

LETTER JOÃO LOPES ON PORTUGUESE CINEMA

ARTFORUM

FEBRUARY 1997

VITAL SIGNS

IF THE NUMBER of films released in the last year and a half are any indication, Portuguese cinema has at last achieved something of a presence. Recent releases include Manoel de Oliveira's twisted tale of scholarly and romantic obsessions, *O Convento* (The convent, 1995), shown at the 1995 New York Film Festival; João Cesar Monteiro's quirky narrative of a solitary man, his collection of young girls' pubic hair, and the ice-cream flavor he invents, *A Comédia de Deus* (God's comedy, 1995), awarded the special jury prize at the 1995 Venice film festival; and António da Cunha Telles' new take on the old love-triangle theme, *Pandora*, 1995.

With the sheer variety of works on view in theaters last year, any notion of a cinema reflecting "national" ideals and divorced from the exigencies of the market was finally laid to rest, while aesthetic, thematic, and stylistic differences became essential to Portuguese film's vitality. Suddenly, there was something of everything, from the parable of knowledge that was *O Convento* to novelistic treatments of historico-political situations, including a coming-of-age story set

during Salazar's dictatorship as the Spanish Civil War erupts across the border (Luís Filipe Rocha's *Sinais de Fogo* [Signs of fire, 1995]) and a haunting tale of two lovers shadowed by Portugal's colonial past (Alberto Seixas Santos' *Paraíso Perdido* [Paradise lost, 1995]).

When viewed within the context of an industry traditionally financed by the state but lacking stable distribution or much audience support, two recent films *Adão e Eva* (Adam and Eve, 1995) and *Corte de Cabelo* (Haircut, 1995), offered signs of Portuguese cinema's future. Joaquim Leitão's *Adão e Eva* recounts the misadventures of a lesbian newscaster, searching for a man to father her child, a TV-movie-of-the-week plot that serves mainly as an excuse to zoom in behind the scenes of the commercial television station where she works. Produced with the participation of the private Portuguese channel SIC, *Adão e Eva* was, from the very first stages of production up to its commercial release, a telecinematographic phenomenon. (It was also one of the biggest box-office hits in the

history of Portuguese cinema.) Even if the formal merits of *Adão e Eva* are questionable, there's no doubt it opened the door for new collaborations, on both the creative and financial plane, between cinema and private television stations—partnerships that (along with the continued support of the state-owned channel RTP) may represent Portuguese cinema's economic future.

Much more stimulating on both a narrative and aesthetic level, *Corte de Cabelo* was, predictably enough, less financially but more critically successful. The first feature-length effort of thirty-two-year-old filmmaker Joaquim Sapinho, *Corte de Cabelo* begins quite simply. One step away from the altar, eighteen-year-old Rita impulsively cuts off her long dark hair, to which her fiancé Paulo is deeply attached. What follows reads as a vibrant meditation on youth culture and modern love, strikingly free of stereotypes and sentiment, in a formal language culled from advertising and videoclips.

Of course, neither *Corte de Cabelo* nor any one of the movies I've mentioned can be held up as the solution to the artistic or commercial problems that beset

Portuguese cinema. But at least they show that what's at stake is no longer finding a single model, but rather recognizing that cinematic production should be as manifold as the society from which it springs. □

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Translated from the Portuguese by Sheila Glaser.



Joaquim Sapinho, *Corte de Cabelo* (Haircut), 1995, from a color film in 35 mm, 91 minutes. Rita (Carla Boitso) Paulo (Marco Delgado).