

A Cinema Guild Release



# **The Last Time I Saw Macao**

*(A ÚLTIMA VEZ QUE VI MACAU)*

**A film by  
João Pedro Rodrigues and  
João Rui Guerra da Mata**

85 minutes / HD (DCP) / 1.85:1 / 5.1 / Portugal / France / Not Rated  
In Portuguese with English Subtitles.

Stills available at: [http://cinemaguild.com/theatrical/macao\\_press.htm](http://cinemaguild.com/theatrical/macao_press.htm)

### **Synopsis**

A wonderfully mysterious, shape-shifting feature from celebrated filmmakers João Pedro Rodrigues and João Rui Guerra da Mata, *The Last Time I Saw Macao* is a detective tale that blends film noir, documentary footage and personal travelogue to intoxicating effect.

Following a spectacular opening number, a lip-synched rendition of Jane Russell's sultry "You Kill Me," the film's hero, in voiceover, sets the tale in motion. He has come to Macao in search of Candy, an old friend, who he fears has been kidnapped by a shadowy criminal syndicate. He searches the city streets and back alleys, gambling dens and music halls, but Candy's whereabouts continue to elude him, until a larger, more sinister plot comes into focus.

## **DIRECTORS' STATEMENT**

Two directors leave for Macao, embarking on a journey of discovery in a fascinating, multicultural labyrinth-city. The Oriental childhood memories of one – fictionalized recollections of a vivid reality – enter into dialogue with the other’s memories of the Orient, built on the codes of cinema, literature and painting – vivid memories of a fictionalized reality. The result is an album of physical and emotional geography, structured like an investigation disguised as a Film Noir, where the puzzle of the narrative challenges reality and fictionalizes it. The first time we thought of going to Macao, the territory was still under Portuguese control. In 1999 we wanted to witness the transfer of sovereignty to the People’s Republic of China but our trip was postponed. The year 2009 was the tenth anniversary of the Macao SAR (Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China). It seemed like the right moment to go ahead with this project. The allure of the East, as a distant horizon and backdrop for a story, has always been a source of inspiration for Western cinema. The American Cinema, as the greatest producer of images, has used it to stage its own stories since the days of silent film. In most of these films, the representation of Eastern reality is given an exotic slant, tailoring it to the imagery, iconography and codes of each film genre. To what extent has cinema made a fiction of the East, sometimes close, sometimes light-years away from reality? How does this imaginary fiction echoes reality? To what extent do Eastern societies reflect on this exotic vision of themselves in an ever more globalized world? In *The Last Time I Saw Macao*, like in a Film Noir, the voiceover of both directors-protagonists contextualizes the images with the plot that unfolds from them, as if it was a criminal investigation. Film Noir normally uses the criminal underworld as its backdrop, anchored in the nocturnal urban imaginary. Its aesthetic is based on contrasts of light and shade, a dreamlike atmosphere, dark and claustrophobic, peopled by male heroes, *femmes fatales* and sadistic criminals. The most common elements of Noir are the narration of the male protagonist which establishes the predominant view point of the film, the multiple contradictory and paradoxical perspectives, making the narrative more complex and the voiceover which is used to continually reformulate the plot. These are the codes we appropriated in making our film. Sound plays also a major role. We constructed a dialectic between the diegetic and nondiegetic sound. Other than the voiceover of the directors, the direct sound, the noises, the ambiances and the music, build a new sound structure, at times coincidental, at others parallel to the structure of the images. It is from this dialectic that the structure of the film emerges; a film of palpable details, places, characters, looks, gestures, sounds and even secrets. What would have happened to the tights that Jane Russell threw overboard in Sternberg's *Macao* (1952) if Robert Mitchum had not caught them on the deck? What would have happened to those tights if they had fallen into the sea or got blown all the way to Macao and we had followed them and forgotten about the actors who then would never have met or fell in love, as they do in the film? What absurd kind of film would this be, the journey of a pair of tights to Macao? As in Oriental mythology, where the elements have supernatural powers, we wanted to have this kind of freedom in the construction of the film and be blown away to Macao on the wings of the wind.

**An Interview with Filmmakers**  
**João Pedro Rodrigues and João Rui Guerra da Mata**

**You've been working together for years, but with this film and your two last shorts (*Morning of Saint Anthony's Day* and *Red Dawn*), it seems you're exploring a new cycle, far from traditional fiction.**

**João Pedro Rodrigues:** I've always been very scared of doing the same thing and being a prisoner of my own style, being too comfortable with it. I read somewhere that my three first features were like a trilogy, but I think of my films one after the other and not as a series. The important thing about *The Last Time I've Seen Macao* is that it was first conceived as a documentary. To me, it was a way of making films in the same way I started: in my first short film, *Happy Birthday!*, with João Rui as an actor, there were only five people in the crew, including the two actors (plus our cat Sónic). I wanted to go back to an economy that would allow me to have more freedom and not to be restrained by the schedules of a regular production.

