; 2006: 107-126), and Jacques Lemièrre (2002; 2006: 731-765). All these authors agree that it would be tricky and problematic to claim that Portuguese films share something as elusive and difficult to define as a common and distinguishable ‘national style’. Be that as it may, it also seemed clear to them that from the ‘cinema novo’ (new cinema) movement onwards, there was an irruption of films set to redefine the country’s previous cinematographic image. According to these authors, that reconfiguration was not only a foundational moment in the

history of modern Portuguese cinema; it was also a turning point in the history of a cinematography obsessed with its own 'national correctness'.

To call it a turning point is to acknowledge that this shared feature became prevalent in Portuguese films produced during the 1960s, the 1970s, and especially during the 1980s, when the 'Portuguese school' label emerged. But it also to acknowledge that many Portuguese films had thrived on the 'national question' since long before, and from as early on as the very first years of the history of Portuguese cinema. Focusing on the way Portuguese films of the 1960s through the 1980s accommodated modern cinema to portray an updated version of the country –, and one that counteracted, after 1974, the one built under the dictatorial regime –, those authors failed to emphasize how the 'national question' lingered on in many films. Exactly what constituted the country, and more specifically what should integrate its cinematographic representations, might have been diligently challenged by filmmakers, and critics alike; but the premise that Portuguese films should keep on discussing the 'national question' remained undisputed.

The fact that so many Portuguese films thrived on the 'national question' certainly offers a common feature (and a shared identity) to this national cinematography. But this common feature could hardly be pointed out as something unique to Portuguese cinema, and this is another point that has not received enough (if any) attention in recent accounts of Portuguese cinema. Since at least the 1910s, many other national cinematographies in Europe also became increasingly recognizable as belonging to a particular national culture, and many of them even developed a specific film style, or specialized in some film genre. Although it would be futile to isolate a single cause for such a complex and widespread phenomenon, it's worth noting that in most cases this occurred in the context of the different responses set up to counterbalance the overwhelming presence of American films in European national markets. Victoria de Grazia has shown how these responses generated national film styles, but also a European film style, based on the first international co-productions of this continent's film history (Grazia 1989: 53-87; 2005: 284-335). In both cases, de Grazia reminds us, and as early as in the 1920s, European producers, filmmakers, and critics, were militantly asserting the need for European films to become individual 'works of art' in order to compete with the 'industrial products' of Hollywood cinema. The close, intimate bond between some national and art (or quality) cinema is therefore a tradition at least as old as the opposition between 'artistic' and 'industrial' filmmaking itself. Dating exactly from the period when the world's national markets became Hollywood's fiefs, this tradition commanded the aesthetic and thematic choices of the 'national turn' that became dominant in most European national cinematographies, and that will probably continue to be in place for as long as the Hollywood hegemony endures.

This might explain why the idea that Portuguese films should focus on putting the country's collective imaginary on film and issues of cultural identity went unrivalled during most of Portuguese cinema's history. But

although the ‘national art cinema’ might have been the predominant mode of Portuguese cinema, its existence, as a centurylong process, is far from having been a smooth, constant, or monolithic one. Two major periods can be roughly outlined in the history of Portuguese ‘national art cinema’. The first unfolds from the very inception of Portuguese cinema, in the mid-1890s, when the film pioneer Aurélio da Paz dos Reis shot the first Portuguese films, right up to the early 1960s, when the ‘cinema novo’ filmmakers initiated their activity. During this period, the ‘national question’ travelled unchallenged in Portuguese screens, taking up a number of forms that were as numerous as they were diverse (from Paz dos Reis early films to the literary adaptations of the silent period, and from the popular urban comedies of the 1930s and 1940s to the historical super-productions of the 1940s), and met with general acceptance from the audiences and film critics alike. A second period spreads out from the first ‘cinema novo’ films in the early 1960s, and especially after some Portuguese films were internationally branded as the ‘Portuguese school’ during the 1980s, up to the present time. In this period, the ‘national art cinema’ of previous decades was denounced as something out of step with the ‘real’ country, and lost both the critical appraisal and the audience support it previously had. The modern reformulation of ‘national art cinema’ didn’t change the primary concern of Portuguese cinema – how best to reflect the nation’s imaginary –, but it did smash the consensus that concern once enjoyed. And so, what had previously united filmmakers, audiences, and critics, and seemed such a good way to promote national culture and fight foreign cinema, now seemed to reduce Portuguese cinema to a ghetto of its own – a feeling that the ‘Portuguese school’ label, imposed from abroad as it had been, re-asserted all too eloquently.

