

A Cinematic Book: *The Maias* on the Cinema Screen

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Abstract

The Maias - Scenes from Romantic Life - 2014 is a Portuguese film directed by João Botelho that confirms the dramatic qualities widely recognized to Eça de Queiroz's nineteenth century novel - The Maias (1888). Surprisingly, only in 2014 was the cinematic approach conceived by proposing a unique and empathic creative dialogue with the novel. Thus, the objective of this paper is to establish a frame of reference which guides the reading to an interpretative proposal of João Botelho's filmic adaptation. The text emphasizes the transformational grammar of the adaptation in the composition of an artful and operatic-theatrical ingenious film.

Keywords: Cinema, Adaptation, *The Maias*, Eça de Queiroz, João Botelho.

Introduction

The novel *The Maias*, dated 1888, is renowned for the extended time it took to write it. Also, it induced in its author the idea that it was a text with dramaturgical potentials that could be re-enacted on stage. This led Eça de Queiroz to an unsuccessful attempt to adapt his great novel for theatre. Later, *The Maias* rose several times to the stage, one of them in the National Theatre of D. Maria II, in Lisbon, in 1945 by José Bruno Carreiro, after a rigorous work of selection and reinterpretation.

At the same time, cinema, and in its period television, realized that the Queirozian literary heritage represented a fertile source of content for audio-visual appropriation. It appeared in cinema several films, not only in Portugal, but also in other countries, such as in Mexico or Argentina. In the field of television there were also quite a few transposed novels for this audio-visual language.

Being *The Maias* a long and intense novel with several episodes, themes, characters and incidents, the difficulty of the audio-visual approach in adapting this book, without losing the aura of quality and value of the text, is not surprising. On the other hand, emerging as one of the most important novels in Portuguese literature, widely known, it is not an easy task to suggest a revision of the novel into a cinematic or television format that is considered important. In this sense, only in 2014 the proposal of a 'filmed book' arises by the hand of João Botelho and in the Portuguese cinema. *The Maias - Scenes from Romantic Life*, Portugal, 2014, presents an original retelling of the novel, according to an artificial vision, and offers the viewer and the common reader of Eça de Queiroz the challenge of finding new points

of view and create an interaction with an alternative cinematographic interpretation.

Therefore, the present paper is organized in the sense of directing the attention to a reading proposal of the cinematographic adaptation by João Botelho, suggesting an understanding that highlights *The Maias* as a portrait of Portugal and its richness in terms of dramatic potential.

Thus, the text is structured in two parts. In the first part it exposes a general overview of the novel *The Maias* and deals with the specificity of the book; in the second part, it discusses the results of João Botelho's adaptation, emphasizing the interaction between the textual references and the proposed cinematographic model. The main objective of the paper is to highlight the textual characteristics that were rewritten into a non-natural and operatic theatrical cinematic model. In terms of methodological perspective used in the empirical part, it is based on the masks process proposed by Michel Chion (2011) and consisted on an approach that studied the sound without the images, the images without the sound and again the sound and the images interconnected.

The Maias, a masterpiece of the 19th century

The incidents of the Maia family and the events that surround it are integrated in a set of circumstances that make it possible to characterize the state of Portugal. In this sense, the family narrative serves as a platform for the effective theme that embodies the novel - the portrait of a declining country. It is not by chance that the novel begins with the Maia's family house (*Ramalhete*) in "tones of ruin" (Queiroz [19-], 5) and twelve years later, after about 700 pages, indifferent to the works of revitalization, the gloomy house remains in "tones of ruin" (Queiroz [19-], 714). It is as if the *Ramalhete* metaphorically symbolizes a nation that has stood still in time. Hence, the terms used to characterize the *Ramalhete* could also describe Portugal at that time: dark, austere, with a timid row of small windows (symbolizing short views), a sad look of ecclesiastical residence (a reminder of the excessive and retrograde institutional weight of the Church), with a panel of Portuguese tiles (typical Portuguese element) and an evident lethargy in a neighborhood where a dormant peace reigns, such as the decaying and inactive country, as a poor uncultivated and abandoned backyard. The *Ramalhete* is, therefore, the allegory of a sub-Atlantic rectangle that accommodates the last of the aristocratic and virtuous patriarchs whose lineage is on the verge of extinction.

