

Introduction: I'm Brian, and this is Stream Close Up. This one's a lot of fun. Our guest is Portuguese director João Rosas.

His film, *The Luminous Life*, was part of the Crystal Globe Competition at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. *The Luminous Life* is a beautiful film that presents a slice of young adulthood set in contemporary Lisbon. We'll learn that the story is part of an arc that dates back to 2012, and that João has revisited these characters and actors multiple times before presenting them here.

It made me spontaneously think of Richard Linkletter, but Rosas's *Entrecampos* predates boyhood. And I've seen references to *Trafau*, but I think what he's doing here is unique. We'll talk about the *Luminous Life* and the backstory contained in three of his previous shorts.

We'll also get into the current political climate for filmmaking in Portugal and the situation in Lisbon. And perhaps most interestingly, we'll touch on João's thoughts on film festivals and their role as gatekeepers, while at the same time looking at the challenges of his role sitting on festival juries. In for his *Stream Close Up*, João Rosas.

Hit it, José!

Brian: We can start by saying, I reached out because, you know, your film, *The Luminous Life*, was in the Karlovy Vary Festival in that Crystal Globe competition. And when I reached out, I knew nothing about you, and I'll be honest, I have done no homework except for watching your films, which I hope is the primary work when you're talking to a filmmaker.

João: Yeah, that's enough.

Brian: Yeah. And so I read the synopsis of *The Luminous Life*, and I had a chance to see it as part of Karlovy Vary's festival. And then you were kind enough to send me some of the earlier material that really relates to it in a big way.

And I'm familiar with artists in sort of many genres, working with a theme, you know, sketches and working and working until you get to the final masterpiece, whether you're painting, whether you're sculpting. And even I've spoken to directors who've sort of revisited the same theme over and over again. But you're doing something a little bit different than that.

And I wonder, when did the concept for this come together? So I guess we should start by saying a little bit about *The Luminous Life*, so people listening sort of know where we're going. Do you want to tell us about your film?

I mean, you've been out promoting it, you've been presenting it at film festivals. What are you saying to people when you present it?

João: Well, *The Luminous Life* is basically the story of this 24-year-old young man who's still living with his parents in Lisbon. And he's sort of in a recovering from a long, well, he's in a process of a long recovery from a breakup, a love relationship, his first big love that failed. And so he's more or less stuck in his life and trying to, well, maybe he's not really trying, he's just stuck not knowing where to go and what to do with his life.

And so the film basically starts at this, at this, has its starting point, this situation where Nicolau, the protagonist, is basically kind of lost. And the film is in a way, his first steps on his own, in the sense that he's building, finally starting to build his own identity and personality from the moment he moves out of his parents' place and starts working and finds new people and makes new friends. And so the starting point for the film was more or less this very general idea, but for me, very important of this identity process or the identity-building process that people tend to go through when in their early 20s, I mean, depending, of course, on the countries and economic context or whatever.

But this idea of the moment where you start building your own route and your own path. And so this was a starting point. And of course, the challenge was to how to approach such a complex theme in an hour and a half.

Brian: A big issue, but it's presented as a simple slice of life at the end of the day. I think it's very beautifully done. And I want to drill down into *The Luminous Life* itself.

But I would also like to say, you talk about Nicolo, your protagonist, he's not a new figure for you. This is not the first time you've met him. That character is woven through sort of three of your previous works.

And I want to ask you, I guess, when you shot the first short, was it *Entre Campos*?

João: Yeah.

Brian: *Entre Campos*?

2012.

Brian: 2012. With some of the same ensemble that we see in *The Luminous Life*. When you were working back then, that came out 2012, when you were working on that, did you have this vision for this arc that you were going to follow these characters and use this ensemble repeatedly?

Or when did this whole project that it's become fall into place for you?

João: Well, no, not at all. I didn't have this. It wasn't a project at all.

It was basically, Entre Campus was sort of a first attempt, was my first sort of professional short, I mean, with a professional crew. And so where I was trying basically to explore a lot of ideas, namely filming the city or urban space, sort of this following this idea of a city as a character, more or less, in interaction with the human characters. And at the same time, exploring the universe of childhood.

And so for me, cinema was very much related, and still is, but to curiosity. And I was into childhood, in a sense that childhood is an age or a period in our lives where we're discovering the world, and we're curious towards a world that we don't know, and we're trying to figure out. And for me, cinema is linked to this idea of curiosity and trying to figure out things that fascinate me in the world or in cities in general, in this case, Lisbon.

And so, that film was, I didn't plan to continue this story. But as I was developing and writing the following film, Maria do Mar, which was an idea that I had more or less at the same time as I entered campus, again, based on this idea of discovery and childhood, and how to learn, or how children and teenagers learn how to live in a grown up world. This idea of basically a teenage boy who discovers sexuality or desire through the vision of this female body or this older woman.

