

WHOSE STORY TO TELL?

PLATFORM STRATEGIES, CULTURAL IDENTITY, AND LOCAL REPRESENTATION IN NETFLIX'S *RABO DE PEIXE*

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Abstract: Using Netflix's *Rabo de Peixe* as a case study, this article examines how cultural identity is negotiated when global streaming platforms engage with non-hegemonic contexts. Grounded in Cultural and Media Studies, it draws on qualitative research combining semi-structured interviews and media-based reception analysis to examine production conditions, institutional mediation, and audience response in Portugal's audiovisual sector. It shows how *Açorianidade* functions as a flexible yet essentialised identity framework, selectively mobilised to signal authenticity while ensuring transnational legibility. Although nationally celebrated as a landmark achievement, the series generated local resistance, exposing how platform-driven visibility might amplify asymmetries of symbolic power and narrative authority.

Keywords: *Açorianidade*, cultural identity, global streaming platforms, peripheral markets, Portuguese audiovisual industry

1 Introduction

June 2001. The shores of Rabo de Peixe, a small village on São Miguel Island in the Azores, were suddenly covered with packages of cocaine. Around half a ton of highly pure drugs washed ashore after a sailing boat crossing from Latin America to Europe sank near the island. The shipment had been hidden in marine caves, but the tide exposed it to the local community – an impoverished population largely dependent on fishing. What followed was a public health crisis marked by overdoses and long-term social consequences. For those outside the village, the episode became known mainly for its oddness. For Rabo de Peixe, however, the incident became a collective trauma that continues to shape local memory.

May 2023. The first season of *Rabo de Peixe* (2023–present) premiered on Netflix, creating a fictional narrative inspired by the 2001 events. The series emerged from an unprecedented initiative in the Portuguese audiovisual

sector: a development grant launched in 2020 through a partnership between Netflix and Instituto do Cinema e do Audiovisual (ICA).¹ *Rabo de Peixe* was granted funds for its development and, at a later stage, selected for production, joining a still modest catalogue of Portuguese Netflix Originals. Although Netflix had been available in Portugal since 2015, its direct involvement in financing national productions only began in 2021.

The presence of global streaming platforms in small markets such as Portugal raises questions about how production conditions, cultural identity frameworks, and audience reception are negotiated when transnational capital meets non-hegemonic stories.^{2,3,4,5} This article examines Netflix's engagement with the Portuguese audiovisual sector through the first season of *Rabo de Peixe*, considering how cultural elements were mobilised and negotiated to provide enough authenticity while ensuring global legibility, and how Portuguese audiences – especially from the Azores – responded to the series' interpretation of local memory and identity.

Central to this negotiation is the concept of *Açorianidade* (Azorean-ness). Developed by Vitorino Nemésio, the term articulates a shared Azorean identity rooted in insular psychology, shaped by prolonged isolation and a demanding physical environment^{6,7,8}. The sea operates simultaneously as prison and horizon; volcanism and seismic threat give rise to a pragmatic, pagan-Christian religiosity; and the tension between national belonging and regional difference remains constitutive of how Azorean identity is imagined, lived, and represented.

Although the concept has clear essentialist underpinnings and has been mainly transposed to literary studies,^{9,10,11} it remains a useful analytical lens here – not as a fixed essence but as a framework for examining how the creative team selected, mobilised, and contested identity markers in the making of the series, how those choices were shaped by platform pressures towards global legibility, and how local audiences responded when a version of their own community was reflected back at them through the conventions of a transnational crime drama.

2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory approach,^{12,13} enabling an integrated analysis across production, institutional mediation, and reception, connecting *Rabo de Peixe* to debates on small-market dynamics^{14,15} and cultural representation.^{16,17} Seventeen interviews^{18,19} were conducted between April and June 2025 with crew members,²⁰ journalists, and representatives from ICA, PIC Portugal, Portugal Film Commission, and Azores Film Commission. They were thematically coded²¹ and integrated into analysis based on recurring insights provided by the interviewees.

Reception study drawing on newspaper coverage examined national and local media framing of the series. Portuguese newspaper archives and Radio e Televisão de Portugal's (RTP) telejournal clips were analysed using qualitative media content analysis²² with a framing-oriented reading²³, in order to contextualise the 2001 incident and its coverage in leading legacy media. Such analysis made it possible to assess both the intensity of media attention at the time and the dominant narrative framings (e.g. tragic, factual, sensationalised). Additionally, contemporary media articles on the series' production and reception provided insight into audience and critical responses.

