

## ENSAIOS



### Reflections on the way film projects are developed in Portugal

**Paulo Leite**

*In abstract: this text is a brief analysis on four major flaws in the Portuguese film industry that come from an outdated and ineffective culture and way of developing ideas into screenplays that are ready to produce. Without a hard look at these weaknesses, we will never achieve a good degree of international success with our most ambitious films.*

Over the past few years, I have been helping British producers evaluate material they have acquired and develop them into finished screenplays. Such material – which can be compared to the idea of “raw material” – comes in many forms: synopsis written by screenwriters based on ideas from the producer (or other sources whose rights they purchased), synopsis written by screenwriters based on their own original ideas, treatments and first drafts that fall into any of the previous categories. In other words, it all comes according the state of things and from whom it comes from.

The delicate nature of such a job along with contractual obligations prevent me from naming and discussing actual projects – and this tells a lot about the utmost importance producers abroad attribute to the development of a certain raw material into a property (i.e. screenplay) that can generate millions of Euros or cause a company to dissolve.

In such context, it is fair to assume that not only the development of a screenplay is regarded as crucial; but also, all the future steps of the moviemaking process come into consideration and have some degree of impact on the way this fundamental part of the film gets created, developed and written.

And that way of thinking differs greatly from the one responsible for guiding the development of most Portuguese films that have opened in recent years. That difference can be summed up in

four basic conclusions that weaken the Portuguese film industry today.

## **1 – A wrong reading of the international market**

The international film market is still ruled by that old phrase written by William Goldman that says “*nobody knows anything*”. But the real meaning of this phrase has changed according to times. Once it meant that nothing is guaranteed to succeed. Today it simply means that everybody is looking for the next big hit. It’s not that the first meaning isn’t valid anymore, it just got a further development: nothing is guaranteed to succeed and everybody is looking for the next big hit – a hit nobody can predict. One can argue that the idea is roughly the same but, there’s an obvious proactive shift when we move the emphasis from uncertainty into a search.

The reason for this shift comes from the state of the market itself: every two weeks there’s a blockbuster opening at a theater near you; marketing costs are higher than ever; production budgets have skyrocketed over 150 million dollars in many cases; movie piracy is ubiquitous, there are new forms of entertainment fighting for the audience’s time. And on the top of those, we have the crossroads: how to market a film on Facebook or Twitter? What impact will Digital Cinema have on the circulation of smaller films? Should we release a movie on VOD along with theaters? Is the film business model changing? What does Harrison Ford plus Kim Kardashian equal? Why should I care about what PerezHilton.com thinks of my film?

Any serious attempt to address any of these issues tells us two things: a) the international film market is riskier than ever; and b) nobody cares about the Artist. In other words, in such an adverse environment, every Artist must care for himself. Oddly enough, by “Artist” I mean anyone responsible for getting a film made – be it the producer, the director, the screenwriter or all of them.

The question then that faces the Portuguese film industry is quite simple: do we desire to compete in such an international hurricane or not?

If the answer is negative, then we’re probably on the right path because every year we find at least one or two films that reach or surpass the 100.000 or the 200.000 spectators mark. Films like *Amália – O Filme* (2008), *Call Girl* (2008) and *Corrupção* (2007) are proof that Portuguese audiences will flock to the theaters in order to see a Portuguese film if that project is appealing enough and gets a wide release. The worst thing that can be said in this case is that we should focus on the reasons why other films which, having been produced with those marks in mind, ended up failing to attract filmgoers thus underperformed at the box-office. The number of films falling in this category is slightly higher: *A Arte de Roubar* (2008), *Star Crossed - Amor em Jogo* (2009), *Contrato* (2008) e *Second Life* (2008). The goal then could be to understand how can we create a stable distribution environment where more and more of these titles can reach their full potential with Portuguese audiences.

But if the answer for the question presented is affirmative, then the Portuguese film industry has systematically failed miserably and it is obvious that a totally new way of project development is needed. And why has this failure been so obvious? Because from all the Portuguese films produced that reached any degree of commercial success nationally, none had any significant success on bigger, more important markets like the USA, Spain, France, the UK, Italy, Mexico, Scandinavia, South America, South Korea, Australia or Japan. This means that in the context of an international market where high risk is met with a pragmatic way different countries manage their films, we must change the way we position ourselves on the market – otherwise we’ll keep failing year after year since we keep swimming countercurrent.

It is true the American film industry is as powerful today as it ever was, but still year after year, a number of smaller national cinemas (not much bigger than the Portuguese one) find a comfortable financial/creative structure that generates films that get international attention and

successful distribution. Mighty Hollywood does not allow competition in many market segments, but all around the world, many producers discover areas that Hollywood (or American cinema) will not cover.

Our misreading keeps us seeing the market as we wish it would be. It prevents us from seeing the market the way it is.

