

Book Review

Colvin, Michael. *Fado and the Urban Poor in Portuguese Cinema of the 1930s and 1940s*. Tamesis, 2016.

This volume nuances a foundational maxim of Lisbon fado, namely, that it acquired class mobility via nineteenth-century prostitute-*fadista* Maria Severa (from the hardscrabble neighborhood of Mouraria) and her liaison with a member of the nobility. Building on insights developed in his *The Reconstruction of Lisbon: Severa's Legacy and the Fado's Rewriting of Urban History* (Bucknell UP, 2008), Colvin's most recent book looks to fado films for what they might reveal regarding changing relations between class ideologies, the Severa story, representations of *fadistas*, and popular culture during dictatorship-era Portugal. Through five chapters, Colvin argues that these films shaped attitudes toward fado and its celebrated protagonists and that some of these attitudes reverberate through to the present. While his framing traverses a wide cinematic chronology (and includes non-Portuguese films), the bulk of the analysis consists of close readings of Portuguese films from the 1930s-1940s. Colvin in fact claims that the development of the *fadista* character "seems to halt at the end of the 1940s" (5).

Colvin's introduction situates his project within the context of recent scholarship on fado and on Portuguese cinema. He introduces Portugal's first sound film, Leitão de Barros's *A Severa* (1931), and some of the *fadista* plots in the films which would follow, arguing that unlike in earlier dramas, "these characters [in film], like Leitão de Barros' Severa, challenge consecrated ideologies regarding class hierarchies" and thus constitute a threat to Estado Novo era propaganda and a national cinema that "discouraged the portrayal of an easy life of poverty in Lisbon" (3).

The early years of the Estado Novo were marked by an ambivalence to an idea of fado as Portugal's "national song." Yet the first Portuguese forays into the medium of sound film would be based on fado themes. Colvin's first chapter examines *A Severa* and José Cottinelli Telmos's comedy *A Canção de Lisboa* (1933). He argues that these films provide a rare glimpse of Portuguese cinema

before the establishment of Portugal's Ministry of National Propaganda (SPN) (13). Colvin thus works with these two films as windows into understanding class struggles and as way to understand fado in relation to an idea of "defeat" that counters the Estado Novo ideology of "progress." He moves briefly to discuss later films from the 1930s, claiming that by the end of the 1930s, the *fadista* had become a stock character in Portuguese film, always revealing something about the city of Lisbon while also often standing in for the "urban poor" (35).

Official ideologies of the city-dweller as debauched, pitted against the (virtuous) rural idyll, played a key role in informing cultural policy of dictatorship-era Lisbon. Colvin's second chapter examines some of these country-city frictions as they play out in relation to class in Eduardo Chianca de Garcia's *Aldeia da Roupa Branca* (1938). Colvin analyzes this film in light of changing sentiments in the SPN toward comedy (this would be the first comedy to appear since the inauguration of the SPN in 1933), the emergence of SPN director António Ferro's *política do espírito*, and the increasing nationalization of Portuguese cinema on the eve of World War II. Colvin argues that "*Aldeia* sets the stage for later Portuguese films in which the fado accompanies the protagonists' road to perdition" (43).

The fado trope of the *marialva*, characterized as a man of higher class who casts his class privilege away for his love of the *fadista* (64), features as central to Colvin's analysis in the third chapter. Here he notes that the "complicity of the noble classes" was critical to the nationalization of fado in the twentieth century (69). Focusing primarily on Arthur Duarte's comedy *O Costa do Castelo* (1943), Colvin argues that in contrast to dramas from the same period, comedies "promote communication between social classes by paving a two-way street for class mobility (60); indeed, he later notes that it is precisely for this democratic potential that Ferro "disinvests the comedies" within national cinema (80).

By the late 1940s, the international career of Portugal's fado diva, Amália Rodrigues, was underway. Along with radio, film was a key medium for the development of her celebrity status. Colvin cites 1947 as the year of her acting debut in Armando Miranda's Portuguese box office hit, *Capas Negras*, in which Lisbon fado is dramatically pitted against Coimbra fado (in the same year, Amália starred in João Perdigão Queiroga's *Fado, História d'uma Cantadeira*). In chapter four, Colvin reads *Capas Negras* as a lens through which to understand post-WWII class struggle and as a colonial allegory, invoking theories of magical

realism to interpret the film's critical reception concerning the "falsification of traditions" (100). Chapter five focuses on Queiroga's film in light of fado's increasing internationalization, the development of the *fadista* as artist, and the emergence of what Colvin terms *fado novo* (or *fado canção* [fado song]), described as "lighter and musically richer [and] no longer characteristic of the complaints of an impoverished urban class" (107).

Colvin concludes the book with a reading of both Augusto Fraga's *Fado Malhoa* (1948) and the 1910 painting by José Malhoa, *O Fado* (fado's most iconic painting, now housed in Lisbon's *Museu do Fado*). He situates these within a wider conversation regarding the Severa myth in film and shifting representations of the *fadista* figure and "Lisbon's poor." Moving to the topic of contemporary Lisbon in the volume's afterward, Colvin further develops his discussion of the legacy of the Severa myth.

The book includes a useful filmography, and many excerpts of these films are easily available online. Portuguese passages are translated and most Portuguese terms are explained in English; the narrative could in some places benefit from more contextualization (for readers coming from outside of Portuguese studies). The Severa myth is deeply gendered, and Colvin makes observations about gender throughout. Given this, the bibliography and analysis might have benefited from a more sustained dialogue with theoretical work on gender, music, and film.

This book will be valuable reading for scholars and students of Lusophone expressive culture, Portuguese studies, and film studies. Colvin's research is important in that it fleshes out a history of representations of the *fadista* in 1930s-40s film and sheds light on the development both of fado (as a genre) and the nation during the first decades of the *Estado Novo*. In addition, Colvin offers valuable historical observations on fado and representations of Lisbon's neighborhoods, an important pre-history to any understanding of contemporary relations between fado, gentrification, and urban planning in the Portuguese capital.

Lila Ellen Gray
Dickinson College