Consequently, the development of a narrative that focuses on the tragedy of a family asserts the

opportunity to suggest a portrait of Portugal in the late nineteenth century. That is why the book presents not only a title, but a subtitle whose substrate refers to the critical and ironic thought. Thus, the novel *The Maias* materializes the *Episodes from Romantic Life* in family, in society and in cultural, political, and intellectual behavior. It also represents the genesis of the cinematographic process of artificial re-creation of the *Scenes from Romantic Life* by João Botelho.

Considering that Eça's style is recognized as one that offers a point of view "according to a mobile optical camera" (Saraiva and Lopes 1989, 941), we can identify in *The Maias* several suggestions of composition, framing and even camera angles which focus the interpretation precisely within visual concreteness (Alvarenga 2013) and show adjacency with the cinema's grammar.

This is the case of the suggestion of *mise-en-scène* or camera shots. For instance, the general description of the auditorium of a Portuguese Theatre (*Trindade Theatre*), where an important cultural event takes place, is almost combined with a subtle imaginary tracking shot from the audience to a suggested medium shot of the character Cruges playing the piano, which is evoked by the quotation from page 596 "throughout the theatre the whispering grew louder. Some coughed freely. Two gentlemen had opened the newspaper. And fallen over the keyboard, with the collar of his coat drained to the neck, the poor Cruges, sweating" (author's free translation, Queiroz [19--], 596). Or the invocation of a close-up of the hands of the female character Maria Eduarda, which can be interpreted from the text on page 367 "while the beautiful hands of Maria, with jewels gleaming, were pulling the woolen threads" ((author's free translation, Queiroz [19--], 367).

In the same evocative sense, on page 64, the occasion of a dinner at the family's villa (*Quinta de Santa Olávia*) during Carlos's childhood inspires visual, chromatic, and musical possibilities:

There was only one white ash in the chimney: the lilacs of the jars exuded a living scent, mixed with that of the burnt crème brûlée, touched by a string of lemon: the servants in white waistcoats removed the service from which an Argentinean sound escaped: and the whole damasked towel disappeared under the confusion of dessert, where the golden tones of Port wine gleamed among the crystal jam jars (author's free translation, Queiroz [19--], 64).

In addition, Eça excels in creating settings that refer almost directly to scenic environments in film transposition, such as a part of the description of the two-lover's sanctuary (*Toca*), the love nest of the protagonists, among other refined and detailed portraiture. On the other hand, the literary analepses favor the idea of filmmaking by allowing the juxtaposition of narrative sequences, which belong to different temporal situations. This is comparable to the cinematic flashback, such as what happens from page 13 to page 95 of the novel, where we find out about the youth of the character Afonso, the cruel destiny

of his son Pedro and the childhood and education of his grandson Carlos da Maia, to arrive at the autumn of 1875, the moment of the beginning of the story. A scenic manna borrowed from the textual content whose potentialities assist the filmic transposition.

On a technical and artistic level within the cinema's context it is very important the creative and artistic use of light. Besides producing an esthetically pleasant scene, the use of light also considers the conception of an appropriate atmosphere. Light is a central element of cinematography and it is mainly responsible for the visual expression of the film. Light can establish the tone of a scene and at the same time highlights a feeling or presence. It is especially interesting to observe the Queirozian use of light in his fictional texts whose expressive force supports the technical concretization and often facilitates camera angle and shots. The following fragment focus on the dialectic darkness/light and the emphasis on silence accentuates the dramatic meaning of the occasion immediately after the voluntary incest between the brothers takes place:

He slowly opened the door. One foot after the other, he climbed the stairs deafened by the cherry-colored velvet. On the plateau, he groped for the candle - when, through the half-open curtain, he saw a light moving in the back of the room. Nervously, he stepped back and stood in the nook. The flash came, growing: slow, heavy steps, paced deftly on the carpet: the light appeared - and with it, grandfather in a long-sleeved shirt, livid, mute, large, spectral. Carlos did not move, he choked; and the two eyes of the old man, red, frowning, filled with horror, fell upon him, remained on him, and swept him to the depths of his soul, reading then and there, his secret (author's free translation, Queiroz [19--], 667-668).