## 2 – Betting on the wrong horses

If we have the desire to compete on the international film market with any reasonable degree of success (yet keep failing to do so) we must recognize that we are simply producing the wrong films or wrongly developing the right films – or both! Films do not exist in a void. On the contrary most of them compete against each other for roughly the same target audience. In this context, inside the international market, a Portuguese film is thrown against similar films from other countries and must offer higher production values if it wants to be competitive. At the end, it is irrelevant for us to say that our films are unique because the films themselves are irrelevant. What is relevant, however, is that the international market is sophisticated and intelligent enough to know where each specific film belongs – and when that comes, sadly, our films are not unique enough to beat the uniqueness of films that come from Spain, Norway, Sweden, Hong Kong, Brazil, France or South Korea. It is against their uniqueness that our films are measured.

If we look at the Cannes Film Festival lineup for the Palm d’Or this year, we’ll see feature-length films that come from countries like Denmark, South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines. *Thirst* directed by Park Chan-Wook is a South Korean film. This film is unique in many ways: for once, it bends the horror genre into a charming love story and character study unlike anything we see today. It is the fact that this film does not copy a Hollywood formula and still manages to appeal to audiences that helped it secure international distribution from a major (Universal) distributor. *Let the Right One In* (2008), directed by Tomas Alfredson, also manages to offer something unique filmgoers did not find anywhere else – and the film found distribution in more than 30 territories worldwide with great success. Why are we different?

The big difference between our film industry and the film industries in other countries is that we still did not understand that producing films as good, appealing and well made (whatever those might be) as American films is not only an impossible goal, but also a creative model designed for international failure – because nobody makes Hollywood films better than Hollywood. The same principle is valid when we try to master a French drama or a British thriller: they are the real thing while we are cheap imitations.

On *A Arte de Roubar*, one Portuguese viewer left the following comment on the Internet Movie Data Base:

“Yes, go figure. You can say this is a Tarantino ripoff and lacks some structure and has a lot of style despite substance. But, for a Portuguese film, everyone has to admit it was put a lot of effort in this film to make it possible to be done.”

Another Portuguese viewer, also at IMDB, wrote the following comment:

“This new film of the director Leonel Vieira is clearly inspired in Tarantino's cinematographic universe, like it was a kind of tribute to that great American director. In a recent TV interview Leonel Vieira admitted that he always was fascinated by Tarantino's films and all the ambiance which surround them, but it's not easy for a Portuguese director to do that kind of cinema. And in this film we understand why it's not easy to do such kind of cinema in Portugal! (...) Well, it's entertaining and funny, at parts, but it values essentially for the risk of making a production like this in our country.”

These two examples unexpectedly address this film's major weakness: while Portuguese audiences might find it (at best) amusing that this kind of film is produced in Portugal, this is the only element that seems to linger on; the reproduction of a style we all see in American films. In other words, nobody outside Portugal is sensitive to such effort because in the end, this film is perceived as a cheap imitation just like countless others produced everywhere, every year.

Even if we admit it is a great feat for a Portuguese film, the replication of a Tarantino-type film throws *A Arte de Roubar* against both American films (with 50 times the budget and spectacle) and non-American films from the same genre that actually do give international audiences something American films do not. It is a lose-lose situation.

The film *Contrato* directed by Nicolau Breyner is another example. A viewer wrote the following comment on IMDB:

“My theory is that they tried for a good Portuguese film and ended up doing a bad American one. Not even the nudity can save it. The rhythm is awful, I heard people snoring on the cinema, the acting is unnaturally forced and the plot tries so hard to resemble an American action film (with scenes in Afganisthan hahah)that it becomes laughable on scenes it wasn't supposed to be funny at all. And all the cars are Skodas!! What sort of hit-man drives a Skoda?!”

The example above alludes to the natural result of trying to compete in a very particular genre (hitmen) populated by expensive films far above a Portuguese producer's financial capacity. It also serves as proof of what was said before: that the viewer in question (or the market) threw this Portuguese film against foreign films that are far more effective, appealing and successful. Films like *Collateral* (2004), *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), *The Italian Job* (2003) and even a French film like *Taken* (2008) – among many other films – constitute the reference universe of the same audience and market *Contrato* is fighting for.

From the moment the Portuguese film decides to replicate an American formula, the thing that shines the most is the odd choice of cars because we know that while *The Bourne Ultimatum* wrecks 25 cars in order to make just one scene, on the Portuguese flick the hitmen drive cheap Skodas because the producer needed to save ten thousand Euros. Because the whole film only cost €400.000 Euros or less.

In Lisbon, *Star Crossed – Amor em Jogo* needed thirteen times more theaters (a total of 26) in order to reach only twice the number of filmgoers as the Swedish *Let the right One In* (that opened in only two theaters). Both films opened at the same time and stayed in theaters for the same number of weeks. One would expect that being an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* set against a soccer backdrop, *Star Crossed* would be a smash hit among Portuguese (and international) audiences. The film even had a British director; was shot in English language and had a trailer that boosted the film's energetic soccer imagery. But without the big budget or the big names, the film forgot to secure any significant creative distinction that would have put it above the many Shakespeare adaptations geared up every year and all the other soccer films made in the past.