Brian: An obsession, which will be a recurring theme for Nicolau, but go on. Healthy adolescent obsession.

João: And so basically, this idea was more or less, I had it at the same time as I entered campus, but when I was writing, and since Francisco, so the boy who played Nicolau, was more or less the same age as the protagonist I had in mind, and since I had really liked working with him, and also with Miguel, who is this older brother, who is a very secondary character. But for me, it was important to work with these people in particular and to be able to work and to write for them. I mean, trying to write in a way that I was enhancing what I have found were their characteristics or the things I liked the most.

I mean, in Nicolao, in Francisco slash Nicolao, was basically what I found very appealing and very in terms of in cinematic terms was his look, the way he, the look in terms of not the way he looked, but the way he looked at things, his eyes. And so Maria Dumar is of course, the film built around this idea of what he sees, namely this woman he meets. So, and his look upon this group of older characters.

And from that point on, cinema.

Brian: So, hang on, pardon me, I need to interrupt, I have so many questions. So, it became natural just sort of from a casting perspective to bring him back for the story you thought he fit. When you did Onto Compost, did you know this cast of characters?

Was it an open casting call? I mean, what was your relationship to the performers?

João: Yeah. Well, I had no relationship. It was an open casting.

And since it was casting for children, I was trying to avoid these very gifted children that, of course, come to castings, know that they do ads or advertisements or play music or whatever, you know, speak French or who are very beautiful and usually whose parents are also very keen on having kids on screen. And so I was avoiding this and trying to avoid this. And Francisco and Francisca were very similar names by chance.

But these were normal children that struck me for their sensitivity and for the relationships that I was able to establish with them, even though I was much older. I was helped by the fact, and this influenced me a lot in my work, by the fact that I have two much younger sisters, so like ten years old, younger than me. And so I was very used to, to, you know, spending time with children, playing with them.

And I was very fascinated by, as I said, by this idea of childhood as a, as an age of discovering the world and this curiosity, this, this trying to understand how the world works. And cinema for me was related to this, but from Entre Campos on was also related to the idea of relationship. And so Maria Dumar, as I said, was written for these two actors or non-actors, but these two people that I liked working with and was written for this specific house where the film is set, because it was a house from a friend.

And so from that point on, it became clear that cinema for me was a way of, on the one hand, discovering things that I didn't know. And cinema was a way of making that discovery or that quest, that voyage, so to speak. But also a way of relating to places and people that I liked working with.

And so the castings from that moment on, and of course, Maria Dumar, it was the first time where I tried to develop this working method, where the casting was a way of finding people that weren't actors, but were people that I liked and that I liked to be friends with. And basically the films became this, from that moment on, became this way of starting these new relationships. And of course, both personal and working relationships.

That was one of the first notes I took watching *The Luminous Life*, naturalism. They felt so at ease. And now realizing that you've worked with them over time and sort of they've developed in this sort of path, it's obvious that you've chosen them deliberately because that's what you were looking for to begin with.

Brian: That really comes through, and it's really a sort of a nice element to all your work. Sort of meditative and natural. And you say sort of you wrote, or you have them in mind, you know, their characteristics somehow are in mind when you're developing all of this.

How much is just sort of shot in the moment of them doing something? I mean, do you do anything that's just sort of almost organic when you're shooting some of this footage, just them

lounging, someone unpacking a box, or are all these things absolutely staged? Because they just feel so natural.

João: No, no, they're very staged. I like that you felt organic, because it's a word I use a lot when I try to describe what I'm trying to reach. It's precisely an organic whole from very staged fragments, which for me also has to do with the idea of fragmentation of urban life and the way how urban fragments tend to then build this serious character in an organic way.

But in terms of human characters, it's all very staged. The thing is that I work with, I have a very long period of rehearsals. And the casting itself, it's probably one, if not my favorite, one of my favorite stages of the whole film process, which is, it's basically a conversation.

So more than reading lines, it's a small section of the casting. It's basically long conversations that last for 45 minutes an hour, almost as a therapy session, where I'm the therapist, and I'm trying to get people to tell me, basically to relate with me, to see if that relationship will, if this encounter will become an interesting relationship. That they tell me stories about their own lives, that they tell me how they live the city, where they live, who they live with, if they go out at night, if they're in a relationship, in a flat share, whatever, the neighborhoods that they like.

And so, the casting and then the rehearsals are a very long process, they take months, where I'm always going back and forth between the actual rehearsals and then the writing. And so, I'm constantly rewriting the script based on my own ideas on what I want from the scenes in terms of where they fit in the structure of the film, but also taking all these elements that people give to me that can be, you know, like from an idiomatic expression to a certain story, to certain things that they do. And that then I try to integrate in an organic way, as you said.

