

PANORAMA OF THE SOCIAL CHRONICLE IN OS MAIAS: A CONTEMPORARY CINEMATOGRAPHIC NOVEL

*Panorâmica da crónica de costumes n'Os Maias:
Um romance cinematográfico contemporâneo*

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Abstract

The Portuguese filmmaker João Botelho stands out for his keen insight into the literary nature of the text and for his cinematic adaptations of canonical Portuguese literary works. The film *Os Maias* is based on the portrayal of Portugal – a common genre in Portuguese cinema. In this filmic work, the social, cultural, political, and identity characteristics of nineteenth-century society are stamped, and the customs of the upper class are denounced through sharp criticism and ironic depiction. The dissection of Portugal through its neural center, Lisbon, while faithful to the literary work, is to some extent an outdated autopsy, as the country has gained new contours. So, the work harks back to a corpse from the Romantic period, whose appearance diverges from hypermodern times.

Resumo

O cineasta português João Botelho destaca-se pelo olhar exímio perante a literariedade do texto e pelas transposições cinematográficas de obras canónicas da literatura portuguesa. O filme *Os Maias* assenta no retrato de Portugal – um lugar-comum no cinema português. Na obra fílmica, estampam-se os quadros social, cultural, político e identitário da sociedade da centúria de Oitocentos e denunciam-se os costumes da alta-roda, através da crítica mordaz e do retrato irónico. A dissecação de Portugal pelo centro nevrálgico lisboeta, ainda que fiel à obra literária, é uma autópsia, em certo grau, desatualizada, pois que o país ganhou novos contornos. A obra fílmica remete, assim, para um cadáver do tempo do Romantismo, cuja feição foge dos tempos hipermodernos.

Keywords: *João Botelho; Portuguese cinema; Eça de Queirós; Portuguese realist literature; Novel.*

Palavras-chave: *João Botelho; Cinema português; Eça de Queirós; Literatura portuguesa realista; Romance.*

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– *Falhámos a vida, menino!*

– *Creio que sim... Mas todo o mundo mais ou menos a falha.*

– *We missed life, boy!*

– *I think so... But everyone more or less fails*

AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Portuguese filmmaker João Botelho stands out for his excellent look at the literariness of the text and for his cinematographic transpositions of some works by the greatest canonical faces of Portuguese literature. This is proven by the musical feature film *Um Filme em Forma de Assim* (2022), motivated by the volume *Uma Coisa em Forma de Assim*, which brings together the prose of Alexandre O'Neill; *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (2020), which is based on the same Saramaguian work; *Peregrination* (2017), based on the 16th century travel work by Fernão Mendes Pinto; *Filme do Desassossego* (2010), based on fragments of the non-book book by the semi-heteronymous Bernardo Soares; *A Corte do Norte* (2009), based on the novel by Agustina de Bessa-Luís; and *Who are you?* (2001), an adaptation of the tragedy *Frei Luís de Sousa*, by Almeida Garrett.

In the particular case of *Os Maias* (2014), the filmmaker's primary objective focuses on re-updating and transposing the criticism of the social strata of the nineteenth-century elite to the contemporary thematic framework, which remains, in several points, unalterable with regard to the fractures in the character of society. By resorting to techniques and representation styles typical of opera and theater, cinematographic composition denounces real problems through a fictional and artificial universe that is instrumentalized in the sense that it sends the public the denunciation of social problems through a facet caricatural, making use of aesthetic-dialectic techniques, in which modernity is interpreted in the light of the past tense.

1. QUEIROSIANA'S LITERARY WORK

In a letter dated June 12, 1888, sent from Bristol to his friend Oliveira Martins, Eça reveals that “The *Maias* came out as an extensive and overloaded thing, in two thick volumes! But there are quite tolerable episodes”, and he does not hesitate to consider the novelistic production, which at the time he was preparing to launch, as a “huge bundle of prose” (Queirós, 2008).

