

Seeing films: audiences reaction to local cultural products*

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Abstract.

This paper discusses the results of a large survey conducted in 2006 on the perception Portuguese movies' audiences have of their own locally produced films. Audience's reception of locally produced films is marked by the rejection of the consumption of these objects as a result of a bias against locally produced cultural artefacts. The prejudice shaping this relationship, not only demands for new cultural and social politics, but also raises a number of questions on local and European media industry's ability to cope with its own audiences' expectations. Finally, broader considerations are made on the different ways contemporary audiences are shaping media technologies, and their respective cultural artefacts, through their own use and reception of those technologies and artefacts.

Introduction

Audience studies have evolved in the past decades, and the assumption of a passive audience ready to consume any and all products the media industry delivers is no longer acceptable (Schroder, Drotner, Kline, Murray, 2003). Some understand the changes contemporary audiences are going through partly as a consequence of the changes in the media technology itself. Changes in the number and nature of the communication channel allow audiences to move from a mass-communication model onto a more personalised¹ communication model, with users having an even more decisive role in deciding what media content to use and when to use it ((McQuail, 2000; Wilson, 2004). Other authors are not so focused on the communication channel, and associate most of the changes we

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witness with the increase in the amount of information being produced and put to circulation, namely in western countries (Ross & Nightingale, 2003).

Whatever the case, the fact remains that, in recent years, quantitative changes can be detected in audience's consumption patterns for specific media, namely cinema, and that qualitative change seems to be associated with this fact, to be precise in what refers to social forms of reception and cultural expectations depicted by audiences. Changes in media use, like the substitution of one media by another in what refers to content consumption (e.g. films), also seem to have a larger role to play in this process.

By stating this initial assumption, we do not want to assert that there is a simple cause-effect relation between the variation in the total number of users for a specific media and their expectations regarding that same media. Media message's and level of exposure, in films, like in most other cases, is not alone responsible for the qualitative and quantitative behaviour audiences depict. Social and cultural factors enforming audience's behaviour and their attitudes towards media technology and content also have an important role to perform in this process.

This worked started with the acknowledgement of two facts: first there is a general drop in the total amount of movie goers in Portugal¹ (see table 1), a trend that follows the figures we witness in other European countries. Secondly, besides this general drop in the number of people watching movies in theatres, there is in Portugal's specific case consistently low audiences for locally produced films².

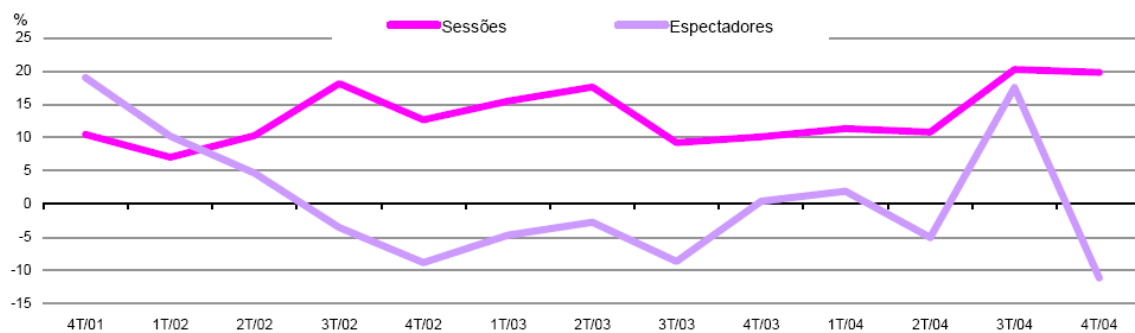


Table 1 – Relation between screen sessions and cinema spectators in Portugal between 2001 and 2004 (source: INE)

This second fact does not follow any clear European tendency, since in a time of globalisation, locally produced content has an increasingly strong presence in all

European countries, with locally produced content ruling over most European television primetime, and European Cinema attaining better figures every year.

Despite this, film has always presented particular constraints, namely considering the importance American production has in this arena. The debate around the sustainability of a European film industry is an old one and several aspects have shaped this debate. Some of the main trends that do emerge when we discuss European films (Bensi, 2005) are: **The considerable variation in admissions for European films**, recorded on average over the past eight years, which proves to be clearly higher than the variation for US films, and **the low correlation between the trend in admissions for European films and that for overall admissions** on all the Western European markets on which the average admissions for European films are highest. **The high concentration of ticket sales for European films on a handful of titles. The widely varying extents to which domestic films manage to draw audiences abroad.** The European films most widely distributed in Europe are UK productions. The top ten most widely viewed domestic films on the UK market in 2004 drew 60% of their total admissions outside their country of origin. British films are gaining growing market shares especially in Western Europe; for example in France (with 59.1% of overall admissions for European films), Spain (54.2%) and the Netherlands (53.9%). The impact of French films is still strong, and they were most viewed in Luxembourg in 2004 (with 58.6% of overall admissions for European films), Italy (48.7%), the UK and Ireland (38.7%), Finland (36.1%) and Denmark (22.5%). German films come in third place, in terms of ticket sales, in France, Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Latvia, although with a percentage of admissions that is often far lower than that of French and British films. Over the past few years, the distribution of Spanish films has increased, with significantly higher percentages in 2002/2003: 24.2% in France, 21.0% in the United Kingdom together with Ireland. **The time lag of the release dates on the different European markets.**