A seemingly transparent and merely geographical or cultural notion, ‘Portuguese cinema’ is actually an ideologically charged concept that determined most of what Portuguese films became (and were not allowed to become) over the past century. This paper tries to interrogate that concept, and to understand its formation and different configurations over time. I believe the ambivalence of the concept to be responsible for the way Portuguese films allowed themselves to be walled inside the ghetto of an identity founded upon nationalism, an impossible desire to compete with foreign entertainment cinema, and finally, and a ‘national autheurism’ assembled from abroad which, at the same time as it praised the originality of a handful of films, threatened to reduce an entire national cinematography to a fad or, which might be worse, into a genre.

2. The nation’s mirror

In the early 1920s, the period of ‘Portuguese cinema made by foreign directors’, several film companies based in Lisbon and Oporto hired French and Italian filmmakers, built studios, and called upon the time’s most famed stage actors to star in a series of adaptations of Portuguese XIX century novels (Baptista 2003; 2008). For a brief period, the goal of Portuguese cinema was to reach the entire world. The domestic market was packed with foreign films but the success cases of smaller national

cinematographies (first and foremost, Sweden and Denmark) didn't go unnoticed. Having those examples from northern Europe in mind, and in order to compete with American serials and French melodramas, the Oporto film company Invicta Film stressed the regional and exotic nature of its own productions. It was hoped that this strategy would entice not only foreign audiences looking out for some southern Europe picturesque, but also the colonies of Portuguese immigrants spread across the globe. Portuguese films were expected to become the country's 'calling card', the advanced agents of its international acceptance as the most recent of modern nations (and what better symptom of modernity could there be, in the early XXth century, than the ability to make cinema!...). However, the media that most embodied modernity itself would be used to portray an archaic, rural country, buried under the weight of its centennial traditions and history. From the onset of the history of Portuguese cinema, the art that seemed the best equipped to portray contemporary times would be used to look back into a distant past. The contradiction is only apparent as this use of film was actually a sign of absolute synchronism with what was going on in other European countries. During the silent film period, there was hardly a more up to date and international idea than to use modern tools to invent old nations. These silent films thus founded Portuguese cinema as a national cinema, adding to all the numerous attempts made during the same years to invent a nation based on an ensemble of recognizable and shared patrimonial icons (in painting, literature, theatre, architecture, music, and even opera). All those Minho villages, mountain ranges, monasteries, and peasant festivals seemingly wanted to materialize the cultural bonds that united all Portuguese as members of the same nation. Film replicated the air of times and made it reached more people than ever. And the spirit of the times was charged with nationalism.

During the following decades, sound films would carry on and update this cinematographic fabrication based on the premise that Portuguese history and the agrarian universe, with all its traditions and superstitions, were the keystones of nationality. Silent films had, for that matter, already established the crucial role of the rural world in Portuguese cinema. Adapted mostly from naturalist literature and painting, the filmic rural world took one step further the most common narrative mechanism of cultural nationalism: the city-countryside opposition. In most Portuguese silent films of the 1920s this opposition meant the systematic absence of the city, or its representation in extremely detrimental terms. Almost like a 'moral *hors cadre*', the city is less a geographical space than a diffuse idea to which all evil and vice adhered. If nothing more, the city's main purpose was to put the moral virtues of the countryside to the test, always asserting their superiority by the end of the film (for more detail see Baptista 2005: 167-184).

This city-countryside opposition made its way into the sound comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. The urban setting of these films should not mislead anyone. The big anonymous city where strangers could interact freely is still missing from these films. That is why, while in silent films the city space had a metonymical value that made it superfluous to represent any real and recognizable cityscape, the city in the sound

comedies of the following decades is (almost) always Lisbon. For the same reason, some authors prefer to call name these films 'Lisbon comedies', instead of the more current designation, 'Portuguese comedies'. The fact that the capital's exhibition venues made Lisbon's audiences the most important in the domestic exhibition market can certainly be pointed out as responsible for the number of times the city is portrayed in these comedies, and also for their repeated box-office accomplishments. But the cinematographic 'Lisbon' is a very peculiar city and one that bears little or no relation to the sociological and urban realities of the Portuguese capital. This 'city' is structured like a cluster of small neighbourhoods that really play the role of miniature villages. All the relationships between the characters are under someone's tutelage (an employer, a relative, a neighbour), thus undermining the freedom usually associated (and that silent films indeed associated) with life in a big city with thousands of people who don't know, and more often than not don't want to know, each other (Granja 2000). City folks in 'Lisbon comedies' live, work, and love just like the peasants in Invicta Film's silent features.