In the work, which took close to ten years to complete, the presence of the matrix author cannot, nor should – in our modest opinion – suffer eclipse or even be annihilated with the coming, in a Barthesian assertion, of his death, since This would reduce the characters' understanding of this. Eça's personal traits and convictions, namely those concerning traditional Portuguese education, (anti)clericalism and the disproportionate institutional weight of the church in active life, are clearly present in the novel, especially in characters from the Maia family, such as in Afonso, but especially in Carlos and his friend Ega. Furthermore, the deconstructed family and the concentration of the paternal role around grandfather Afonso recalls that which, in the author's empirical life, grandfather Queirós assumed; family fragmentation recalls the environment in which Eça lived; while the friendship achieved, in Coimbra, between Carlos and Ega is similar to the one that, at Colégio da Lapa, in Porto, Eça built with Oliveira Martins. Furthermore:

A decisive moment in Eça de Queirós' life was his arrival to Lisbon after completing his Law course at the University of Coimbra to finally live with his parents. Perhaps a dream postponed for too long that takes us back to the beginning of *Os Maias*. Eça enjoys Lisbon with Friends of the Cenáculo and opens horizons through trips abroad. Ambience and impressions that are evident in his masterpiece and that a more attentive observer can identify. One cannot fail to recognize the parallel with the arrival of Carlos da Maia in 1875 in the capital, having graduated in medicine also in Coimbra and traveling around Europe, to meet his great friend Ega with whom he appreciated the pleasures of life and developed thought. critical. They seem to be living the first day of the rest of their lives, enchanted by luxury and with prospects of a very fortunate and superior future (Sobral, 2015, p. 57).

2. FROM THE LITERARY MAYANS TO THE CINEMATOGRAPHED MAYANS

The reinterpretation of the literary work is, in the cinematic dimension, mastered in another language: it is no longer the literary language that is in operation, at least not in the foreground, but a language composed of a succession of images that result from a look at the literariness of the text. These images, accompanied by a sound scale, acquire kinetic energy and their unitary visual potential becomes a signifying movement:

In literature, imagination is the primary vector, sentences are projected in the mind of the reader who mentally recreates the story guided by the author's rhythm, with much of the meaning added by the imaginative aspect. In cinema there is the inevitability of image and sound concretization which, although it feeds the imagination, nevertheless establishes a more objective starting point, requiring specific transposition care (Sobral, 2017, p. 644).

In addition, but as a consequence of this difference, cinema demands vision – the look that captures the image –, while literature begins a process of mobilizing and stimulating the imagination to recreate an imagetic universe. This means that what, in literature, is only accessible indirectly, in cinema, is given to us directly. But this also means that cinema tries, to a certain extent, to materialize the literariness of the text, in a process that evidently has a certain originality, presupposes creativity and modalizes the narrative itself, and can allude to the context (historical, social, cultural, political, etc.) and/or determine a deviation, a departure, a turn from that same context and introduce a rupture or discontinuity, so “the filmic adaptation of literary texts means choosing paths and taking options to create a dramatic work rooted in literary material” (Sobral, 2017, p. 645).

3. OVERVIEW OF THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC WORK

Table 1 – Ficha técnica do filme *Os Maias*.

Título	Os Maias
Subtítulo	Cenas da vida romântica
Idioma	Português (europeu)
Género	Romance e drama
Duração	139 minutos (versão original)
Data e local de lançamento	11 de setembro de 2014, Portugal
Produção	Ar de Filmes
Coprodução	Raccord Produções Bando à Parte
Produtor	Alexandre Oliveira
Realização	João Botelho
Argumentação	João Botelho
Narrador	Jorge Vaz Carvalho
Diretor de produção	Pedro Bento
Direção de fotografia	João Ribeiro
Direção de arte	Silvina Grabowski
Autoria dos quadros a óleo	João Queiroz
Chefe de guarda-roupa	Tânia Franco
Apoios à produção	Ministério da Cultura/ICA, Câmara Municipal de Lisboa e Montepio

Own source [based on the information contained in <https://www.ardefilmes.org/osmaias/>].

Os Maias, by João Botelho, is part of a set of works whose contours are based on the portrait, identity and cultural representation of Portugal – this, in fact, a commonplace in Portuguese cinema. The current filmic adaptation of a work that is more than 120 years old and that goes back to a specific sociocultural and historical-political context, is, from the point of view of the pragmatic framework that thematizes, reviewable and identifiable, to a certain extent, to the spheres democratic policies of the Portuguese 21st century but also to the current daily life of Portuguese society. In fact, the revitalization and reuse of the same title as the counterpart Queiroz novel, *Os Maias*, and the minimal readaptation of its subtitle, which is transferred from Episodes of romantic life to Scenes of romantic life – giving it a “more” filmic character –, denounces the initial condemnation of the work to universality. Criticism of customs immortalizes itself and survives regardless of the passage of time due to the resistance of the pictures it paints of the various spheres of Portuguese life:

Eça predicts an “inevitable bankruptcy” and what is certain is that shortly afterwards the country took out a loan from England that took several years to pay off. It would not be the only occasion in which Portugal had to resort to external financial aid, as the economic and financial situation of 2015 witnessed, with the country trying to pay off the monetary support package from the international rescue fund. Many other elements spill over from the pages of the novel to the present day. The banker Cohen is a social type exposed in the work that alludes to some current bankers, the romanticized politicians are reminiscent of the demagogue deputies of the Assembly of the Republic and the presence of women in social, cultural and political life refers to the sexual objectification of the female figure, regardless of their human and intellectual qualities (Sobral, 2015, p. 59).

The Queiroz novel is canonized by the contemporary chronicle of customs and remains solid over the passage of time, generations, daily life and political spheres. It is this characteristic, added to the dramatic, ironic, and satirical matrices of the intrigue, that triggers the filmic transposition of the novel: the diegesis is more than the stories of failed and impossible love of a wealthy family and delves into the history of a country in decadence, allowing reflection on the romantic condition of the 19th century – the cause, in fact, of the great civilizational backwardness in which the country lived, imprisoned in provincialism, especially of character.

The film is an authentic x-ray, initially in black and white film – which portrays two generations, that of Afonso, very briefly, and that of Pedro, constituent of the secondary action, also portrayed fleetingly –; which is, little by little, gaining chromatin and distancing the first and second generations from the third, Carlos'. What remains imprinted on João Botelho's lens is the sociocultural and political framework of 19th century society, in an often scandalous, putrid and sour aspect. And it is through scathing irony and criticism that the pride of the upper circles is portrayed to us, which distances itself out of disgust from the common people; usurpation and corruption for one's own benefit or through bribery; the inertial state of indifference; the provincial and ridiculous imitation of the customs of northern Europe, especially England, and western Europe, with obvious emphasis on Paris. In fact, the film's subtitle, similar to what happens in the literary work, tells us more about what it proposes to be about than its title itself.

The film's scenes converge on a humorous, sarcastic and caricatural impression of Portuguese society in the second half of the 19th century and the environments where the elite circulate. These are, however, reviewable today, as Eça's nineteenth-century painting is not a conscious representation of a deconstructed aristocratic family, more than it is a faithful portrait of the nation, nor of the political state, nor of the Portugueseness of

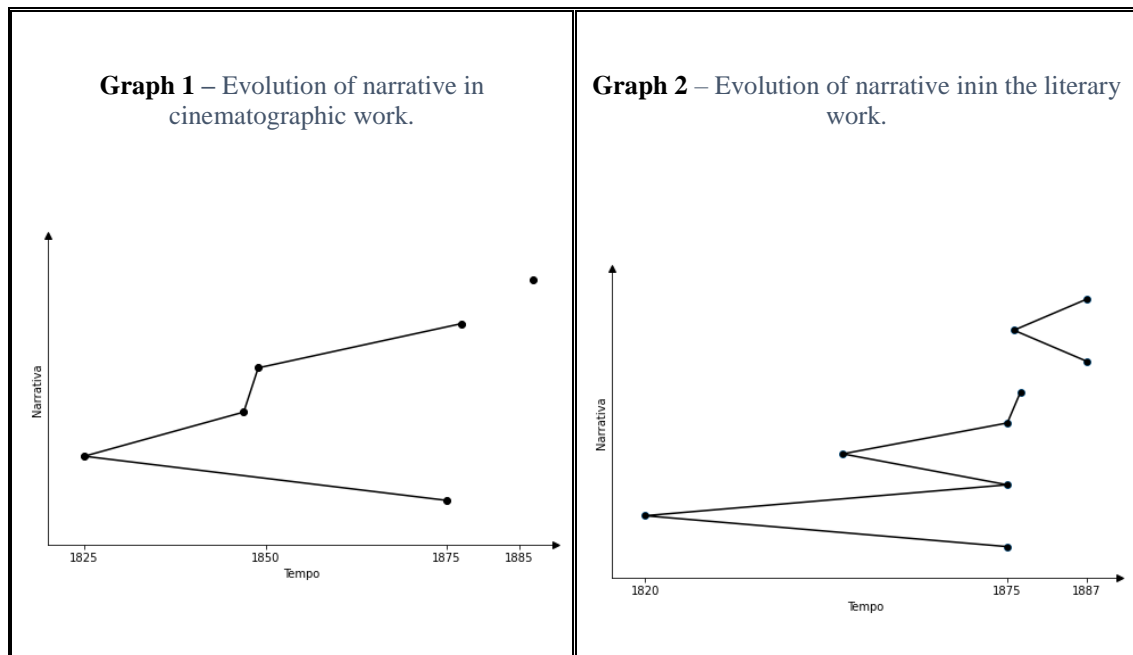
Lisbon itself. which geographically heads Europe, but which is filled with characters who are victims of a society devoured by ignorance, by excessive sentimentalism – like that of the Countess of Gouvarinho –, by braggadocio of Dâmaso, for the incessant concern with *très chic*, for the dishonesty and corruption of figures like Palma Cavalão, etc.