Portuguese cinematography also follows some of these trends, namely in what refers to the time lag on release dates, but since the mid-nineties no title has managed to attract more than a handful of audiences – 2005 was an exception to this with one single film

making 50% of the overall entries³. A large number of reasons are usually presented to explain this situation, but no single study had ever been conducted on the issue.

While the general drop in film theatres audiences seems to be associated with a phenomenon by which audiences replace one medium by other, though consuming the same content – films – but in different platforms (e.g. the internet), this specific low consumption of locally produced films seems harder to explain.

Our study's main goal was to explain the reasons behind Portuguese audience's particular behaviour. On one side, we wanted to understand what kept Portuguese moviegoers away from their own cinematography and check if there was an associated low level of satisfaction towards Portuguese films. On the other side, we wanted to identify the main expectations people had in relation with films and the reasons sustaining their decision to go and watch a particular film and not other, namely a local one. This project was part of a larger study of Portuguese audience's behaviour towards different media and the identification of possible cultural variables that shaped those attitudes and behaviours.

Method and Results

In the scope of the project MAU-MEDIA – *User modelling and viewing clusters*⁴ a survey was conducted on Portuguese cinema audiences' perceptions and expectations towards their own filmic production.

In the first stage of this study, a qualitative exploratory approach was followed (Webster, Phalen & Litchy, 2000). Several focus groups were conducted in order to clearly define the problem and establish a pattern of perception Portuguese audiences had towards their own films and the expectations they had in relation with the themes, production values and general aesthetics qualities these films should have. Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 46 participants (22 men and 24 women). Three of the focus group sessions were conducted in Lisbon and one in Oporto. All sessions were recorded and the findings included in the draft of the subsequent conclusive stage of the study.

During the focus group sessions, participants were inquired on their habits, expectations and perceptions towards films, namely locally produced ones. All participants in these sessions regarded going to the cinema has a form of entertainment. The cast, themes and genre were identified as the main variables determining the decision on the film to watch. Most of the participants in these sessions declared they did not go to see a

Portuguese film because the stories narrated and the themes approached are depressive or monotonous. Other factors influencing the public's decision is the low production values showed by the films and a general perception that the films are highly "intellectual", apparently being written and shot with a reduced elite group of people in mind. Since promotion effort is also regarded as poor, going to see a Portuguese film is regarded as a risk. Not only there's a financial factor involved (the medium cost for a theatre ticket in Portugal is 4,8 €) but also the lack of promotion and the tight scope of the films contributes to very little curiosity on the public side.

In the second stage of the project (Webster, Phalen & Litchy, 2000) a conclusive descriptive survey was conducted and quantitative data gathered on Portuguese film audience's perceptions and expectations towards local filmic production.

The questionnaire that was used dealt with four areas: gathering of demographic info; evaluation of viewing habits and relation between content and media platform; satisfaction evaluation and motivational suggestions. The satisfaction questionnaire involved technical aspects (e.g. sound quality) and dramatic elements (e.g. is the story well told).

A random probabilistic technique was followed to establish a sample of 1,878 individuals representing the approximate 40,000 that go every week to a movie theatre in Portugal. For the purpose of this study, it was considered that this group was representative of the larger population consuming films in the country. We decided to focus our study in a specific platform (the movie theatre), since this made it easier to isolate a specific population. Final results show that the findings of this study can, to a certain extent, be extrapolated for other platforms, but still this constraint has to be taken into account. This platform focus was partly annulated by the fact that the only criterion followed to include an individual in the sample was the fact that the individual "regularly watches films".

The questionnaires were passed through face-to-face interviews mostly conducted in the surroundings of film theatres (82,9%) but also through computer assisted telephone interviews (12,1%) and mail survey via internet (5,1%). The sample population was segmented using market⁵ variables. Though, the sample had between 1500 and 2000 individuals (representation figure for the Portuguese population exposed to media messages through television), the survey was conducted in the entire country including

the islands in even proportions with the number of cinema spectators in those regions, age distribution followed the same intervals as for total population, all levels of education were considered on the same proportion as for total population and genres distribution was equal. No economic criterion was followed considering that having access to the medium (e.g. watching films) was the only criterion on a social-economical level.