3 From the News to the Screen

The 2001 incident attracted considerable media attention, with coverage largely focusing on the social and economic vulnerabilities of the community.^{24,25,26,27} Sixteen years later, the event regained public attention through a report in

El País.²⁸ The article recounted ‘how half a ton of cocaine destroyed a tiny Portuguese island’, reviving the story in the imagination of audiences likely unfamiliar with the Azores and even less so with Rabo de Peixe. The *El País* piece functioned as a discursive mediator, reframing the event not merely as a local tragedy but as a narrative curiosity – a strange, almost cinematic premise inviting imaginative elaboration.

This very episode would serve as inspiration for a Netflix series released in 2023. As one of the winning projects of the ICA-Netflix Script Development Grant, *Rabo de Peixe* moved forward to production, with direct investment from Netflix alongside other funding sources such as the cash rebate promoted by PIC Portugal.²⁹ The series follows four young villagers – Eduardo (José Condessa), Sílvia (Helena Caldeira), Rafael (Rodrigo Tomás), and Carlinhos (André Leitão) – who discover the cocaine and see it as a pathway to escape a predetermined future of poverty and constrained opportunities, all while navigating family dynamics, local power structures, the drug trafficker’s pursuit, and the scrutiny of a mainland police inspector.

Marking a significant moment in the Portuguese audiovisual sector – the second Netflix series and its first *Full Original*³⁰ production – *Rabo de Peixe* reflects the current regulatory framework governing audiovisual production in the country, which evolved significantly in response to market growth and the entry of streaming platforms. Following the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), the Portuguese law³¹ introduced quotas, taxes, and direct investment obligations designed to rebalance relations between the local market and global platforms. Although these measures increased the visibility of Portuguese content on streaming services, most platform investment remains concentrated on licensing, reflecting a cautious stance driven by market risk and uncertainty regarding audience reach.

Rabo de Peixe also exemplifies a strategic approach by Netflix: a model in which the platform fulfils its investment obligations while mitigating risks by prioritising genres that have proven attractive to transnational audiences.^{32,33,34} The adaptation choices visible in the series align with these risk management strategies – the narrative structure follows recognisable genre conventions (coming of age, crime, drama), the pacing and visual style conform to internationally legible aesthetics, and the story’s core (young people seeking escape from economic precarity through illicit means) resonates across cultural contexts³⁵. Following its premiere and subsequent audience success, the series was renewed for two additional seasons – one released in 2025 and the other in 2026 – confirming both its commercial viability and its appeal to global viewers.

4 Açorianidade as a Cultural Marker and Discursive Strategy

Understanding how *Rabo de Peixe* negotiates local cultural identity within the globalising framework of Netflix requires looking behind the screen. Interviews with crew members offer a lens into what the creative team considered authentic Azorean representation, revealing the deliberate choices, compromises, and negotiations that shaped the series before it reached public view.



Figure 1. Sequences of the Festa do Senhor Santo Cristo procession and the Igreja de Nossa Senhora da Conceição. Among the most distinctive religious celebrations of the Azores, their inclusion signals a deliberate effort to anchor the narrative in specifically local devotional culture rather than generic Catholic imagery. Source: *Rabo de Peixe* (Season 1), official trailer, Netflix YouTube channel, 2023. Screenshots by the author.

Among the regional features incorporated into the narrative, the prominence of religion on São Miguel Island is striking. The very first scene opens in a church, immediately revealing how sacred space is part of everyday life – but with a provocative twist: a priest during an overdose. Religious motifs continue in the Festa do Santo Cristo, a celebration observed across the archipelago. As noted by one interviewee, these details extend beyond mere ornamentation: ‘It is a deeply religious place. For example, Rafael tattooed a Santo Cristo on his back, almost as an

act of penance. In the first episode, there is a procession, and he gives the first money he earns from drugs to the saint.³⁶ Another member of the creative team identified religion as an element that anchors the narrative locally while foregrounding less familiar aspects of Azorean life:

I tried to provide other references that had not yet appeared in audiovisual media, thematically related to the Azores (...) Santo Cristo is a religious figure from one of the festivals in the Azores (...) a specific reference to the Azores that had never appeared in audiovisual media before.³⁷