4. TECHNIQUE, DETAIL AND REREADING

The focus of the initial shot is on the narration by Jorge Vaz de Carvalho, who reads the initial instances of the novel and introduces us to the Maia family home, Ramalhete. Little by little, the shot becomes decentralized, the scene expands, and the focus starts to fall on the narrator's face. Finally, suddenly, the shot now encompasses the entire surrounding scene, showing us the narrator sitting in a chair and leaning under a rounded table around dozens of books, which takes us to an imagery interpretation of the screenwriter's work. A page from a sketchbook is then highlighted, as well as some notes that appear to constitute the film script, small templates, or models, of the large scenes and the selection of clothing, which reinforce the idea of study and reading prior to the film production and necessary for the readaptation of literature to the universe of cinema.

At the heart of the story of three generations, which spans 75 years, the filmmaker uses decisive elements to, with fidelity to the Aetian work, transpose it to the contemporary screen, modernizing it. The construction of the social and cultural atmosphere is privileged to the detriment of romantic intrigue, so the filmmaker turns to the theatrical and stage dimensions, which the great morals come to accentuate, and to which the introduction of elements and objects that reinforce the caricature matrix and the use of filming techniques that accentuate the meaning and significance of the compositional elements, with obvious emphasis on the fluctuations in the lighting of spaces, especially interiors.

The editing of the film scenes is linearly designed through the chain of summaries and intercalary ellipses, with a single moment of analysis, which sets the film production apart from its counterpart literary novel:

Table 2 – Comparison of the evolution of narrative time in cinematographic and literary works.

Own source (graphics by A. Batista, courtesy).

The scene editing technique allows the narration to flow gradually³, without abrupt cuts or discontinuities that interfere with logical cohesion and diegetic succession. In turn, the artificial panoramas and backgrounds – created at the expense of João Queiroz's morals/oil paintings (see the attached figures) and which replicate the exterior spaces of all the scenes – focus on the theme for which the filmmaker intends highlight: criticism and the provincial and traditional incarceration of Portuguese society, through the direction of the public's attention, almost exclusively, to the representation of the actors and to the narrator's voice-over, which locates and contextualizes the action. Thus, everything that is additional or extraordinary and does not contribute to criticizing customs is disregarded. The filmmaker focuses on the use of image as a language that makes it possible to reiterate the pragmatic framework inscribed in Queiroz's own narrative, namely, through the renewal of some elements of the literary work⁴ the

³ The first dramatic units depict, in black and white, the Lisbon autumn of 1825, in the Ramalhete house, in the Benfica neighborhood. The use of black and white to portray the analeptic narration that dates back to the times of Caetano da Maia; of Afonso himself, of his youth and of our time in Surrey when he was already married to Maria Eduarda Runa; of Pedro da Maia, his marriage to Maria Monforte and the courteous environment that they came to live in at Casa de Arroios contrasts and distances the first two generations from the third. The application of chromatin only happens with the retraction of the generation of Afonso's grandson, Carlos da Maia, and with the return of both to Ramalhete, after 25 years.

⁴ For example, at the dinner at the Hotel Central, which Ega dedicates to the banker Cohen, the menu, on the advice of the maître d', is petits pois à la Cohen, instead of farcies tomatoes as is the case in Queiroz's work.

reinterpretation of literary passages⁵and the introduction of decisive and pragmatic elements⁶.