The majority of the individuals in the study (64,5%) declared going to the cinema at least once a month (see table 2) but the large majority sees a Portuguese film less than once a month (60,8%) or even never sees one (24,2%).

Frequency of cinema sessions attended		
	Frequency	%
< 1 month	679	36.5
1 month	521	28
Every 15 days	354	19
1 a week	220	11.8
> 1 a week	86	4.6
Total	1860	100
Missing = 18		

Table 2 – Frequency of cinema sessions attended by the sample

Following these figures, the number of respondents claiming to prefer local production over foreigner production is less than 7%. If we cross the values in tables 3 and 4 with those on tables 5 and 6 referring to genre preferences, we detect one first variable influencing the public decision: the themes and genres covered by the film. Since most of the films produced in Portugal after the 1974 revolution mostly followed a film *d'auter* approach and were highly focused on a very strong critic of local society and its most depressive aspects (Luz, 1978) – a current that came to be known as *miserabilism* – this created in the eyes of the public an association between Portuguese films and a certain type of cultural representation.

How often do you see Portuguese films?		
	Frequency	%
Never	445	24.2
< 1 a month	1119	60.8
1 a month	217	11.8
every 15 days	39	2.1
1 a week	18	.9
> 1 a week	3	.2
Total	1841	100
Missing = 37		

Table 3 – Frequency of Portuguese films attended by the sample

Preferences Portuguese or foreign films?		
	Frequency	%
Portuguese	120	6.7
Foreigner	1665	93.3
Total	1785	100
Missing = 93		

Table 4 – Sample preferences by origin

Preferences by genre		
	Frequency	%
Action	918	49
Romance	522	27.9
<i>Suspense</i>	678	36.2
Drama	388	20.7
Terror	454	24.2
Comedy	1003	53.6
Independent	341	18.2
Other	138	7.4
Animation	37	2.0
Biographics	3	.2
Documentaries	9	.5
Epichal	10	.5
Erotic	2	.1
Science Fiction	38	2.0
Fantasy	4	.2
War	2	.1
Police	7	.4
Porno	7	.4
Psychological	3	.2
<i>Surf</i>	2	.1
<i>Thriller</i>	10	.5
Adventure	4	.2

Table 5 – Preferences by genre

When we look at the genres audiences claim to prefer, comedy (53, 6%) and action (49%) are clearly the most to preferred genres⁶. If we compare these figures with the production genres along Portuguese filmmaking history, we see that the two main periods of success for locally produced films, are the forties, characterised by a large investment in comedy production, and the eighties, when a large number of action films were produced (Silva, 2003).

Having establish one of the factors affecting the audience decision, we tried to verify if while replacing the viewing of films in theatres by home viewing of cinema, for instance on DVD, audiences were being influenced by this fact in any manner on what concerns the film origin. Data from table 6 shows that platform decision has no relation with content decision. This fact proves that deterministic public policies that try to influence the public through platform manipulation (e.g. making large bulks of content available on the internet) have no direct influence on the audience. It's the nature of the content and the social and cultural values it embodies that define audience behaviour.

Where did you saw your last Portuguese film?		
	Frequency	%
Cannot remember	418	23.3
General Tv Channel	565	31.5
Cable/satellite TV	19	1.1
Cinema	585	32.6
DVD/other	206	11.5
Total	1793	100
<i>Missing = 85</i>		

Table 6 – Platform identification

Table 7 presents the respondent's answers when explicitly asked on the factors influencing their possible decision to watch a Portuguese film. Story, cast and promotion are the most referred factors. The identification of these three elements points to an association between the cultural object and the social representations it transmits. Story

points to the realities people want to see on screen – the results show that audiences do not want to see their own lives and daily realities depicted, but more fantasised ones. Cast points to the importance of social role models. Finally, promotion points to the decision making process and the fact that watching a Portuguese film is regarded as a great risk. People want to have the maximum info before making the decision.

What makes you decide to watch a Portuguese Film?		
	Frequency	%
Nothing, i do not see Portuguese films	265	14.2
The director	238	12.7
The cast	539	28.7
The story/plot	939	50.1
Promotion	486	25.9
TV	200	11.3
<i>Trailer</i>	244	13.7
<i>Web</i>	45	2.5
Press	72	4.1
Being a Portuguese film	275	14.7
Mouth-to-mouth	344	18.3

Table 7 – factors influencing decision

Having to a certain extent establish the factors influencing the public’s decision and their viewing habits, we then moved on to verify the levels of satisfaction presented by the audiences. For the purpose of this paper we’ll only present the results for three specific aspects – story, cast and technical aspects – and then the general values. The main aspect aroused by all these figures is that in general there is not a feeling of like or dislike towards Portuguese films. Audiences are neutral, either because they do not know the films or because they have no importance for them.