Many of the 'Lisbon comedies' were huge blockbusters and, over the last 30 years, they have enjoyed a new lease of life through repeated broadcasting and home video releases that stretches as far as the present time. This renewed interest took place when Portuguese cinema had reached its lowest point in audience appeal, and contributed decisively to the argument that there could be such a thing as a 'popular Portuguese cinema'. The argument benefited from hindsight and must also be considered as just one of the many forms of mockery targeting contemporary Portuguese cinema, derided as too cerebral and elitist, during the 1980s and 1990s. How *revanchiste* as it might have been, this retrospective validation of 'Lisbon comedies' is still disappointing if one considers that it was already under a democratic regime that such conservative films (both socially and politically) earned such a consensual status in common sense and taste. One of the greatest ironies in the history of Portuguese cinema must be that in spite of the fact that many of the 'Lisbon comedies' were surely much more effective ideologically than the few propaganda films the authoritarian regime produced, they could not be further from what the director of the national propaganda office had in mind when he was thinking about 'Portuguese cinema'. The quotation is well known: for António Ferro, the comedies of the 1930s and 1940s were the 'cancer of national cinema' (Ferro). What the regime wanted, as well as many modernist cinephiles and intellectuals, were more literary adaptations and historical films that could be used to both promote film as an art, and the country as a modern nation in international film festivals. To support this kind of productions, in 1948 the regime would create the first public system of film funding. The Fundo Nacional do Cinema, or National Cinema Fund, was to be financed by exhibition profits, and was therefore extremely sensitive to the market's fluctuations as it taxed new releases. Because it was designed as an integrated solution to the progressive decadence of Portuguese cinema during the late 1940s and 1950s, the 'Fund' gave away several grants for Portuguese filmmakers who wanted to study abroad, and it also created a Portuguese Film Archive, intended to advance the knowledge of the

history of Portuguese cinema, therefore stimulating the taste for Portuguese films. Consequently, between the 1930s and the 1950s, two main trends co-existed in the inventory of ideas, themes and forms that were to shape Portuguese cinema. On the one hand, there were the popular comedies based on a star system imported from the Lisbon vaudeville theatre, the 'revista', and from popular music. António Lopes Ribeiro, the regime's unofficial producer/director, was responsible for many of those films, of which *O Pátio das Cantigas* (1942) is one of the finest examples. On the other hand, there were the prestige historical-literary films, encouraged, sometimes funded, and always thoroughly promoted by the regime, in which Leitão de Barros specialized and that had its prototype in *Camões* (1946).

The vitality of both these trends collapsed during the 1950s when the genres of previous decades originated increasingly formulaic, technically incompetent, and artistically mediocre films (Pina 121-124). Older directors stopped filming or did so only sporadically, anticipating the beginning of the generational transition that would take place during the 1960s. Films about the fado and other national themes, deemed to offer some sense of a shared collective identity, were manifold – apart from fado, there was an increase in films about bullfighting, soccer, and religion. Some musicals and melodramas based on the new singing celebrities made famous by the radio and television (after 1957) tried to include some references to the changes taking place within film audiences, and Portuguese society in general (developing youth culture, toddling consumerism, rural exodus, urban growth, massive emigration, and the colonial war). But the sloppy combination of old genre and plot solutions with technical novelties such as the use of colour and Cinemascope were the most obvious expression of just how superficial were the attempts made by filmmakers to adapt to the (moderate) change that Portuguese society's was undergoing in the 1950s and 1960s.

3. New cinema, old country?

In the early 1960s, the handful of films that over time came to be known as 'cinema novo' radically changed how Portuguese films were produced and directed. A group of younger filmmakers tried to escape both the traps of public funding and the market laws by securing, firstly, the support of producer António da Cunha Telles, and later that of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. 'Cinema novo' was less an organized movement than a group of people sharing a defiant attitude towards the previous Portuguese cinema, and particularly the films supported by the National Cinema Fund, scorned as the 'cinema do fundo', or the cinema that had reached the bottom.

Portuguese 'new cinema' set out to reform the 'national art cinema' of previous years, and so it presented audiences with new conceptions about film, but mostly with a reformulation of how the country should be portrayed on film. *Os Verdes Anos* (Paulo Rocha, 1963) and *Belarmino* (Fernando Lopes, 1964), the two films that inaugurated 'new cinema', organised their fresh views on both film and the country around the

representation of the city of Lisbon. Unlike the 'Lisbon comedies' of the 1930s and 1940s, or even the melodramas of the 1950s, the protagonists of these two films were not part of a solidary community. Rocha and Lopes' characters are outcasts the city has pushed towards a desperate position. In both films, Lisbon becomes the perfect metaphor of the social prison the regime was, as well as the stage of a social conflict that expresses itself on film by the ostensive segregation of the characters from the bourgeois city, depicted either by the busy streets of the commercial district of Baixa, or by the modern residential neighbourhoods near Roma and Estados Unidos da América avenues. It's no coincidence if the setting of both films' most decisive narrative moments is the street, used to contrast the loneliness of the socially unfit protagonists with the groups or anonymous crowds indifferent to their individual humiliations and frustrations.