And so, I like this idea that you, the word that you used for sketches, no, because I really like to see in painter's work, for example, the sketches that lead to a painting, or these ideas of sketches that are layers upon which the painting will be constructed. And I kind of see my film process in that way. I mean, sketches that I tend to develop and try to perfect.

And each film is a sketch for something that I'm trying to reach. And so in a way, they work as films, I mean, as objects, you know, by themselves. But I like this idea of keep trying and filming as also a way of questioning and not having an answer.

And so this is something that reflects also, is reflected in the castings and in the rehearsals, where I'm basically a bit like Nicolau. I'm in this position of listening to what people have to say. And so many times *The Luminous Life* being a feature gave me that possibility of having this long process of casting and rehearsals and being able to integrate people that weren't planned to be in the film and create characters on purpose for them to be in the film.

And so I have certain characters that already existed in the original structure, but others that I was so interested in getting to know more about these people that I created characters from scratch.

Brian: So first of all, to me, the casting process sounds like building a new friends group. It sounds like a wonderful thing to be going through. And sort of you touched on what's a recurring theme here on this show, is that as much as a filmmaker has a vision, that a film really is a collective process, you know?

As you say, you're getting cues even from your actors for how you create the characters. Could you want to say a few words about Catovento? And I have some questions about, you know, you allude to the city as a character.

I definitely want to get into that as well. But sort of, so you've done the first two, there's a connection now with Nicolo as a character, and then you do Catovento next.

João: Well, Catovento is basically, again, you can see it as a sketch, or it's like a long short, so it's 40 minutes long. And again, it's based on this idea of, after Entre Campos and Maria Dumar, of this idea of growing up. And so I think in narrative terms, it's very interesting for me to try to develop these stories from these starting points as, you know, transitional phases where you are basically between...

you're looking for something. And I think this relates, again, to this idea of cinema as a way of looking and questioning. And I think it has to do, of course, with Francisco himself, the way he looks and the way his attitude towards life.

And also, of course, the stage he is in his own life, even though Nicolau is not based on his life, I always take elements from what he's doing. For example, like in Maria do Mar, with these card tricks, the magic tricks, in Cato Avento, he was learning, really learning how to play the guitar. Then in Luminous Life, he really has a band.

And so, Cato Avento, I was interested, it was basically a pre-stage to The Luminous Life in the sense that it's the first time where you're asked to decide more or less what you want to do with your life. And I really like this idea of indecision and doubt. In fact, The Luminous Life afterwards starts with this line from Bertolt Berest, of all things certain, the most certain is doubt with the choir singing.

And so Catovento was built on this idea of indecision and how when you're asked to choose, you don't know what to do. And so The Luminous Life then follows that path in the sense that it's not what really necessarily what you study in college that will determine your future because then living is more than that, no? And so The Luminous Life is about this more ontological quest, so to speak, that goes beyond what you studied.

And it really has to do. And for me, when I presented the film, I don't think it was a very good presentation, a very good pitch. But for me, it's really a film about friendship and love and how these two kinds of relationship really form our personalities and our identities and how you, once

you start moving away from your family, your parents who chose the school you attended and not they didn't choose your friends, but in a way you didn't have much choice.

Brian: I was interested in how really when you start giving these first steps on your own, the people you meet, either friends or love relationships, are these connections that will really push you through life and stay with you. And it's what makes life Luminous itself.

Lovely. You make...

João: It's a bit confusing sometimes.

Brian: No, no, that was lovely. If you've seen the film, that makes perfect sense. And if you haven't seen the film, when you find the chance to, you should watch it.

Yeah. I would say... You mentioned a few things here.

You mentioned transition. There's always sort of someone passing through Lisbon in these stories and sort of that gives a contrast to the potential. You know, you talk about he's facing sort of his adult life, the first steps of it.

And I thought it was interesting, sort of, okay, everyone's these young people who he meets, they're all coming and going. You know, and his choices seem a little bit more limited, maybe by his own, sort of he's stuck in his own little world for reasons. But I thought that was very interesting, sort of it starts to make Lisbon the place, sort of part of the story, and you also do that visually.

I mean, you seem to love standing in the middle of traffic and movement and letting the city flow around you in a bunch of these shots. There's references to architecture all over the place. And then there are references to cemeteries.

Tell me where that comes from. I need to know.

João: The cemeteries?

Brian: Yeah, the cemeteries. I mean, you even refer, I'm here in Sweden as we talk, and you even reference Skogsjökergården, which is a UNESCO site here, but that's a famous cemetery. But how do you even know about these places?

And how do they find their way into your into your movies as sort of a sub theme?