Satisfaction – Story/Plot		
	Frequency	%
Nothing	147	8.1
Very little	453	24.8
Fair	827	45.3
Satisfied	363	19.9
Very satisfied	36	2.0
Total	1826	100
Missing = 52		

Table 8 – Satisfaction: story/plot

Satisfaction – technical aspects		
	Frequency	%
nothing	159	8.8
Very little	429	23.7
fair	828	45.8
satisfied	322	18.4
Very satisfied	61	3.4
Total	1809	100
Missing = 69		

Table 9 – Satisfaction: technical aspects

Satisfaction - Cast		
	Frequency	%
nothing	91	5
Very little	264	14.5
fair	788	43.4
satisfied	559	30.8
Very satisfied	114	6.3
Total	1816	100
Missing = 62		

Table 10 – Satisfaction: Cast

Satisfaction levels were established using a five intervals lickert scale. The different satisfaction gradients were distributed in the following manner:

0-20%: nothing – no satisfaction;

21-40%: very little satisfaction;

41-60%: fair – neither satisfied neither unsatisfied;

61-80%: satisfaction

81-100%: very satisfied.

In terms of general satisfaction, the sample showed a value of **58.2%**, what corresponds to a neutral attitude towards locally produced films (people are neither happy nor unhappy with their own cultural production). Table 11 illustrates this fact and presents the results divided by sexual genre of the respondents.

	Men		Women		U
	M	DP	M	DP	
Total Satisfaction	48.50 (57%)	10.56	50.42 (59.3%)	11.52	368310.00***
Story	14.18 (56.7%)	3.59	14.76 (59%)	3.67	377029.00***
Technical	5.24 (52.4%)	1.61	5.38 (53.8%)	1.58	365939.00*
Cast	29.22 (58.4%)	6.46	30.70 (61.4%)	6.99	356137.50***

Note. M= average; DP= standard deviation; U= Mann-Whitney test;

*** $p \leq .001$; * $p \leq .05$.

Figure 11 – general Satisfaction by genre

Following this neutral attitude, the large majority of the sample made no motivational suggestions to improve local films. The ones that made a number of suggestions all ended up going back to the same aspects – stories, casts, promotion – that were already detected as the main factors influencing the audience decision.

Changes you would like to see in Portuguese Films		
	Frequência	%
Technical quality	718	38.2
Dialogues	1253	66.7
Cast	941	50.1
Promotion	968	51.5
Main actors	335	17.8

Table 12 – Motivational suggestions

Discussion and conclusions

The low level of Cinema spectatorship in Portugal for locally produced films is grounded in two aspects: first there is a general lack of trust towards the cultural object. Portuguese films are perceived as not having much quality so representing a great risk in terms of time and money spent. Since the motives and expectations that guide film audiences are not in their view fulfilled by local production, people then decide to consume foreigner content that has a higher possibility of satisfying their desires.

Secondly, the low level of identification audiences has with the cultural artefact in general. Portuguese cultural artefacts are perceived as being targeted to an elite, not being produced accordingly to the large majority wishes and expectations.

These two aspects illustrate a general variable influencing contemporary audiences' behaviour. On one side, the medium's message, in this case the themes and casts presented by films, is used by the audiences to justify their attitudes towards an object. But on the other side, it is the social consequences of using the medium (Livingstone, 2002) that shape users attitudes towards content.

From what has been said we can deduct that the particular case of Portuguese audiences attitude towards locally produced films actually represents a much broader trend in media use whereby socially shared conceptions on the consequences of media use shape users attitudes and beliefs and ultimately the technology itself.

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¹ According to the INE (Portuguese National Statistics Institute) the number of film spectators has dropped consistently in the past few years, namely by 11,1% in 2003, 8,8% in 2004 and 15,1% in 2005. This drop in the number of viewers has been accompanied by a general drop in revenue. www.ine.pt

² Portuguese Film Institute (ICAM) data shows that differently for other European countries, Portuguese films are not able to gain internal public by more than for instance 2% in 2004 and 3,5% in 2005 when comparing with figures between 15% (Sweden) and 45% (France) in most European countries. www.icam.pt

³ “O Crime do Padre Amaro” with a total of 350.000 spectators

⁴ This study was conducted between July 2005 and April 2006 with the support of ICAM (the Portuguese Film Institute) and FCT- The National Foundation for Science and Technology

⁵ Marktest is the main audiences rating analysis company in Portugal and their media market segmentation structure is available on-line in www.marktest.pt

⁶ We cannot claim that the majority of the sample prefers this or that genre since each one of the respondents could answer more than one option. The percentages presented in table 6 represent the number of times a certain genre was referred.