Erudite, subtle and often very elliptical, these portraits of subjugated individuals were not what the Portuguese cine-club movement built during the 1950s upon the endorsement of Italian neo-realism had expected. Having studied abroad, and benefiting in many cases from the grants conceded by the National Cinema Fund, the cinema novo filmmakers had spent as much time in the film schools of Paris, London, or Rome, as inside Europe's best cinemathèques. Their films were therefore to be as aligned with the main aesthetic trends of their time, as with the history of film itself. To all the critics and audiences that expected from each new Portuguese film a re-edition of the popularity 'Lisbon comedies' had once generated, the 'cinophilia' of new cinema was a mortal sin.

'Orphans' of the National Fund Cinema, contested by the cine-club movement, and shunned by audiences, the new filmmakers adopted Manoel de Oliveira as their cardinal reference (Seabra 1989: 6). In Oliveira, younger directors found the example of a cinema made with eyes set on what was happening in foreign cinematographies, but that didn't turn its back on the cultural reality of the nation where it departed from. For many Portuguese filmmakers, and for a growing number of foreign directors, Oliveira embodied a radically modern cinema that conceded nothing to the formulae of entertainment cinema or to the genre conventions that caused the slow decadence of Portuguese cinema. The deliberate departure from the conventions of narrative cinema – or, as Luis de Pina put it, the willingness to shoot «not the artifice of reality, but the reality of the artifice» (Pina 166) – was at the core of Oliveira's modern conception of cinema, but it also was at the centre of its profound and lasting incomprehension by film audiences.

Taking up Manoel de Oliveira's seminal lead in *Acto da Primavera* (1962), 'cinema novo' filmmakers expected to rebuild the sombre relationship between Portuguese cinema and national audiences. But in spite of the renovation of the exhausted formulae and the condemnation of the 'false studio perfection' of previous films (and regardless of its only too modest adhesion to modern European cinema), 'cinema novo' failed to enrapture audiences with its social, but also very cinephile and elliptical, metaphors of Portuguese society. Another shortcoming of 'cinema novo'

was the way it clung to the concept of 'national cinema'. Portuguese films had definitely changed; but the will to correct the way the country and of Portuguese people had been represented in the national cinema of the previous decades meant the persistence of some fundamental issues. In other words, the country might have been depicted differently, but the fact that Portuguese (new) cinema should consider its main duty to portray the nation went unchallenged.

'Cinema novo' might not have reformed the 'national question' in Portuguese cinema more deeply because, in a sense, this question was a mere by-product of its main objectives. To unravel a different country was the most straightforward way to deny the studio clichés of the National Cinema Fund films, and the more immediate pretext to redefine cinema as an art form (and not an industry), filmmakers as authors (and not technicians), and the films themselves as cultural artefacts (and not entertainment commodities). Although this conception of cinema was the opposite of the one that had guided Portuguese cinema during the 1950s, the 'cinema novo' films had the same fate upon their release. Almost all the films produced by Cunha Telles turned out to be huge box-office flops, causing that production company to bankrupt shortly after it initiated its activity. Filmmakers blamed the massive distribution of foreign cinema in the country which, according to them, caused all domestic production projects to abort. The document some Portuguese filmmakers presented to the Gulbenkian Foundation in late 1967 pleading for its support in the funding of Portuguese cinema is a true manifesto about art cinema¹. The document also makes clear that, according to the filmmakers that signed it, cinema should for the most part focus on questions of national identity and culture. In fact, this was to become the main argument to defend why this cinema should be funded and protected from the market, where it would never be able to compete on its own against foreign entertainment cinema. Gulbenkian accepted the filmmakers' arguments and funded them through the Centro Português de Cinema, or Portuguese Centre of Cinema, created in 1969. A few years later, the same position was taken by the State after the passing of a new cinema law in 1971, which dissolved the old National Cinema Fund and created the Instituto Português de Cinema (IPC), or Portuguese Institute of Cinema. The inversion in the names of these institutions is not irrelevant, as it accurately translates a significant inversion in public policy on film production (Grilo). Formally, the cinema the IPC would fund no longer had to be *Portuguese* (as was mandatory under the National Cinema Fund), but only produced *in Portugal*. The public funding system was thus altered to tax more heavily foreign films distributed in the country: instead of taxing new releases, the State would now base its tax on the total number of tickets sold. This change allowed for a considerable increase in the amount of money available to fund individual Portuguese films, and at the expense of the profits of international cinema. In doing so, the State acknowledged that national cinema was not only an art form, but also cultural patrimony that needed to be preserved from the hegemonic power of foreign cinematographies.