João: Well, in the case of the cemeteries in Lisbon, it is, as I said before, it's I cinema is also a way of relating to certain places that are part of my life or my memory of the city throughout the years. And so I have a connection to that cemeteries, and it's a place that makes part of my story of my own Lisbon, so to speak. And then...

Brian: Pardon me, is that the cemeteries that's sort of in some of the background shots in Entrecampos?

João: Yeah, it is.

Brian: Okay.

João: Yeah. And so, I was... And then, well, these two cemeteries, the one in Sweden and the one in Morocco, in Rabat, are two places that I visited and that struck me a lot.

And so, the character, I don't... Well, once I met this girl who was really studying cemeteries, and again, it was one of these encounters that I didn't see her again in my life, and I didn't really know what her thesis was about, but she only said this sentence and this stayed with me. And it's one of these elements that I was saying that I picked from the city or from some people that I encounter in my daily life.

And this idea stayed with me for a lot of, well, many years. This was in 2017, I think, that I met this girl. And so, I don't know, it's one of these things, when I was writing the scenes and I was developing the character, it wasn't thought of, you know, it just came of, this is, Chloe was this, she was this student that was, you know, studying architecture and cemeteries in particular.

And then, of course, cemeteries also worked as a metaphor for me, of course, death or the presence of death is what also what makes life luminous. And so, also, it has, I mean, for me, it has a lot of, you know, metaphor, not for me, like for humankind, a lot of mankind has a lot of metaphors, you know, like, there are very poetic places and very, very, what you think about life, of course, about time. And it made sense to stage this love relationship, the possibility of a new life in a place that's associated with grief and sadness.

And, but also, but also from the point of view of, you know, like, this idea, and that's why I also have the plants and the trees and in the film, this idea of cycle, you know, the cycle, sounds a bit cheesy, but the, you know, the cycle of life that you need to die to be reborn and so on. I'm not a very mystic person and religious, but at least in the film, I wanted to explore that idea as well. And also it's, I like the idea of these places more in a philosophical terms of, you know, in the middle of the city where it's full of life, and you have these sort of blank spaces where, you know, life goes on around them, and the places themselves are dead.

Brian: Yeah, that's something you explore in your other project. Was it Death Of A City? I want to get the name right.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, you allude to that there a little bit. I mean, it's nice, all the sort of park scenes, the sort of, you know, places where you can convene publicly still that you use in the shots.

And there's also sort of a little bit of a sadness. I mean, I understand what's going on in Lisbon and other cities like that when it comes to housing and the challenges for young people and sort of the economic challenges that have happened in some of the cycles that have been going on. And I really, I mean, I love the story among the young people.

I love sort of how they have these beautiful, honest conversations about their feelings, you know, and they and I love the sort of, I don't want as simple as to not the right word, but the sort of plain way that Nicolo just keeps going through it, keeps pushing through, keeps pushing through.

João: I like the word simple so you can use it.

Brian: Okay, okay, I don't want to be diminishing in any way around that. But I also love sort of the adult line in his life, you know, he's dealing with his parents' relationship, he's interacting with these new adults. There's sort of like the chorus of those three, the former teacher and the other two in the bookstore, you know, who are in the background sort of advising or misadvising him from time to time.

And I mean, I love the, there's so many just like moments that struck me. There's the bookstore owner, he takes the job at the bookstore and the bookstore owner says to him, you must be honest, but if he doesn't ask for a receipt, don't give him one. You have to be honest when you deal with me, but you know, we'll scam the system.

These beautiful sort of, I don't know why, but they sort of just calm me and take me into this place so deeply when you do those things.

João: Nice, thank you.

Brian: Yeah, really impressive. And it was, I have to say, fascinating to go back and see these characters. I mean, you get a little hint of the teacher early, early on in one of the shorts, and then boom, she's back and she has a big role here.

And I just think that's sort of wonderful how you have that connection, that arc, that thread through it all. Do you expect people to consume these things as a group? I mean, is that the ideal?

João: Yeah, well, I think, I think The Luminous Life works for itself, no, I think it's an independent film. So I'm not expecting, I know most people won't be able to see the shorts. But of course, if they can do it, I think it's interesting.

I think it's a very, I mean, when the shorts are played in a screening, the three of them, for example, it's screening that people really like, because it's interesting how to, this of course, as I said, wasn't planned from the beginning, but now looking back and when you see them, the three of them together, of course, cinema is a way of reconstructing space. You fragment space

in different shots, and then you build this organic hole through editing. But it's also a way of filming time.

And for me, these films are related to this idea of my memory of the city and how cinema is a way of also poetically try to work this memory, but without creating this memorial or nostalgic discourse about the city, how it was 20 years ago, or my own youth. But trying to find how these young people are living the city nowadays.