**You were only two during the shooting?**

**J.P.R.:** It was the two of us, one assistant director who was also the production manager and script girl, one person for the sound and sometimes a translator. We shot the images ourselves except for the first sequence with Candy and the tigers that was made in Portugal with my longtime cinematographer Rui Poças.

**When did it turn into a fiction?**

**João Rui Guerra da Mata:** It was just after the second time we went to Macao that we understood in which direction the film was going.

**J.P.R.:** And it was different from our first idea.

**J.R.G.M.:** We applied for Portuguese funds for a documentary about Macao that had as a starting point my childhood memories. The years I spent in Macao were such an important period of my life. We wanted to visit Macao for a long time and for one reason or other we kept postponing it. We wanted to go there for the Handover in 1999 but we didn't manage to. After we did *China, China* (2007), the first short film we co-directed, we started to talk more seriously about it. And suddenly, it was the right time to go.

**J.P.R.:** I had finished my previous film and I didn't really know what was going to happen next. So this was perfect, I had found something to do!

**J.R.G.M.:** But once we got there, we understood that the world didn't need another documentary about the city. There were already too many. We felt free to shoot whatever we liked, not really knowing, at the time, which direction the film would take.

**J.P.R.:** Also, we didn't have a proper schedule. We had a permission from the Cultural Institute of Macao to shoot almost everywhere in Macao.

**J.R.G.M.:** In the beginning, most of the locations where we shot were based on my memory, the geography of my memory. I would tell João Pedro: "I used to live there, I was taking this road to go to school, and there I used to go for a snack, etc.", so we had all these memory itineraries. But, of course, in thirty years, the city had changed a lot and sometimes we were stopped because there was a huge building in our way. Also, we

often got lost or excited by something which was not part of our plans but that we thought was really interesting to shoot.

**How did Josef von Sternberg's *Macao* find its place into your film?**

**J.P.R.:** In one of the first shots of Sternberg's film we recognized the house where João Rui used to live.

**J.R.G.M.:** Actually, my house is not important at all for the film's plot, but it was like some strange connection between Macao, the film, and our own *Macao*.

**Did it give birth to other ideas?**

**J.R.G.M.:** I suppose it led us to the idea of some sort of Film Noir.

**Or the ghost of a Film Noir with a faceless detective, an invisible femme fatale, and an empty cage as a McGuffin.**

**J.R.G.M.:** We really wanted things to happen off-screen, exploring the idea of telling a story without seeing the characters. We went further and further with that idea. For instance at one moment we hear the sound of a phone ringing and the characters speaking on the phone, but the phone booth is empty. For us that makes sense because the phone booth is the place where people speak on the phone...

**J.P.R.:** It's a kind of a conceptual film even if I hate that idea. But we tried to destroy that concept by making the film playful, even childish sometimes.

**There's this sequence where you're talking to João Rui about his childhood's games. And to me, the film is exactly like that, like two kids playing with each other and trying to build up a story.**

**J.R.G.M.:** And also the film starts with a game.

**A game that, at the end, becomes real.**

**J.R.G.M.:** I suppose this beginning explains what we're going to see. How we manipulate those documentary images and turn them into fiction.

**J.P.R.:** I like to think of it as a kind of B movie, because it was made with very little means.

**An abstract B movie...**

**J.P.R.:** In B movies they had almost no budget, so they had to use old sets from other films. In our film there's a similar idea, but the other way around: we use real places but we change them into imaginary sets. In a way, it's like a Hollywood movie where everything is built in a film studio to make believe you're somewhere else.

**J.R.G.M.:** Like the Sternberg's film: it starts with documentary images of Macao, China and then it goes to the RKO Studios in America.

**J.P.R.:** It's totally fake but you believe you're in Macao.

**J.R.G.M.:** To add credibility to fiction, to make it look real, they needed those documentary images.

**J.P.R.:** In our film, fiction comes from images shot as a documentary.

**There's fiction in every image, even if it's a documentary image.**

**J.R.G.M.:** Exactly. Anyway I don't really believe in pure documentary. There's always a point of view, someone behind the camera.

**J.P.R.:** I have to say that I'm not very interested in documentary in general.

**J.R.G.M.:** But it's a documentary in a way. Except for the staged scenes which link the plot we were developing to the documentary images we were shooting, for example the shots with my character –or at least his shadow- everything is documentary.

**J.P.R.:** Even some of the characters you see in the film were complete strangers to us, like the man with the cell phone in front of the sex shop. We actually never met him.