From a cultural-historical perspective, Almeida – an Azorean philosopher and writer long resident in the United States – links faith to the archipelago's telluric vulnerabilities. As the State proved unable to support the population in the context of natural disasters, religion gained great strength, with the church and God becoming the only conceivable recourse in the face of earthquakes and volcanoes.³⁸

This connection between religion and geography exemplifies how *Açorianidade*, as theorised by Nemésio, operates in the series: not as explicit exposition but as an organising logic that structures character behaviour and narrative atmosphere. Recurrent references to Azorean geography move beyond visual depictions of mountains, volcanoes, coastline, and vegetation to emphasise the challenges posed by the archipelago's inherent instability. The landscapes, frequently highlighted in interviews, function not only as setting but as semiotic agents, conveying eccentricity and a sense of place.

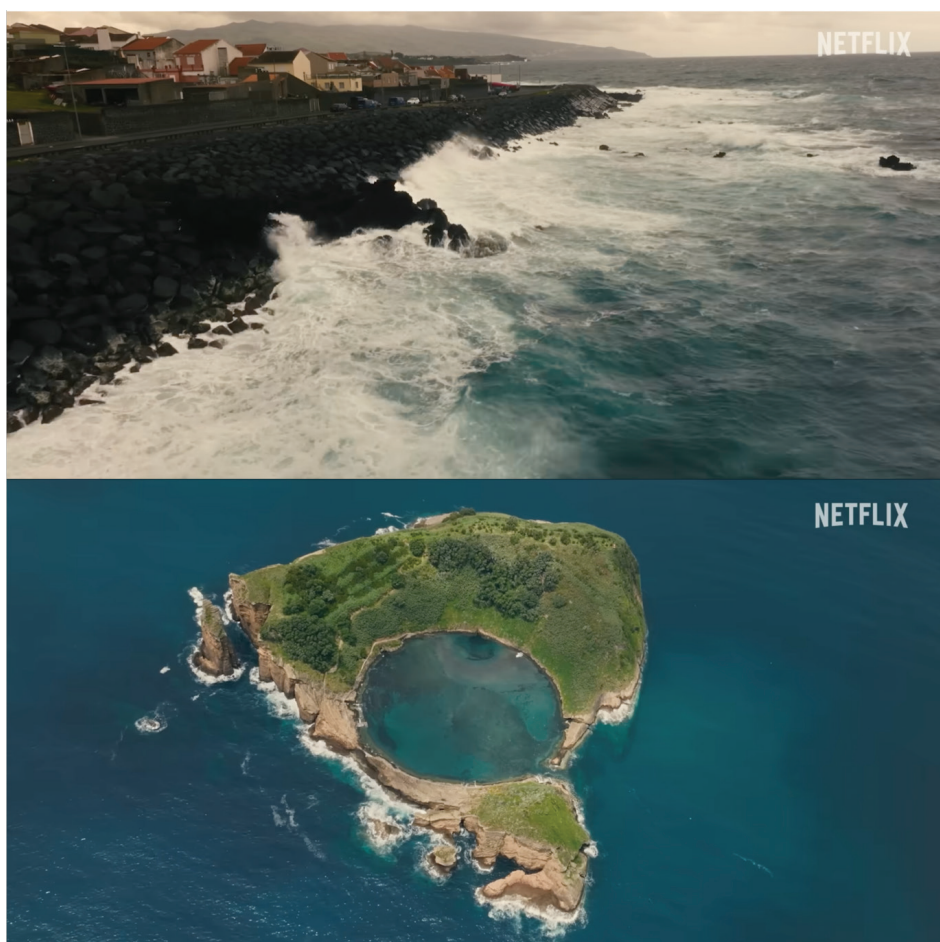


Figure 2. Shots of São Miguel's coastline alongside the Ilhéu, one of the most recognisable landmarks of the Azores. Its presence in the series reflects a deliberate showcasing of the archipelago's landscape, where geography serves as both setting and visual signature. Source: *Rabo de Peixe* (Season 1), official trailer, Netflix YouTube channel, 2023. Screenshots by the author.