Brian: But there's a hint of that melancholy because it affects where they are right now. So it's nice and subtle. I want to ask about another element, since you're talking about cinematography as an art form.

You have the Cinematheca as key setting in *The Luminous Life*, films within films, some very gentle scenes with hands touching each other. What was the purpose? I mean, you're a filmmaker, obviously that was done with a very deliberate choice.

So what was the purpose of the films that you chose and the people presenting the films? What was the message there? I lost a little bit on me because it was French translated to Portuguese, and I was trying to keep up with it.

I think it was an important message. Do you want to share a little bit about what you were doing there with Cinematheca?

João: Well, there's more than one scene, right? So on the one hand, I was, well, I have these references. It's important to say that either from films or music or from books, the books they read, I'm not interested in, you know, like calling the attention upon the references or my knowledge of these.

Brian: This is my job to try to ask about the references.

João: know, I know, I know, but I put them there. I'm just saying that what I try to do to use again, the word organic is to have these objects or, you know, like films, books, music, to have them in the film in an organic way, because it's again, elements, there are things, these little treasures or precious stones that we carry inside us, each one of us carries inside ourselves, and that make life luminous, you know, a line from a film, shot, a line from a book or a song. And so I wanted to have them in an organic way, in the sense that they're included in the narrative line, so to speak.

And so, but also, I was interested in having cinema, because for me, the cinema, I'm more interested in as a viewer than as a filmmaker, in the sense that for me, like a movie theater is a place of communion. And it's an extension of this idea of city as a place for encounters and exchanges and meeting people by chance, and creating relationships. And all the films are created, are built around this idea.

I only realized it's not long ago, but around this idea of people moving from one place to another and then meeting and enter campus is very clear on that. No, it's like she feels at home once she makes the first friend in the city. And so the Cinemateca in particular as a cemetery, it's a place where I've spent a lot of time.

So it makes part of my own story of the city. And it's also this symbol of an idea of communion that's sort of in decay, because people tend to go less and less to the cinema. But it's this beautiful idea of falling in love with someone who is sharing a film with you.

And of course, a platonic love, most of the times you don't even speak to that person, but you're having this collective experience with strangers. And for me, it's important nowadays where, as you know, the extreme, the far right is more and more, gaining more and more power and this discourse of, you know, fear and fear and loathing against what we don't know and who is different. For me, the cinema is this idea of communion of strangers.

And so, and this, again, connected to this idea of friendship and love. And also, then, one of the scenes is with the quoting this Robert Cresson notes on the cinematographer. It's a book that I, it's really important for me.

It's probably the most important book I read in terms of cinema. And that really formed me as a filmmaker. And I still follow some of those rules, even though I'm not as orthodox as Cresson.

But I really like his films in this book. It's a book that I return to often, even when I'm not filming. But I wanted to have it in the film, but from an ironic point of view, also being able to laugh at myself.

And, you know, this idea of the French intellectual who only speaks through quotes, as with the film of Storheim or other books that are quoted throughout the film. So I like to have these references, but at the same time, being able to look at them from a certain distance. It's not that I don't take them seriously, but I don't want them to impose them on the viewer.

And I'm able to look at them also from this ironic point of view and laugh at myself and my, you know, this idea also.

Brian: I would never, I'm not saying there's anything heavy handed about them at all. I just, you know, I need to ask. I thought they were woven in very nicely.

I thought it's a beautiful setting. The, you know, piano music is beautiful. And it's also a wonderful device in the storytelling to give Nicolao a chance to follow this girl, you know.

João: Yeah, because also, I forgot to mention, but you're probably aware of this. There's this very old tradition or idea of cinema is somehow connected to ghosts, you know, this idea of the, you know, like the, this beam of light in the dark and the ghosts on screen. And is this reality?

What is the representation and dream? And so for me, it made sense that this ghost of the ex-girlfriend somehow was present in this, in this, in this dark room as a sort of, you know, in dialogue with the ghosts on screen in this case, in this case, through Haim's Ghosts, and this place where reality is not always what it seems. And so it's curious that many people have asked me, they really hold hands.

And well, I don't want to answer that, because you can see whatever you want. But when I was filming, it didn't occur to me that people would have that doubt. But it's interesting that people sometimes ask me, did it really happen?

What is going on there? Is this real? Is this part of the film?

And also for me as a filmmaker, I really like the film of Strolheim, The Wedding March, even though it's not considered one of his best. But I remember that scene very well. And when I was teaching, I even showed it to students, because I also really like, again, that's why I chose Nicolau or Francisco to then continue working with him in Maria do Mar.