¹ «O Ofício do Cinema em Portugal» was signed by fifteen 'new cinema' filmmakers. The document is reproduced in Costa 2007.

4. The revolutionary interlude

In April the 25th 1974, the Revolution that ended the forty-eight-year-long Portuguese dictatorship froze all the funding programmes of the IPC and set off a profound re-evaluation of the State's policies towards film (see Costa 2002 for an account of the period's troubled film policies). The revolutionary period that followed interrupted the authorial and artistic film practices of 'cinema novo' in the name of a more immediate, militant and political use of film. It didn't disturb, however, the will to amend the country's cinematographic image that 'cinema novo' had launched. Where the interruption was more manifest was in the way that 'April cinema' dedicated a more pressing attention to the present. Before pursuing the revelation of the 'real' country the authoritarian regime had 'folklorised' or simply dissimulated, it was necessary to shoot the ongoing Revolution and its protagonists: the people. Everything was filmed as if to document all the details of a period that everybody perceived as one of the most important events in recent Portuguese history. Film and filmmakers became witnesses of the Revolution, recording all its proceedings for the benefit of future generations, but also as a way to catalyse social and ideological transformations. The more militant films of the period used television to expand their potential audience, and hence their political effectiveness. These films took a general interest in the living and working conditions of both peasant and factory workers, in the population's poverty and illiteracy, and specifically in farm occupations, the agrarian reform process, the organisation of cooperatives and neighbourhood committees, and the institution of popular courts. But apart from this kind of cinema, much contaminated by television, journalism, and day-to-day party politics, there were some other films, made in the tradition of cinematographic and ethnographic documentaries, which focused on 'rediscovering' the rural world. The work of António Reis and Margarida Cordeiro is the most important example of this type of films, and both *Trás-os-Montes* (1976) and *Ana* (1982) played an archetypal role in their definition. The two films researched the mythic and ancestral origins of Portugal's identity as a rural country, stressing the importance of the agrarian area and populations of the region of Trás-os-Montes as the keepers of a millennial culture. If Trás-os-Montes became the 'ark of traditions' of Portuguese cinema, Alentejo was filmed as an anticipation of the country's future². The many films about farm occupations and the production cooperatives enumerated the advantages of an agrarian reform. Almost in the manner of a visual 'user's guide', all the difficulties and resistances seemed to be shown only to illustrate the path towards a society that everybody hoped would be more equitable.

This awareness on the rural world and the polarisation of its cinematographic representation – where the present was always manipulated in the name of the past, or the future – should make us downplay the idea that the revolutionary period was, as far as Portuguese cinema is concerned, a period of intense attentiveness to the present time. We should extend the same precaution to the films that relate more closely

² The treatment of both regions in this period's cinema is discussed in *Olhares sobre Portugal: Cinema e Antropologia*.

to the television formats. If it's true that they do display an 'almost excessive attachment to the present' (Seabra 1989: 9), it is also true that that attachment was undermined by the ideological content and the ready-made interpretations of the same films. Placing itself alongside the Revolution to better serve it, the 'April cinema' turned out to be a mere interlude in the renewal of Portuguese cinema initiated with 'cinema novo'. After the Revolution ended, and the IPC resumed its public funding programmes, the tradition of an authorial, cinephile and handcrafted Portuguese cinema was resumed, even if in an entirely reconfigured way.