Another narrative element mentioned by interviewees is the connection between the Azores and the United States, which justifies the use of English narration as both an attractive factor for international audiences and a real cultural fact. Historically, substantial Azorean communities in the U.S. were formed through decades of emigration. A recurring figure in this migratory history is the deported Azorean – someone who moved to the U.S. as a child, was convicted of a crime, and deported back to the islands, often without cultural connection to the archipelago and sometimes without even speaking Portuguese.³⁹ This reality is explicitly represented in the character of Uncle Joe (Pepê Rapazote), who doubles as narrator. Similarly, the inclusion of Sandro G – a real-life rapper from São Miguel who moved to Boston at age nine and later returned – grounds the story in place and time while offering a cultural reference readily recognisable to local audiences.



Figure 3. Uncle Joe speaking in English, reflecting his trajectory between the Azores and the United States. The language operates as an interface, smoothing cultural distance while aligning the narrative with the dominant linguistic expectations of global distribution. Source: *Rabo de Peixe* (Season 1), official trailer, Netflix YouTube channel, 2023. Screenshot by the author.

Bilingualism and the migration narrative thus serve a double function: authenticating the story for Azorean audiences familiar with these realities, while simultaneously making the series more legible and attractive to transnational viewers. This reflects the logic of glocalisation in platform strategy – the negotiation between global and local, where local specificities are adapted to enhance global circulation while global formats are reshaped by local contexts.^{40,41,42,43} The migration narrative operates as a hinge between the local and the global, with diaspora, displacement, and return providing a shared vocabulary through which Azorean experience becomes internationally legible.

The recurring emphasis on the fishing universe connects the characters to the sea, foregrounding a broader Portuguese maritime identity while specifically mobilising Nemésio's concept of *Açorianidade*. Unlike other regional markers, these elements operate not only at the level of *mise-en-scène* but also as narratively structuring forces, shaping character trajectories and situating the plot within a fishing community.



Figure 4. A fishing boat against the open sea, characters aboard a vessel, and fish handling scenes. The fishing universe as an organising presence in the characters' daily lives and in the series' portrayal of the community. Source: *Rabo de Peixe* (Season 1), official trailer, Netflix YouTube channel, 2023. Screenshots by the author.

Themes of fate and predetermined destiny also permeate the narrative, reflecting local moral sensibilities and being simultaneously aligning with globally recognisable narratives of marginalised youth.

The idea is that they want to leave Rabo de Peixe. Sílvia (...) wants to enter a beauty pageant, which doesn't really suit her, but she does it because she wants a trip to Toronto, (the first-place prize). (...) In Rafael's case, he might have become a well-known player, but he got injured, so he stays a footballer there. Even Eduardo, who was the top student in his class, had to go work in fishing.⁴⁴

This narrative of constrained futures and frustrated aspirations resonates with insularity as a form of psychological and material imprisonment. Yet it also aligns with a broader genre convention in crime dramas: the peripheral setting where poverty and limited opportunities drive characters towards illicit activities.⁴⁵ The question becomes whether this narrative emerges organically from Azorean specificities or whether it reflects a more generic template of peripheral marginality that could be transposed to virtually any socially vulnerable setting.

Several interviewees observed precisely this tension. While the story incorporates distinctly Azorean motifs, these are often framed through an essentialist lens of *Açorianidade* that serves more to evoke a sense of place than to drive the narrative. In other words, the characters, narrative settings, and dramatic tensions could be replicated elsewhere: Azorean specificities, although present, do not constitute defining elements of the story – the core narrative remains fundamentally portable.



Figure 5. Interior views of a police investigation unit, including suspect boards, surveillance imagery, and the police chief's characterisation. The visual organisation follows established crime genre conventions, rendering investigation processes immediately intelligible across different viewing contexts. Source: *Rabo de Peixe* (Season 1), official trailer, Netflix YouTube channel, 2023. Screenshots by the author.

5 Contested Visibility: The Tensions Behind Local Reception

Media coverage and interviews reveal a reception landscape marked less by consensus than by dissonance. While national media discourse largely celebrated *Rabo de Peixe* – from its announcement to its release – as a long-awaited milestone for Portuguese audiovisual production,^{46,47,48,49,50,51} local responses articulated a far more ambivalent stance, shaped by long-standing struggles against stereotyping and sensationalist portrayals. Rumours of exaggerated scenes – ‘Women frying fish with cocaine, elderly people hiding drugs for traffickers in exchange for money to buy lunch, young men marking football fields with the substance, fishermen becoming criminals, and people preparing the drugs on assembly lines’⁵² – circulated locally, contributing to the perception that the production would sensationalise misery instead of allowing the incident to be reinterpreted or critically examined.