This idea of, or this capacity, beautiful capacity that cinema has of connecting people through the gaze, through gaze, through their eyes. And so this whole sequence of Strolheim is built around this idea of connecting these three characters through the way they look at each other. And so as a filmmaker, there's also this sense of a challenge for myself.

Can I do, build a whole sequence with the same premises, you know, like the eyes and the hands? And so that was, the formal challenge was.

Brian: Nicely done, very beautiful scene, I would say.

João: It's my favorite, actually.

Brian: Oh, really? I love the setting of the Cinematheque in general as well. And I hadn't heard the analogy of ghosts as the film.

I hadn't heard that before, but I guess that sort of ties nicely into the cemetery imagery as well that you have as part of this. I'd like to switch gears a little bit, but there's still some overlap, and talk about your film Death Of A City for a moment here. Yeah, and then I want to ask you some questions about the festival as well.

But Death Of A City, when did you do that? Does that predate these shorts? Is that in the middle of all this?

João: Well, Death Of A City was a very long process. So I filmed it after Maria do Mar, so between Maria do Mar and Catavento. I filmed it between 2016 and 2018.

I shot it for two years, which was the period it took for this building to be built. And so it was a very long process. And then I edited it for many years on and off because I had kids, and then there was COVID and all these different lives happening.

Brian: Can we say really quickly, for people listening, it's sort of a meditative study of the demolition of a building in Lisbon and sort of in the context of what's happening to the city in a bigger way, and an exploration of the men actually on the site doing the job. Is that a good explanation of it?

João: Yeah, I think so. I mean, it's a film. It's yeah, it's a film that starts with this questioning about what's happening to my city.

And then the movement of the film, not only the film itself, but also when I was filming is this movement of approaching or getting closer to these men who are doing the work. And so it starts as a film about, you know, just, yeah, the financial and political background of what's going on. And this idea of death of a certain city.

But also then the movement is of discovery of a new way of living the city through these people. And again, it has in common with fiction, my fiction films, this idea of encounter with the other. And even in a much stronger and more obvious way, because we're talking about mostly immigrants who are subject to many types of violence, not only in the working place, but in their daily lives.

And so the challenge was how to, again, create a relationship with these people, a relationship that would be a relationship, sort of a horizontal relationship and of trust, of sharing, of friendship in certain cases, and not a vertical and a power relationship, where me as a Portuguese white filmmaker with a camera in my hand, go into this working place and produce some kind of speech about what it is to be immigrant or whatever. So a bit like Nicolau. So again, I was in this listening position.

Brian: I like the way that in the film itself you explored just that, how you have to establish the relationship. And then I was not completely shocked, but I was a bit surprised about sort of the transient nature of it all. These crews aren't even on these sites for extended periods, and you go and you come back and they've turned over, and you have to start again with that whole process of sort of making them feel comfortable in front of your camera.

There was one, there's a lot in that film that stands out. I think it's really provocative in sort of obviously the building demolition and the broader issues around what's happening in cities today that is sort of awakened, but also the struggle of these guys. And that some of them are just passing through.

I mean, some of them will be there for years and still pass through. Their ambition is to get out and not stay. And the conditions that they're working in.

And I think it's really, really nice. And it's again, not heavy handed, but it brings up all these issues, these really important political issues, without pounding me.

João: Yeah, well, the challenge was how to approach these very sometimes abstract and theoretical and macroeconomic realities, you know, like gentrification or racism, and post colonialism, well, capitalism in general from a human scale. So how to intertwine, so to speak, the macro and the micro narratives. So, and the film, again, it's, I think it's a film where your idea of sketch is very clear.

So this idea, I was questioning myself every day as I was filming. And so this idea of having the voiceover and talking about the process of making the film itself is really based on this idea of sketching, you know. So I'm trying, like this quote from Beckett, you know, like the try, failed, try again, failed better.

Well, it's not exactly like this, but it's, it's, this is the idea. So constantly.

Fast in the modern world.

And a constant attempt to, to, to understand and to use cinema as a tool for that questioning. And again, very important for me in this idea of relating to these people. And so I was interested in including that process in the film itself.

Brian: I think it's a lovely layer to it. That's very clearly very personal. I mean, you're doing the voice, you're talking this through your struggle with the film.

Your concept for the film and what it's going to become. And I think that adds a real nice sort of secondary storytelling layer to it all as it unfolds. I like that.

It was a nice sort of, not quite guide track, but something that kept me interested in a separate lane the whole time. How is *The Luminous Life* being received? Has it been released anywhere yet?

Is the Portuguese public seeing it?

João: Yeah, yeah. It's in Lisbon now, well, in Portugal, but mostly Lisbon now, but it premiered just before the festival. So we had a national premiere because we had the international one at Karlovy Vary.