When put this way, the comparison seems unfair. But we must understand that it only seems that way because we have been constantly misreading the market – where comparisons like these are common despite our deep wishes of having our uniqueness recognized internationally.

### **3 – A lack of investment on creative development**

But such uniqueness is nowhere to be found because:

- a) In any Portuguese film budgeted miles below the usual American, French or British budget, the only element that will put on it a clear mark of distinction aimed at the international market is of a creative order;
- b) If we think that the investment made by most Portuguese producers in developing the screenplay rarely goes above €10.000-€15.000 Euros, it is then obvious that no such distinction can ever be created; no such added value ever gets to the market.

What gets to the market is the producer and the director's ability to mimic the technique. The other 50% – the creative side capital to its uniqueness – is absent. The problem, in fact goes much deeper because most Portuguese producers do not trust the role of specialized readers who will likely spot the weaknesses of a given screenplay. They will rely only on their own personal taste and reading of the market – even though they never care to know the audience they are trying to reach. In fact, while assembling the many production values of the film (the script being the most important if you lack the others) Portuguese producers usually forget to perform the most single important operation of them all: the creative reverse engineering of the films that constitute the reference universe of their target audience.

Such operation is fundamental for film production and marketing because it allows us to evaluate the real needs, conditions and circumstances that must be met in order for our film to achieve the ultimate goal: uniqueness. And that preoccupation in mind cannot have any practical consequence without some degree of financial investment simply because it is too time consuming. It needs a full time screenwriter (or more than just one), a producer dedicated to that reverse engineering task, proof readers and many, many, many rewrites. Such hard work cannot fall between the €10.000 - €15.000 price ranges that seem to be the rule in Portugal.

A second problem among Portuguese producers, directors and screenwriters is the constant confusion between the personal nature of their projects, its true value to the market and the way such nature interacts with international distribution. Both artistically and commercially, the decision to go one way or another when it comes to writing a script is always personal. But since every film is developed by people, every script reflects personal choices or visions. But distributors, who may love Art, are not artists themselves. They are not interested in the personal element. What they are interested in is a personal element that can be shared with audiences they know and enjoyed somehow – because those are the audiences to whom they must sell the film. From the distributor's perspective it makes a different sense: *why should I distribute this film if I do not know how to sell it and who will want to see it?* Or, in other words, a given film can be great and deeply personal; but beyond that *is it unique?* And to Whom?

So, in retrospect, the financial investment that must go into the creative development of a Portuguese project is the element that can ultimately make or break the film when it gets thrown into the hurricane of the international film market. Today, it is virtually non-existent and that is ironic because while all filmic processes and stages must be negotiated with the market, such investment is the only one where the Portuguese producers are 100% in control.

The betting on the wrong horses now can be understood as following creative paths that are not solidly based, carefully constructed nor evaluated. It means that we all start from great personal universes that end up as films everybody everywhere have already seen before – or worse: nobody saw it before and nobody cares to see it now.

#### **4 – A lack of effort from all the possible parties involved**

As it is clear in many other film industries, the path to unique films must be set by producers. But the journey itself can only reach its end with the active participation of others. And here is where the issue of creative development takes another bizarre turn because most Portuguese film financiers (the ICA, the FICA, distributors and television companies) do not seem to view the film project as that potentially lucrative success everybody in the world is looking for. Most

of these parties do not seem to work together with the producer in order to help create the most creatively competitive product possible.

The television companies, for example, look at different film projects as if they all needed to creatively conform to the shows they already produce in order to be given consideration – unaware of the commercial potential of an international hit film whose rights they will own part of. They overlook a number of practices as old as Television itself: the airing of longer versions of a successful film or the even more interesting conversion of films into (longer running) television series. At this current age, where digital effects are everywhere and the creative gap between Television and Movies is almost gone, the Portuguese TV companies are among the only ones in Europe that did not yet see the potential in playing a more creative part in its national cinema.

The attitude seems to be contrary to what we see in other countries, where producing teams (producer, screenwriters and directors) sit and discuss their film project with all the future parties involved (distributors, television companies and financing agencies) before actually getting the final draft of the screenplay into production.

Not that there is no discussion whatsoever among these parties in Portugal. The difference is that while today everybody is worried about raising money (obviously a very important issue) for the films we want to produce (a discussion about the means), we keep jumping over a previous and equally crucial discussion: the one about what particular uniqueness we want to bring to the market – a creative discussion deeply related to the business model we all live in.

We all know how hard it is to make a film. But making films is hard everywhere. An even harder thing is to ask how we can rightly develop the right film – and come up with a possible good answer. Many answers exist and they are all clear. It's only a matter of looking.