Figure 6. The iconic image of cocaine packages washing ashore is reproduced in a heightened, almost caricatural register. The subsequent scenes of women handling cocaine echo the urban legend that circulated locally – of the substance finding its way into everyday domestic tasks such as battering fish or baking. Source: *Rabo de Peixe* (Season 1), official trailer, Netflix YouTube channel, 2023. Screenshots by the author.

Later reporting returned to the village to document the aftermath of this representational encounter, focusing more on everyday experience than on abstract debate. Interviews with residents from different social backgrounds revealed a shared sense of disillusionment, sharply contrasting with national narratives of success. While technical quality and production value were sometimes acknowledged, the prevailing response was one of revolt rather than pride. Criticism ranged from the absence of local linguistic nuance to the largely negative image of the community. Crucially, these reactions stressed that representation is never merely symbolic. The circulation of the series was perceived to have tangible consequences, from renewed external scrutiny to anxieties about how younger generations might internalise a distorted reflection of themselves.⁵³

This discomfort also took the form of more explicit critique, particularly around questions of authenticity and erasure. Commentary articulated by individuals with strong ties to the village emphasised a familiar asymmetry: the story is told about the community, but no longer with it. Casting choices became a central point, criticised not as an isolated production decision but as a sign of broader representational displacement. The embodied knowledge associated with the local fisherman was perceived as replaced by a generic, metropolitan figure that reduced difference into a recognisable stereotype: 'The image of the Rabo-Peixe fisherman – with sun-weathered skin and hands hardened by the fishing nets – is replaced by the stereotypical image of a young man raised in the schools along the Cascais line, a face that has always lived in the privilege of comfort.'⁵⁴ This substitution was interpreted as part of a recurring pattern in Portuguese audiovisual culture, in which peripheral territories are mobilised as atmospheric backdrops while remaining excluded from meaningful narrative agency.



Figure 7. The series' main cast, all trained in theatre schools in the Lisbon metropolitan area. Recognisable faces to national audiences from accumulated credits in Portuguese series and telenovelas, yet a stark contrast to the impoverished local community they portray. Source: *Rabo de Peixe* (Season 1), official trailer, Netflix YouTube channel, 2023. Screenshots by the author.

Concerns about authenticity extended beyond casting to encompass the series' aesthetic and narrative form. Critical assessments situated *Rabo de Peixe* within a globalised grammar of prestige television, highlighting how its visual language, pacing, and dramatic arcs conform to internationally standardised formats. Within this framework, the village appears less as a specific social world than as an interchangeable setting, made legible through a smooth, exportable aesthetic. Stylistic coherence thus functions as a form of translation that reduces linguistic roughness, idiosyncrasy, and local poetics in favour of narrative clarity and genre familiarity.⁵⁵ Paradoxically, this homogenisation

was read as reinforcing stereotypes precisely by neutralising complexity: difference is signalled just enough to mark otherness, yet never allowed to disturb the expectations of a global audience accustomed to familiar conventions of crime, marginality, and redemption.

In parallel, a counter-discourse emerged in national opinion writing that actively dismissed these local concerns. Defenses of the series positioned critiques of accent, casting, and specificity as misunderstandings of the nature of fiction and the operational logic of global platforms. From this perspective, *Rabo de Peixe* was framed primarily as international entertainment rather than cultural testimony, and demands for ethnographic fidelity were portrayed as unrealistic, if not parochial.⁵⁶ Irony and dismissal functioned rhetorically to delegitimise claims grounded in social responsibility, suggesting that expectations of care or accountability from a Netflix production reflected a categorical error.⁵⁷



Figure 8. The relationship between the fictional narrative and the real event is negotiated by Netflix in the series' trailer. The platform's disclaimer – 'Inspired by real events (very loosely)' – anticipates the terms of the debate: a gesture that simultaneously acknowledges the real and distances itself from any obligation toward it. Source: *Rabo de Peixe* (Season 1), official trailer, Netflix YouTube channel, 2023. Screenshot by the author.

Taken together, these responses reveal a complex field of tensions rather than a simple opposition between local resistance and national endorsement. Initial enthusiasm gradually gave way to negotiation and, ultimately, to confrontation, as the promise of global visibility collided with local expectations of recognition and care.