Finally, the incest episode, although faithful to the homologous novel, is resolved with the departure of Maria Eduarda da Maia and above all with Carlos's trip around the world: if, in the book, the resolution of incest - already although inexplicable and to a certain extent unnecessary for the criticism that the work proposes to make - it is treated with a certain banality; In the film, the incestuous relationship is treated too lightly, as if it were something completely trivial, with no importance or consequence in the lives of the two lovers. Furthermore, the representation of the return of the displeased, whose scene of their return boils down to the perception that any effort is in vain - even though later, in the same scene, they run eagerly after the light of the American -, makes it digressive of the work literary counterpart, as it focuses too much on the idle and indolent matrix of the society it portrays, ignoring the rays of hope or even the positivist dimension to the detriment of a totally disastrous dimension. Furthermore, regardless of life's inconsistencies, it ignores the fact that there is something that always takes revenge:

Ega stood up and made a desolate gesture:

- We missed life, boy!

- I think so... But everyone more or less fails. This means that the life you planned with your imagination always fails in reality. It is said: "I will be like this, because beauty is in being like this". And you're never like that, you're invariably roasted, as the poor marquis said. Sometimes better, but always different.

Ega agreed, with a silent sigh, starting to put on his gloves. (Queirós, 2021, p. 725)

⁵ In the literary work, there is a passage that alludes to Eusebiozinho dressed as an angel, with João Botelho readapting this passage for the scene of Afonso da Maia's dream, which does not appear, as cinematographic, in the literary novel. In this scene, Afonso dreams of Carlos as a child playing with Eusebiozinho dressed as an angel, whom the former comes to remove his wings. It is, however, the vision of the former prosecutor Vilaça, who expresses that he had never liked Ramalhete's house, and to which are added the creaking of doors and windows, thunder, Afonso's memory of his granddaughter Maria Eduarda, and, above all, the fall of a painting of Jesus Christ crucified which constitute the ominous elements of the tragedy that would befall both the Maia family and the nation. The act of removing Carlos' wings from Eusebiozinho, to the sound of howls, is an omen of sin, incest and the inevitability of fado.

⁶ For example, the mirrors - which appear in several of the scenes that Ega takes part in, namely, in the room where he had libidinous relations with Raquel Cohen or the hand mirror where he looks at the reflection of his face after Jacob Cohen had beaten him - appear as elements that portray the pretension of the work: the act of mirroring a decadent and lethargic society. In this sense, they are objects alluding to the concrete intention of mirroring attitudes, mentalities, traditions and behaviors. Also the lighting techniques, using the application of often deep shadows, become an element that contributes to the drama and tragic dimension of the novel, functioning as a portrait element of omen and indicative of the misfortune of the main intrigue.

This philosophical dimension must be seen as another that the book portrays and the film chooses to ignore: the overcoming of Naturalism, which involves a certain return to Romanticism (Reis 1990). In fact, the final episode, portrayed very lightly in the film, 10 years removed from the outcome of the intrigue, is a double reunion: it is Carlos' reunion with the capital of Lisbon but also with his friend Ega, in which both characters they become aware of Alencar's ideological authenticity, which he demonstrated, in fact, very fervently, at the dinner at the Hotel Central:

There is no doubt that Carlos' pre-fradiquism, the cult of authenticity that he implies, his anti-bourgeois dandyism, the cultural elitism that he cultivates, constitute behaviors of romantic exaltation, in a fin-siècle period that perfectly embraces the speech tinged with decadent colors. that both characters speak. And also that conclusion by Ega, between resigned and lucid. (Reis, 1990, p. 151)

– And who are we? Ega exclaimed. What have we been since high school, since the Latin exam? Romantics: that is, inferior individuals who govern themselves in life by feeling and not by reason...

But Carlos really wanted to know if, deep down, those who were guided only by reason were happier, never deviating from it, torturing themselves to stay on their inflexible line, dry, rigid, logical, emotionless until the end. .. (Queirós, 2021, p. 726)

5. FROM THE 19TH CENTURY SOCIOCULTURAL STATE TO THE PRESENT

Essentially, The Mayans condemn Ultra-Romanticism: they sentence what entirely defined the second romantic generation and which was considered the true mal-du-siècle. The condemnation of exaggerated and false sentimentality was one of the basic elements of the Coimbra Question. Later, it was at the Democratic Conferences of the Casino Lisbonense – indispensable for the constitution of the Generation of 70 – where issues of a historical, ideological and aesthetic-literary nature were debated and where the emergence of an intellectual movement that would shake and awaken the nation was affirmed. of the ideological trance that dominated her.