5. Europe's distant cousin

By the 1980s, a growing number of Portuguese films that combined a modern language to a profound re-evaluation of what defined the country's national identity made its way into international film festivals and foreign film magazines, where they gained a mounting reputation, especially in France (Lemière 2002: 7-8). These films were to become instrumental in the coining of the label 'Portuguese school', soon to be applied to all Portuguese cinema. It was an abusive category as not all Portuguese films related to the 'Portuguese school' style and themes. In fact, during the same decade the notion emerged, Portuguese cinema witnessed the multiplication of films that were huge box-office hits. In 1981, José Fonseca e Costa's *Kilas, O Mau da Fita*, reached 120.000 patrons; three years later, António-Pedro Vasconcelos' *O Lugar do Morto* became the most seen Portuguese film of all times, surpassing 270.000 spectators, a box-office that was only very recently broken by *O Crime do Padre Amaro* (Carlos Coelho da Silva, 2005), with over 380.000 viewers³. As different as they might be, these films were probably the best confirmation of the triumph of the American entertainment model, as it not only dominated world markets, but also replicated itself in national 'franchises' of Hollywood-like cinema. The quality of defining themselves against the entertainment film models, and of resisting the hegemonic Hollywood film (and world) views were exactly the reasons why the 'Portuguese school' films were so appreciated abroad. The 'Portuguese school' was to be heralded like the pure modern expression of a national cinematography that had been spared the equalizing menace of entertainment cinema. Therefore, it was quite exemplary that one of the first films that thrust the 'Portuguese school' concept was *Trás-os-Montes*, a film whose peripheral status was twofold: it came not only from a country situated on the margins of Europe, but also from one of the most remote regions in Portugal. And just like Reis and Cordeiro saw the rural populations in their film as the keepers of the most ancient national traditions, so the French critics that praised *Trás-os-Montes* found Portuguese cinema to be a distant relative of modern European cinema – an extraordinary 'finding' because, according to those critics' belief, when it was 'discovered' in the 'periphery' of Europe, that cinema was already fading away in its 'centre'.

If the 'Portuguese school' films allowed Europe to discover Portugal, they also let Portugal discover itself as a European country. That

³ All the data about the Portuguese films box-office results was taken from the Instituto do Cinema e do Audiovisual website (<http://www.icam.pt>).

revelation, however, was as abrupt as it was traumatic. After the independence of the Portuguese colonies in Africa, Portugal was forced to re-invent itself as an exclusively European nation. But after almost 50 years of the regime's imperial propaganda, nothing seemed to connect Portugal's collective imaginary to its European neighbours, and even less to a 'European identity'. How could the country's past as a second-rate colonial power fit into Portugal's European future? And how should the Portuguese history and language, once the privileged tools of colonialist domination but still the most important link to the country's former African colonies, be dealt with? In 1985, Portugal's acceptance in the European Economic Community (EEC) was experienced as the initial step in becoming a developed European country. But first, Portugal was forced to confront the crude reality of its social, cultural, and economic irrelevance in the European context. EEC might have represented everything the country aspired to, but it also reminded him of the long way ahead. Portuguese cinema of the 1980s portrayed all the distress and despair these identity tensions caused. After a failed Revolution, and the dismay caused by the petty parliamentary regime that followed, films associated with the 'Portuguese school' expressed the filmmakers ambivalent feelings towards a country they loved and felt they belonged to, but that at the same time suffocated them and to which they often felt they could not relate to. 'Portuguese school' films mourned a country that wanted to be something else, but found itself restricted to what it was (Seabra 1989: 1; 10-12).

Films about individuals feeling out of place within their families, workplace or community were therefore frequent during the 1980s. Some recurrent figures like the exiled, the emigrant, or the orphan, vented the filmmakers views on the origins and essence of a national psychology that was to be blamed by the country's mediocrity. Films like *A Ilha dos Amores* (Paulo Rocha, 1982), *Um Adeus Português* (João Botelho, 1985), *Matar Saudades* (Fernando Lopes, 1987) or *Recordações da Casa Amarela* (João César Monteiro, 1989) excelled in the attempt to portray what the filmmakers believed was so specific of the Portuguese character. João Botelho's films of this period, in particular, represent the quintessence of this commiseration over the nation's failings. *Um Adeus Português* was the first Portuguese film to openly address the colonial war. And it was in the 'natural' tendency to repress that event's traumatic memories that the director found the way to express the epitome of the melancholic feeling the 'Portuguese school' identified the country with. A feeling that had been so eloquently encapsulated in the Alexandre O'Neill verses that opened *Um Adeus Português* and from which the film had taken its title: «this petty Portuguese pain / so tame, almost vegetable».

In a sense, 'Portuguese school' films continued the reformed national cinema that cinema novo filmmakers had launched. Like in the previous two decades, the 1980s films repeatedly presented audiences with important reconfigurations of the country's collective imaginary, and used an increasingly modern language to do so. In that way, Portuguese cinema faced a double risk of 'ghettoization'. This risk was clear, on the one hand, in the domestic front. Seldomly released in commercial theatres, highly

depreciated by audiences, and forced to be compared to the relative box-office hits of some Portuguese entertainment cinema, 'Portuguese school' films steadily distanced themselves from mainstream commercial cinema. This was an expression of their militant dissidence, but it was interpreted by audiences as a form of contempt for the Portuguese taxpayers who had financed those films in the first place – or so were audiences led to believe by influential intellectuals and opinion-makers. On the other hand, the 'ghettoization' risk was also clear in the international context. The foreign film critics, festivals and magazines that continually incensed 'Portuguese films' met with the State's gamble (via IPC) on a 'national art cinema' that was expected to 'brand' the country's culture abroad. The combination of these two factors threatened to reduce 'Portuguese school' into some genre formulae, and what's more it tempted much of Portuguese film production into that genre. The ensuing confusion between 'Portuguese school' films and Portuguese cinema *tout court* became 'self-evident' to an alarming degree. Could it be that 'Portuguese school' was nothing but a modern re-edition of the 'folklorisation' that characterised Portuguese cinema made before the