**J.R.G.M.:** When we were shooting that street, João Pedro noticed the man. We were intrigued by the way he looked, the way he kept going up and down the road staring at his mobile. We kept shooting just to see what happened. Back in Lisbon, in the editing room, he became Candy's friend, Akan, the connection between her and my own character. We invented him there.

**You shot two films during your stay in Macao, *The Last Time...* and the short film *Red Dawn*.**

**J.P.R.:** And we're thinking about more.

**J.R.G.M.:** We have at least three shorts that could eventually exist. I suppose that was one of the biggest problem we faced. We had so much material. It was really difficult to choose...

**J.P.R.:** Because in the beginning we didn't really know in which direction we were going. We just started to understand it after shooting there for four months and looking at the dailies. For me it was really anguishing because I had never made a film like that. Everything is very written in my films, and this was totally the opposite. Nothing was written.

**J.R.G.M.:** We were editing and at the same time writing the story.

**J.P.R.:** It was a film totally written during the editing process with the help of Raphaël Lefèvre, our editor. And then, during the sound editing with our sound designer, Nuno Carvalho.

**How many hours of footage did you have?**

**J.P.R.:** 150 hours! The editing process lasted for several months. We selected the images, classified them in different files: day / night, exterior / interior, harbor / temples / streets, etc. It wasn't as difficult to shoot as a regular feature because we didn't have the same constraints but then it was excruciating to edit.

**J.R.G.M.:** We were pretty free during the shooting, but during the editing process, everything suddenly became so precise, so--

**J.P.R. (*laughing*):** very obsessive, very organized. Then, we understood that in a film like this, everything was possible. We could shoot in Lisbon as if it was Macao, or we could shoot in Shanghai...

**J.P.R.:** Because the film is shot all over China. And even in Portugal!

**J.R.G.M.:** Then, we would put together our Lisbon shots next to our Macao shots...

**J.P.R.:** ... and that's the wonderful thing about editing, everything can become real and believable.

**J.R.G.M.:** We wanted to keep that freedom of building a story based on images and the freedom of just mixing things, creating...

**J.P.R.:** ... a new space, a new city, "our" city.

**J.R.G.M.:** And again, it also had to deal with memory. Memory is fiction: it's such a cliché to say that but it's true.

**The first sequence is very different from the rest of the film and closer to your previous work.**

**J.R.G.M.:** We wanted to work with Cindy Scrash again, after *To Die Like a Man*.

**J.P.R.:** We love the way she sings. She has an aura from the past.

**J.R.G.M.:** If you go to the drag shows in Lisbon, everybody sings these Spanish and Brazilian over the top type of songs. But Cindy is different, she has this 40s/50s star quality. And we thought it would be great if she would lip synch *You Kill Me*, the Jane Russell song from the film *Macao*. We felt that we really needed to see her, her body, with all the glamour clichés, the Shanghai dress, etc.

***Red Dawn* is ending with the news of Jane Russell's death, while *The Last Time...* is starting with her song from *Macao*. Why this obsession with Jane Russell?**

**J.R.G.M.:** While we were thinking of *Red Dawn*, I was reading Jane Russell's biography. The interesting thing is that she doesn't like the films she did except *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Because she thinks she's always been used as "flesh".

**J.P.R.:** In *The Outlaw* she was chosen because she had big tits.

**J.R.G.M.:** She was "The Body". She was cast for sex, for flesh. In a way, it makes sense, in *Red Dawn* we also dealt with food, flesh (*laughing*)!

**J.P.R.:** And there was also this strange coincidence that she died while we were in Macao.

***Odete* had a strong connection with *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and now *The Last Time...* is inspired by Sternberg's *Macao*. Do you share nostalgia for the golden age of Hollywood?**

**J.P.R.:** The funny thing is that they're not even my favorite films. In *Macao*, there's a really nice beginning though. I love the way the two main characters meet. But I don't like the word nostalgia, even if our film is somewhat about memory: João Rui's childhood memories and my own memories of Hollywood cinema and the way it portrayed the Far

East. Thinking only of Sternberg, there's *Macao*, *Shanghai Gesture*, even *Saga of Anatahan*.

**J.R.G.M.:** I have to admit that I'm more and more fascinated by the idea of shooting in a film studio, in a controlled environment. Because it's something that it's not usually done nowadays, especially in Portugal, only for TV and most of the times the lightning and the decoration are crap.

**Because they do it in a realistic way.**

**J.R.G.M.:** Yes, and it doesn't have that bigger than life quality of the Classical Hollywood films. That fantasy quality.

**J.P.R.:** It's impossible not to feel nostalgic, but what we hate is when people talk about a lost cinema. Cinema changes and that's the way it has to be.