Romantic overcoming was seen as essential to mitigate the effects of dogmatism and the church's inflexibility in society and to bring about fruitfully, after gaining insight into the country's state of stagnation, political, economic, social and religious transformations that would allow for the country to modernize and reach the Parisian or London rhythm (Reis, 1990; 1997). In this context, Os Maias represented the effort to

mobilize the society of their time, above all through denouncing, in chronic form, its most divisive and decadent errors and vices. However, the novel – whether literary or filmic – does so with an intransigence that does not allow positive aspects of the nineteenth-century atmosphere to emerge, namely, the expansion of parliamentarism, the progress of freedoms and the establishment of peace, restricting itself to a failed love as well as the intellectual and political aspirations of a generation.

More than a hundred years later, in a century marked by the mixture of genres and languages and hybridism, both in cinema and literature, it is difficult or even impossible to fully and objectively characterize the aesthetic space. However, the action of new forms of distribution of mass cinema and the increasingly privileged and central role of television are evident, which have been shaping the destiny of Portuguese cinema.

Between labyrinths and crossroads, the economic crisis influenced production and, therefore, the success of Portuguese cinema. Between the 90s of the 20th century and the beginning of the current century, marginal themes emerged, such as drug addiction and homosexuality, but Portuguese cinema continues and continues to be made using scarce resources. Its primitive features, however, have almost never been lost, with its boldness and revealing character innovating it. The audience, however, became smaller and smaller, possibly due to the fact that the imagination and themes of national directors no longer met the demands of the younger classes.

Although the filmic *Os Maias* is based on a text beyond its time, the adaptation does not seem to take into account some of the new cultural aspects of the contemporary era, whether in terms of current public taste or, above all, the fact that time itself, in a Einsteinian assertion, to move faster in today's space: the operatic and theatrical character paused/delayed in a world dominated by haste and the moment, the costumes that do not accompany something so important for the hypermodern identity construction – strictly linked to consumer culture and fashion –, but also the contrasting sociocultural role of modern women compared to nineteenth-century women, the progressive dilution of an atmosphere in which only the elite participated and the increasing lack of concern (on the part of the younger generations) with the national environment seem to explain part of the film's condemnation to a certain failure.

A CONCLUSIVE NOTE

The cinematographic work, like its counterpart novel, corresponds to the dissection of the whole of Portugal in the figure of the city of Lisbon – which is more than the whole country and less than the whole of Europe –, through the satirization of a decadent and sad society. This is how the capital of Lisbon is represented as the nerve center of a country with an intrinsic incapacity for its own thought and whose society copies without any originality, in a life of torpor, deep boredom and gloomy paralysis. However, this autopsy, transported to contemporary cinema, appears, at certain times, to be outdated, as the country has gained new contours. João Botelho's work refers to a corpse, in certain aspects putrified, from the time of Romanticism, no longer found in hypermodern times.

ATTACHMENTS

Figure 1 – Afonso da Maia on the Santa Olvia farm, in Douro.



Source: <https://www.rtp.pt/play> (*Os Maias*. Ep. 1, 19min 31s).

Figure 2 – Ruas e edifícios da cidade de Lisboa, no séc. XIX.

Streets and buildings in the city of Lisbon, in the 19th century. XIX.



Source: <https://www.rtp.pt/play> (*Os Maias*. Ep. 2, 19min 26s).

Figure 3 – Maria Eduarda walking through the streets of downtown Lisbon.



Source: <https://www.rtp.pt/play> (*Os Maias*. Ep. 2, 19min 58s).

Figure 4 – Departure from Carlos and Cruges to Sintra



Source: <https://www.rtp.pt/play> (*Os Maias*. Ep. 2, 22min 46s).

Figure 5 – High society socializing at the hippodrome races.



Source <https://www.rtp.pt/play> (*Os Maias*. Ep. 2, 39min 36s).

Figure 6 – Horse racing at the hippodrome.



Source: <https://www.rtp.pt/play> (*Os Maias*. Ep. 2, 42min 28s).

Figure 7 – The streets of the city of Lisbon.



Source: <https://www.rtp.pt/play> (*Os Maias*. Ep. 2, 47min 15s).

Figure 8 – Place for socializing and social life in Lisbon.



Source: <https://www.rtp.pt/play> (*Os Maias*. Ep. 3, 19min 50s).

Figure 9 – Representation of “Hotel Alliance” and “A Brasileira” café.



Source: <https://www.rtp.pt/play> (*Os Maias*. Ep. 3, 47min 43s).

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