1960s? And, more importantly, was this new exoticism based on the self-depreciation of national identity and a modern understanding of cinema, the proof that all films produced in Portugal were forever destined to envision themselves as 'national cinema'?

6. Other countries

In the mid-1990s, a new generation of filmmakers was to focus on their present time and to flood Portuguese cinema with realism. Only a handful of films before that had attached themselves so radically to their own time. And even less had proven so indifferent to the reasoning of what defined 'Portugalness'. All in all, few Portuguese films had plunged so deeply into the country and, at the same time, few had detached so much from it. This apparent paradox is explained by the interest taken by filmmakers like Teresa Villaverde, João Canijo, João Pedro Rodrigues or Pedro Costa – to name but the youngest and the most diverse – in themes, people and places previously unexplored in Portuguese cinema. Portuguese films from that decade onwards chose for their protagonists young criminals, teenage mothers or illegal immigrants, and their plots revolved around issues like poverty, sickness, unemployment, domestic violence, people trafficking, prostitution, and drug abuse. What is original about these films is not their choice of social issues that were, in themselves, relatively recent to Portuguese society in the 1990s or that only then were starting to gain a more persistent attention from the media. What these films accomplished for the first time in the history of Portuguese cinema was to react very rapidly to what was happening before the filmmakers' eyes, as opposed to what might or might not be specific of Portuguese national culture. In any case, most of those issues were far from afflicting Portuguese society alone and only served to confuse traditional concepts of Portuguese nationality and cultural identity. Who, after all, were 'the Portuguese'? And who were all 'the others'? And why should cinema only portray issues that solely (or mainly) affected 'the Portuguese'?

There was a good reason why these questions had always escaped Portuguese cinema: because they would expose just how artificially the country's national specificity had been defined. If Portuguese cinema was to accommodate the issues these questions raised, Portugal would seem a country just like any other, or at least a country with the same problems that all the other countries had to deal with. For those who had argued for a national cinema that was any other European's country equal, the Portuguese films of the 1990s represented a bitter accomplishment. Portugal's 'entry' in Europe had not been dreamt of in that way, with those films and through those themes. By the late 1990s, many Portuguese films were portraying a country that had rarely been represented in such a crude manner and that dangerously approached the 'social intervention cinema' most Portuguese filmmakers – and especially the 'cinema novo' generation – had always rejected. But these films were precisely what in the Portuguese culture of the 1990s most integrated the country in a global world where frontiers no longer confined what could now be shared from everywhere and at the same time (Monteiro 2004: 67-69). The characters of these films lived, worked, suffered, loved, and died as individuals, and not as Portuguese national citizens. By humanising the individual dilemmas of their characters, these films had become universal. It then seems that it was only when Portuguese films plunged into the present and discovered how much of it was not distinctively Portuguese (and indeed a lot of it wasn't), that they managed to escape for the first time from the traps of a 'national cinema'.

The predisposition these films displayed to meet the 'other' and the present time was contemporary of the greatest boom in documentary production in the history of Portuguese filmmaking (Costa 2004). This boom was related not only to the latest technological developments in digital video shooting and editing equipment, but also to the new public funding programmes dedicated exclusively to documentary film that were started in the early 1990s. A cheaper and easier to use medium than film, digital video meant for many documentary filmmakers the 'luxury of time'⁴ that they needed to film for longer periods, but for less money. The new medium offered the ideal conditions for the documentary filmmakers wishing to immerse fully in the most intimate daily life of the people they were filming. Escaping both television's sensationalist 'life stories' and the overtly militant cinema of the Revolution period, Portuguese documentary filmmaking of the 1990s' paramount concern was to restore the genre's cinematographic tradition. In doing so, documentaries became the vanguard of the cinematographic rediscovery of a country that, in spite of having had the obsessive attention of Portuguese cinema for decades, had nevertheless remained 'absent' of Portuguese films. The 1990s thus exposed Portuguese cinema's central contradiction: the harder it had looked for the country's most distinctive features, the less it had filmed the 'real' country, setting out in ever more historical and existentialist expeditions about Portuguese identity and therefore ignoring its contemporary surroundings. Taking Paulo Filipe Monteiro's argument one

⁴ The expression was used by Pedro Costa; quoted in Lemière (2006: 761-2)

step further, one might say that so much cinema about too much country ended up meaning a cinema about no (real) country at all (Monteiro 2006).