This narrative circumstance, in addition to accentuate the proximity into scenic and lighting terms, underlines the impact of the absence of sound, approaching us to the Bressonian version according to which "silence can be more dramatic than any music" (Bresson in Mazzoleni 2005, 190-191). It also stresses the metaphorical transformation of the character Afonso from a short man into a large and spectral figure, exposing the pettiness of the grandson versus his moral elevation. Along these lines, we notice that Eça's writing stimulates a lot of visual features in terms of camera shots, angles, movements, lighting, sound, cinematography, or *mise-en-scène*, as also through the interaction of on screen/ off screen, sound/ silence, light/ shadow, among many other elements. Thus Alvarenga (2013, 316) reiterates "the extraordinary collection of technical resources emanating from Queiroz's writing and the filmic potential that all his fiction texts have", he also highlights "aspects that suggest equivalences of codes and cinematographic technologies that may have facilitated the film readings produced so far". To Alvarenga (idem) the future perspectives indicate a scenario of continuity through "platforms of future intersemiotic understanding between the seventh art and the work of Eça de Queiroz".

The Maias, Scenes from romantic life – the film

When João Botelho, the Portuguese director, embraced the challenging task of adapting *The Maias* to a Portuguese film, he was certainly aware of the fact that there were earlier audio-visual versions of the same book, although for the television medium. In fact, in 1979 the family saga of the inhabitants of *The Ramalhete* was shown on the Portuguese television screens, in four episodes, fifty minutes long. This version of *The Maias*, quite close to the original text of Eça de Queiroz, takes us to the second half of the nineteenth century in a Lisbon full of contrasts where the Maia family, symbol of the Lisbon aristocracy, experiences a sequence of tragic endings, from the generation of the character Pedro da Maia to his descendants Carlos and Maria Eduarda. This television production, apart from being an important television archive of the Portuguese history, also symbolizes a first audio-visual approach to the masterpiece of Eça de Queiroz, recognizing the dramatic potential of the text already confirmed on stage and perceived by Eça himself. However, in aesthetic terms, the series was no more than filmed theatre.

In 2001, the interest of the small screen by the notorious Portuguese novel was revived, this time in Brazil and on a co-production basis between TV Globo and the Portuguese television channel SIC (Independent Communication Company). The result of this partnership gave rise to a successful series of forty-four episodes where the atmosphere of the novel is noticed in the adaptation of Maria Adelaide Amaral and the technical expertise of the director Luiz Fernando Carvalho. The dramatic effect of the fatality of incest and the portrayal of the behaviors of the Portuguese nineteenth-century society are presented to us through an epochal production that manifests an extreme aesthetic and dramaturgical care. It is the conviction of Carlos Reis (2012, 365) that “*The Maias* maintained, in this exhibition on TV, much of their condition as a great literary novel”.

Later, in 2002, the Queirozian masterpiece once again motivated the interest of Portuguese television to take its characters and themes as a source of inspiration, although in a style and format very distant from the traditional adaptations of literature classics. It is the soap opera *Lusitanian Passion* (Lusitana Paixão), exhibited on the Portuguese public channel RTP1, directed by Jorge Paixão da Costa and André Cerqueira in one hundred and fifty episodes. Francisco Moita Flores, who was the author of the script, transforms the textual basis to propose an updated narrative where not only identifiable element of *The Maias* interact, but also combines components of other Queirozian titles, namely *Count of Abranhos* (O Conde d’Abranhos 1925, posthumous), *The Crime of Father Amaro* (O Crime do Padre Amaro 1875) and *Uma Campanha Alegre* (1890). In this sense, although Eça’s literary heritage has been on the list of cinematographic productions since the time of Portuguese silent films, the truth is that its main title

was kept from the filmic proposals not only nationally but internationally, despite the television and theatrical projects that have been presented over the years.