Several axes structure this debate. One centres on authenticity versus stereotyping, exposing the fragile boundary between local elements as meaningful anchors and as detachable signs that reproduce long-standing associations with poverty and criminality. Another concerns memory and forgetting: the 2001 trafficking episode had existed in a state of suspended visibility, and its reactivation through a high-profile series disrupts this fragile equilibrium, reopening wounds and intensifying disputes over who has the right to narrate traumatic pasts and under what conditions they are recirculated. Underlying both is the double-edged nature of visibility itself: global exposure can amplify vulnerability when representational control rests with external actors.

6 Conclusion: Visibility, Authority, and the Limits of Representation

Rabo de Peixe illuminates three interrelated dynamics characteristic of platform operations in peripheral markets: state-mediated market entry, selective investment strategies, and contested negotiations of cultural identity and symbolic authority.

First, Netflix's active presence was established not through direct market access but via institutional mediation, notably the Netflix–ICA partnership. This arrangement illustrates how platforms leverage state institutions as co-investors and cultural legitimisers, reducing risk and accessing local infrastructure in the process. Although the AVMSD transposition established formal investment obligations, Netflix's involvement remained cautious and project-based, reflecting limited audience size, uncertain returns, and the challenge of identifying stories with both local resonance and transnational appeal.

Second, the creative rationale reveals how cultural identity was negotiated. *Açorianidade* functioned as a flexible resource mobilised through selective authenticity: cultural elements were locally grounded yet aligned with platform imperatives of genre familiarity and global legibility. While the result of conscious creative effort, these markers ultimately operate more as atmospheric texture than as structurally determinative forces, making the narrative simultaneously specific and portable.

Third, reception analysis highlights the ambivalent effects of platform-driven visibility. National media framed *Rabo de Peixe* as a milestone for Portuguese audiovisual production; local responses, by contrast, expressed discomfort and resistance, foregrounding concerns over stereotyping, authenticity, and the amplification of stigma. These conflicts expose enduring questions of symbolic authority – who narrates collective histories, for whom, and at what cost – and reinforce how representation under platform logic carries material consequences for both external perception and internal self-understanding.

The study's limitations must be acknowledged. The absence of interviews with the directors and producers excludes insights of considerable relevance, as does the deliberate decision not to conduct textual analysis, which places specific narrative and semiotic strategies outside the scope of this investigation. The exclusive focus on the first season also leaves open questions that a comparative reading of subsequent seasons might productively address – though as the initial adaptation of the real-life incident, it remains the most analytically decisive entry point.

Future research might productively examine the series' formal properties and how they align with or resist platform aesthetics in the construction of an Azorean portrait. A comparative approach extending beyond *Rabo de Peixe* to other Netflix productions in small European markets would also help determine if the dynamics identified here are specific to this case or structural features of platform operations in peripheral contexts. On the reception side, audience ethnography focusing on how Azorean viewers interpret specific scenes and narrative choices would provide more granular insight than media-based reception analysis allows, while also enabling comparison with transnational audiences.

Ultimately, the tensions surfaced by *Rabo de Peixe* are not unique to Portugal, and they are unlikely to disappear as streaming platforms continue to expand. The question facing peripheral markets is not whether to engage with global platforms – regulatory and economic realities make such engagement increasingly unavoidable – but how to negotiate its terms to preserve space for complex, evolving representations of local cultural identity. What this case makes visible is the conditions under which a community's most difficult memory becomes available for global consumption, and what is lost in that translation. The series draws on *Açorianidade* as a cultural resource, yet in doing so reduces it to a set of essentialised markers that make difference legible transnationally while obscuring the heterogeneity and lived complexity of the community. That gap – between the visibility the series offers and the recognition it

withholds – is where the most consequential questions of this encounter reside, and a reminder that cultural production is never merely economic or aesthetic, but always implicates questions of power and representation.

Acknowledgement

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Biography

Gabriela Orestes is a PhD candidate at the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon, and at the research group imec-SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Studies in Media, Innovation and Technology). Her research focuses on the impact of global streaming platforms on audiovisual representations of national identities, exploring the construction of national narratives for transnational audiences. Gabriela is also a film producer with extensive experience in public funding for international cooperation. She has worked across different markets, including Brazil, Portugal, the United States, and the MENA region, collaborating with players such as Netflix, NBCUniversal, Globosat, and Red Bull Studios.