Pedro Costa is the filmmaker that best represents this recent tendency in Portuguese cinema, and the author of the Portuguese films that have achieved the greatest domestic and international recognition. It is no accident if the work of this tendency's most significant filmmaker intersects both documentary and traditional fiction cinema. After *Ossos* (1997), his last fictional and professionally shot film, Costa started working with digital video and small crews, sometimes alone, in Fontainhas, a slum district in Lisbon. This change happened once the filmmaker realized that not only the purely fictional formats, but also the grandeur of a complete professional film crew were utterly inadequate to accurately portray Fontainhas, usually depicted as a troublesome district in both the media and political discourse. Over the years, Costa's films shot in Fontainhas turned to its inhabitants, mostly immigrants from the former Portuguese colony of Cape Verde, as a starting point to building characters and narrative plots later fictionalised by the filmmaker himself. Already in *Ossos*, but again in *No Quarto da Vanda* (1999) and in the more recent *Juventude em Marcha* (2006), Fontainhas proper became something like a collective character, commanding all the connections, imaginary or real, between actors and their characters, as well as the nature and the timing of everybody's particular narrative involvement.

Juventude em Marcha is the Pedro Costa film in which the role of the Fontainhas district is the furthest developed. The film is a fragmentary biography of Ventura, a real dweller of Fontainhas whose character is envisaged as a kind of imaginary patriarch of the whole district. His biography takes the form, on the one hand, of several visits to his 'sons' and, on the other hand, of a series of flash-backs into Ventura's life since he immigrated from Cape Verde to Portugal, 30 years ago. The flash-back that shows how Ventura and his construction co-workers lived the 1974 Revolution gives us an upsetting alternative image of a key moment in Portuguese contemporary history. Instead of taking part in that day's collective euphoria (or in what is remembered as such), they barricaded inside the shed of the construction site where they both worked and lived in, terrorised by the rumours of black people persecutions. Their behaviour is a clear reminder that not everybody felt included in that 'collective' moment. This scene brings to the foreground an idea that has always been present in Pedro Costa's films shot on Fontainhas, as well as in the work of several other filmmakers of the 1990s: the way we imagine ourselves as a nation is entirely out of step with reality. And also that the hegemonic conceptions about what 'our' country is (or is not) excludes very silently – but also very effectively – several people, memories and experiences of what constitutes life, work, and leisure in Portugal. This is not a minor reason to consider Pedro Costa's films, and *Juventude em Marcha* in particular, as marking the death of Portuguese cinema as a cinematography obsessed with its 'nationalness'.

However, some of the more bitter reactions to Costa's films (and to other filmmakers of the 1990s) confirm, and at the same time contradict

that death sentence. Several right-wing intellectuals violently attacked this cinema of ‘lice’, ‘junkies’, and ‘indigent’ (Lemière 2006: 758-9). To many columnists and opinion-makers of the late 1990s, it was nothing less than ‘immoral’ that the State should fund films that not only didn’t appeal to Portuguese audiences (as in fact they didn’t), but that would also ruin the country’s image abroad. We are already familiar with this conception of cinema as the ambassador of Portuguese culture, determined to denounce the public-funding ‘dependency’ of Portuguese films (and going so far as to establish low grade comparisons between the drug dependency portrayed in those films and their filmmakers ‘dependency’ on public funds⁵). If anything, these attacks proved that some films had indeed started to question the ‘Portugalness’ of Portuguese cinema. But at the same time, these attacks also show that from the point of view of some intellectuals, critics, and opinion-makers, Portuguese films were still expected to conform to the idea of a national cinema. Or so the demand for ‘quality’, ‘decency’, and ‘relevancy’ for the Portuguese cultural identity cinema seemed to indicate.

Dead as the capital ambition of Portuguese filmmakers, alive in the expectations of public opinion and some critics, *Portuguese cinema* is currently undergoing one of the most important limbos in its history. *Portuguese films*, on the other hand, remain as lively, as resistant and as dissident, for better or for worse, as they have been over the last 40 years⁶.

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⁵ Miguel Sousa Tavares and Vasco Graça Moura distinguished themselves in this type of remarks. For detailed quotes, see Lemière (2006: 758-9)

⁶ I am thankful for Miguel Cardoso’s remarks on a previous version of this text.

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