Therefore, 2014 represents a precursory, courageous, and intelligent approach of João Botelho in which national cinema returns to its roots. A pioneer in the Portuguese cinematic lists and artificial in style, these *The Maias* once again put the novel of Eça de Queiroz in focus and enhance, in the filmography of João Botelho, his desire to transform the literature in cinema.

The film perpetuates themes and values presented in the book, re-read from the director’s point of view, and provides a very particular aesthetic that underlines the textual, the filmic and the distancing in the sense in which it aims to motivate the intellectual commitment and the non-realistic identification. It seeks to highlight the cinematographic detail by proposing a *mise-en-scène* influenced by theatre and opera with the intention of emphasizing the text. There is a balance between the narrative aspect, accentuated by the voice of the narrator and the connection between the décor and the characters, with prominence on artificialism and metaphor. It is a space of painting, music, opera, theatre, and cinema accentuated by the style of filming.

The objective of the director is to communicate the idea of an artificial universe within the Portuguese society of eight hundred. Therefore, the key element of the film is the artificialism to underline the portrait of a society whose behavior is fictitious. This idea of artifice is mainly represented through an operatic-theatrical model and the whole construction of an artificial cinematic world where set-ups, wardrobe, painting, music, etc. come together to build the idea of an artificial country.

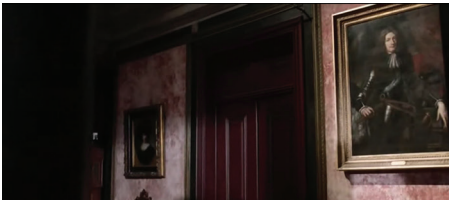
The books filmed in most scenes, in close-ups or ornamenting the décor, recall the literary status of the adaptation, and the presence of the object mirror in certain shots (with more or less emphasis in the composition), allude to the symbolic representation of the thematic emphasized by the novel and the film - reproduction of human behaviors that should be criticized. It is the case of the representation, in black and white photography, of Maria Monforte that looks at the mirror reflecting the belly of a pregnant woman who is trying to use her son as a resource even before he is born. Or when the character Ega, idle and indolent, reflects in the mirror of Vila Balzac the pose of an unproductive artist.



Frame 1 – Character Ega’s reflection in the mirror

The mirror is the allegory to the bonfire of vanities and it is certainly possible to conclude that the presence of this element throughout the film reflects the poetic consubstantiation of the artificial scenario proposed by João Botelho. The reinterpretation through cinema's images of the satirical tone of the novel.

The filmic re-creation presents mostly medium shots and reveals a larger amount of information in some exterior transition shots, where we can realize the enormous painted sceneries as background. Most of the scenes are sustained in the dialogue or interlocution of the actors and the classical music is a constant element. Also, the painting crosses the cinematographic expression, not only through the huge panels by the painter João Queiroz, but also through the presence of varied paintings that decorate the décor walls.



Frame 2 –The family's house movie set

Image and dialogue complete themselves and there is no dominion of one over the other. The rhythm is slow, prosaic, applied in almost static frames that emphasize the representation of the actors and where the coherent movement of the camera participates subtly and emphatically. Even more dynamic scenes, such as the disrespect between the character Alencar and João da Ega or the physical quarrel between Carlos da Maia and Eusebiozinho, are based more on irony than on action.