Well, the reviews have been really good, surprisingly. I must confess I was-

Brian: Hey, why surprisingly? It's a beautiful film.

João: No, but I, well, I mean surprisingly, especially outside of Lisbon or Portugal, because I think there's a very, there's a lot of work with through language and words and a lot of jokes, you

know, subtle humor that I try to work with through language. And so it was, and also I was curious to know how people would react to that, but also to Nicolau himself or Portuguese or the youth, not only Portuguese, but the youth that lives in Lisbon. And it was curious to see that, for example, a lot of Czech young people in Karlovy Vary related to the character and talked to me about how they felt the same.

Brian: Sure, I can see, they can see themselves passing through Lisbon and meeting him and his friends, I'm sure.

João: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, but I was really surprised, and I'm being honest with the reviews in the American press, for example, you know, like the Hollywood Report and Variety and a lot of websites. They were really very, very good.

So I was surprised because I didn't feel, I was, I didn't think honestly that for Americans in particular, or would like this kind of storytelling or filmmaking that it would be maybe too talkative, too slow for what some people are used to. But it's curious because a lot of times they mention the good rhythm of the film and the characters and how they really follow the story. So I was I was very pleased and so it's being very well received.

And now, of course, it's being, Karlovy Vary was more or less the starting point to an international career, so to speak. And so now it's going to start touring different festivals around the world and also having commercial releases in some countries. Excellent.

Brian: Well deserved. A quick question, a quick question about festivals. You said, you know, you were judging at another festival last week.

You presented a Karlovy Vary a couple of weeks ago. What's your festival experience like? I mean, at Karlovy Vary, do you get to watch your peers work in the same category?

Or is it all just presenting your film and focusing on that? Are you meeting other directors? What's the festival experience like for you?

João: Well, I tried as much as possible to watch other films, but it's not always possible, because you tend to go for a couple of days, or three or four days, in this case. And so you're always busy with different screenings, Q&As, and then you have these...

Brian: Idiots like me.

João: Not at all. It's a pleasure. Also, you have all these...

Yeah, well, these things you have to do. So basically, you don't have much time to watch other people's films, but it's a pity, because it's... It's what you bring the most out of festivals.

It's obviously the films you watch and the people you meet. But yeah, but I've had experiences in some other cases, in smaller festivals especially, where I was able to... And I even made friends with other directors from other countries, so it's nice.

But at the same time, it's weird, because festivals are... You know, it's sort of this parallel universe, this bubble, where, yeah, you talk about films, and especially industry and commercial releases and sales and whatever. It's something that I'm not really interested in.

Brian: You make films, not sell films.

João: Yeah, exactly. So and sometimes it's... Once I was in Locarno, for example, with Maria Dumar, and I was having this lunch, you know, with my peers who were in the part of the Domani competition for short films, you know, director from Thailand and, you know, the US, Italy, whatever, Brazil.

And now this was like, no, a year after I was shooting in this country house in Lisbon, and I was, you know, looking around, being fascinated also by these people I was meeting, and we were having lunch in this amazing place in Bocarno with, you know, amazing food. And the distance between, you know, shooting the film, struggling with the idea and the rehearsals and trying to really get things through what the feelings and what you really, the core of your idea, and then the distance between that very lonely, sometimes very painful process and being in this environment of presenting the film, celebrating, which is nice as well. Of course, I really enjoy it, but it's strange.

And then to be a jury last week, I also, of course, it's a way of helping certain films that you like to be seen. But at the same time, this competitive side, I'm not really comfortable with it. I think festivals should be, you know, don't have a competitive...

Brian: I'm fascinated by that whole structure. I mean, for me, I've been blessed to be able to see almost all of the films now in the Crystal Globe competition, and to meet people like you, and be exposed to things I never would have seen otherwise. And that's the magic of it for me.

But I can't imagine sitting on a jury now, having seen these films, and trying to compare them, and then try to say, this one is a winner versus that one. That... how that even happens.

I would never want that challenge myself, is what I would say.

João: Yeah, it's complicated, because also because... Well, I don't know if you've taught to other juries, but it's... as we all know, many times it's not the best film that wins, or your favorite film.

So you need to reach a sort of agreement with three or four other people that like, have different tastes, or have their own agendas. The festivals themselves have their own agendas, and I think it's something very perverse nowadays, the importance that certain festivals have in terms

of the circulation and then the commercial release of the films, because it's true that, I mean, three, four people in a selection committee, they see the film, they like it, and you can have a wonderful career, or if those four people don't like it, it's... the film is doomed to fail.

So it's a bit perverse, the importance. And I experienced it myself with *Death Of A City*, which was a film that for almost a year was very hard to distribute in festivals. And then I was lucky enough to be nominated for this Doc Alliance Prize.