**The political subtext is also very important, especially in the first part of the film.**

**J.R.G.M.:** It's still very difficult for the residents of mainland China to go to Macao. They need a special visa, they have to apply for it, to wait for it and sometimes they never get it.

**J.P.R.:** Macao is a peninsula connected to mainland China. The mainlanders are allowed to make a boat trip around

Macao, they can see it from the distance but they can't step foot on the territory.

**J.R.G.M.:** When I lived in Macao during the 70s, there were many chinese refugees from the Cultural Revolution. They were teachers, poets... mainly intellectuals but also working-class people who had to run away. Otherwise they would have been killed or sent to the Chinese gulags to be "reeducated". They absolutely hated the communist regime. Now, in Macao's main square we saw a Mao Tsé-Toung poster advertising a Cultural Revolution art exhibition and everyone taking pictures of in front of it. As if a camera click could erase the memory.

**How did you come up with the image of the mermaid?**

**J.P.R.:** We saw a video wall with mermaids that appeared and disappeared in one of the new casinos and we thought it was kinda kitsch.

**J.R.G.M.:** But we really liked it. The mermaid is half woman half fish so it all made sense...

**J.P.R.:** ...because of the metamorphosis theme. And the mermaids are opulent, like Jane Russell (*laughing*).

**J.R.G.M.:** There's also a link with Candy, who is a transgendered performance artist.

**In your last films, there are no real characters, a lot of dead or alive animals, and your next project is about an ornithologist. Are you fed up with humanity?**

**J.P.R.:** I don't know. Before becoming a filmmaker, I wanted to become an ornithologist. I think it's the right time to get back to that.

**Tell me about the black and white cat we see towards the end of the film.**

**J.R.G.M.:** That cat looks like the cat in *Happy Birthday!*, which was our cat, Sónic. *To Die Like a Man* was dedicated to him because he died during the shooting.

**J.P.R.:** She belongs to a couple who are very good friends of ours and her name is... Candy!



### **The Filmmakers**

João Pedro Rodrigues and João Rui Guerra da Mata met nineteen years ago and worked together in cinema for the first time in 1995. In 1997, João Rui starred in João Pedro's first short, HAPPY BIRTHDAY!. From then on, João Rui was the art director in all of João Pedro's films, working also on the scripts. In 2007, we decided to co-direct the short film CHINA, CHINA, from an original idea by João Rui, written by both of us. This fiction, spoken mostly in Mandarin, was the first approach to a territory that has long interested us: China. Indeed, the idea of making THE LAST TIME I SAW MACAO emerged after the trips we made in the Far East to promote João Pedro's earlier films, probably over a bowl of white rice, some crispy duck and several bottles of Tsintao. João Rui, son of a naval officer in the Portuguese Navy, spent his childhood in Macau in the 70s, having travelled through many Asian countries without ever setting foot in "Communist China", as it was then known. In thirty years, João Rui never returned to Macao. João Pedro had never been to Macao but was fascinated by João Rui's childhood stories: dark temples with mysterious smells, clandestine opium houses, restaurants serving dog meat, pirate caves and kung-fu heroes.

**CAST**

**With**

Cindy Scrash João Rui Guerra da Mata João Pedro Rodrigues

**Guest Appearance**

Maria João Guerra da Mata Lydie Bárbara Raphaël Lefèvre Nuno Carvalho

**Voices**

Hoi Kem Foo Rita Chan Janete Chan Chan Tong Wong Ko Chung Tin Eduardo Chan  
Mingyu Wu Lian Wu

**CREW**

**Screenplay, Cinematography, Directed by**

João Pedro Rodrigues **and** João Rui Guerra da Mata

**Assistant director** Leonor Noivo

**Direct sound** Nuno Carvalho Carlos Conceição Leonor Noivo

**Editing** Raphaël Lefèvre João Pedro Rodrigues João Rui Guerra da Mata

**Sound editing** Nuno Carvalho

**Sound mix** Mélissa Petitjean

**Scientific consultant** Filomena Silvano

**Musical number crew:**

**Cinematography** Rui Poças aip

**Art direction** João Rui Guerra da Mata

**Production assistants** Yakult Lin Leonor Noivo Rodrigo Candeias Jane Roger

**Production manager** Lydie Bárbara

**Producers** João Figueiras Daniel Chabannes de Sars Corentin Dong-jin Sénéchal

**A production** Blackmaria and Epicentre Films **in co-production with** Le Fresnoy,  
Studio National des Arts Contemporains

**With the financial support of** ICA RTP **and** Centre National de la Cinématographie et  
de l'image Animée

**And the support of** Centre National des Arts Plastiques (image/mouvement), du  
Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication

**Sales agent** Films Boutique

**A Cinema Guild Release**