Frame 3 – Disagreement between João da Ega and Alencar

Certainly, it is not wrong to note that the director João Botelho recreated the literary universe of Eça de Queiroz from the musical, literary, scenic, operatic, or painting references contained in the novel to reinterpret them according to his own operatic-theatrical style. Here are some examples. Shots resembling a painting more than a film frame; contemplative *mise-en-scène*; discrete and dissimulated camera movements, in addition to highly expressive extreme close-ups and music that appeals not only to the spirit of fiction but also to the Portuguese identity. This is the case of the scenic situation in which the character Guimarães tells João da Ega the truth about the incest. In the background,

two female characters can be seen, one of them singing in a nostalgic tone a sad Fado, the Portuguese musical style, that accentuates not only the fatality of the revelation as well as the Portuguese cultural element. Fado assumes the symbolic character of the manifestation of the Portuguese identity and expresses the emotion of a sad melancholy of a nation who does not escape to the implacable *fatum*. The Portuguese recognize themselves in the depth of Fado and identify with what this national song translates about them. Fado has become a symbol of the Lusitanian identity and shows the characteristics of a common culture. As Eduardo Lourenço emphasizes (1999, 43), it is a nation that "sings Fado or in the Fado is sung", entwined in the labyrinth of nostalgia (Lourenço 2009). The character Ega, in *The Maias*, maintains that there is nothing "in art, as beautiful as fado" and Afonso da Maia argues that "There is a lot of poetry in fado" (author's free translation, Queiroz [19--], 650).



Frame 4 –Two women sing Fado

In another scene, the operatic and artificial style of the filmic narrative is underlined, and we can see Maria Eduarda wandering through the shadows of the night and falling crumpled in front of the announcing poster of the opera *La Traviata*. In this scene, the dramatic musical background which is playing (*Addio del Passato*, Act 3, Verdi) is the classic opera libretto that underlines the smallness and impotence of the character.



Frame 5 – Maria Eduarda and the poster of *La Traviata* in the background

Thereby, this is a cinematographic adaptation in which João Botelho supports the originality of his recreation precisely in the emphasis placed in the presence of the artifice. This subterfuge is credited from the first minutes of the film through the opening credit sequence and closes the circle in the last scene that wants to give us the idea of a stage universe when the lights go out after the unlikely final race of the two defeated friends. The director reminds that the 'truth' of the film is the artificialism.

Conclusions

Although there is a recognized dramatic potential in Eça de Queiroz's novels, the transformational filmic approach to *The Maias* is not only challenging, but intricate. This fact can explain that only in 2014 did João Botelho (a filmmaker who had already established a dialogical relationship with other authors of Portuguese literature) find a way to adapt the Queirozian masterpiece, and the result is an artificial film that derives from the opera's and theatre aesthetical influence. The filmmaker's vision proposes to fiction the Portuguese nature satirized on the book. Therefore, it is proposed a filmic space of archetypal characters and re-read episodes according to a point of view whose purpose is the construction of an artificial and distant universe that refers to an opera libretto or a theatre stage. Thus, this canonical and emblematic narrative of Portuguese literature appears for the first time adapted in Portuguese cinema, resulting in an aesthetically appealing and narratively pleasing film work. It is a complex project that recreated the critical and caricature universe of Eça de Queiroz in an artificial way, and whose foundation composed by episodes was reinvented cinematographically to provide scenes where literature and cinema intertwine.

Everything converges to avoid the reproduction of the real, to emphasize the artificial, not only in the way of filming, but also in the composition or in lighting and editing. It also should be emphasized the soundtrack that combines brilliantly the interlocution of the characters, with the voice over of the narrator and with the classic-operatic marks of the soundtrack, concomitantly with the Fado. The use of big oil paintings to reproduce the exteriors gives the film an artificial atmosphere and involves the action into an art gallery.

The operatic-theatre strategy emphasizes not only the fake nature of the production, but also the relevant dimension of the text.

In this sense, *The Maias - Scenes from Romantic Life* is a film which provides a special way of disposing the narrative, under the artistic and authorial perspective of João Botelho, where the plot is developed to emphasize the literary matrix and the story is underlined by stage effects, a reminder of the artificial apparatus not only at the beginning, but at the end of production. It seems, therefore, an inventive strategy that transforms the film object into a consecration simultaneously cinematographic and literary.

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