Well, as I told you, it's really not my field, you know. I don't really...

Brian: Hang on, your films are all over the festivals, you're a judge in festivals. This is your field, whether you like it or not.

João: No, I mean, but the way films circulate, because for me, I mean, I share my films with you with the links, and I share them with whoever asks me. So, for me, what's important is that the films are seen. Of course, you have a commercial interest in the films, especially the producer, but in Portugal, we still have a system that nonetheless, more or less, protects your creativity in the sense that you have public funding that's not asking for profits.

But of course, we're interested that the film is seen and promoted and sold to other markets, but you still have the freedom to work, to do what you want and not what the audience necessarily is expecting. And so, for me, my films would be online for free, you know? So, I understand that I'm...

Brian: You want them seen. That's a common refrain from filmmakers. I get that.

This is also something that's interesting, because I'm speaking to filmmakers from all across the world now, as part of this little series, and you bring up the support you have in Portugal. Do you feel that it's a supportive community? Is it in a good place in terms of funding for the film industry, in terms of helping you make films?

João: Could it be better? Obviously, it could be better. But what's the climate right now?

I mean, I've spoken to people from Norway who have opportunities to get stipends. I've spoken to people from countries where they have to build it themselves, every piece of it. So I'm just wondering what's the climate there for filmmakers.

João: Well, it's getting more and more complicated. The thing is that there's been this long tradition, I mean, for a few decades, especially from the 90s, where there was a lot of investment. And we are collecting the fruits, as we say in Portuguese, collecting the fruits now.

I mean, for example, if you look at Miguel Gomes, now with the director of *Grand Tour*, who won at Cannes, he was someone who 20 years ago started with these films, short films, that they started these funding for short films that no one watched. And so the whole generation of

filmmakers like him and others who are currently very successful at festivals and so are spreading Portuguese culture, so to speak, throughout the world, they were able to try and fail and to do these sketches through public funding. And that still exists, but it's getting harder and harder, not only because of, well, the economic crisis that happened like in 2011-12.

Then there was a bit of more investment after the crisis. But now every time the right wing governments are in power, the first thing to be slashed is culture and social benefits. But of course, the situation is so dramatic nowadays in terms of political climate in Portugal, but in Europe, not to mention Gaza or the US, of course, but in terms of racism, of, you know, the far right is so strong.

That culture, I mean, I feel bad, almost ridiculous to complain that they're cutting my funding to make a film because when you're expelling people from countries who are, well, these people who are working at the construction site, for example, people who are trying to make a living and bring their families, whatever. Those are problems that are much concerning, much more than...

Brian: And doing it for performance.

João: Yeah, no, no, completely, completely. It's for political and personal gain. And it's not that sometimes they don't even really believe in what they're saying.

It's just that out of, yeah, they're the performers in this theater. But, I mean, the situation is still, there are still public fundings, but it's more and more complicated in the sense that cinema is seen as a way of promoting a certain image of the country, namely a touristic image or economic image, so attracting foreign investment.

Brian: But that's not the story. That's not the real story. That's okay.

Go on.

João: I mean, what do you mean the real story?

Brian: I mean, to promote tourism doesn't tell the story of Portugal or Lisbon.

João: Yeah, of course. Of course. But the idea is, you know, like you only see a financial side of it and you want these short term gains.

And so cinema, you know, is starting to be seen as this way of attracting foreign investment and promoting this certain image of the country. Instead of, you know, the system that has been going on for a few decades now, where still you have a lot of freedom to film, you know. And it's true that there are these low budget productions, but still it's part of the charm, so to speak.

But it's in peril. I mean, these next few years are going to be decisive, because we just had elections and the right-wing government won. They ended the Ministry of Culture, which is now the same as youth and sport.

And so there's a big debate going on inside the community of what the next few years will bring.

Brian: It's interesting to see, I mean, we won't know for a while, but what that will mean for the next generation of Portuguese filmmakers, what they will look like since they're going to be coming out of a slightly different school.

João: Yeah.

Brian: I want to say thanks so much for taking the time to do this.

No, it was a pleasure. Thank you.

I really was, I just was touched by *The Luminous Life*. I thought it was just a beautiful film is really all I can come back to over and over. Yeah, that's really all I have to say.

Anything else you want to talk about? Do you have a new project in the works yet? Are you going to take these guys into a TV series someday?

João: Only if Netflix is interested. No, well, I have a new project, but it's not with these same characters. It's again, has to do with the transitions and questioning life, but it's more based on its older age.

Brian: So like midlife crisis more than youth crisis.

These guys aren't growing up fast enough to play these roles.

But maybe I'll come back to them someday. But now I want to change something else and I want to try something else for a change and see where it leads me.

I really enjoyed all the work. Thanks again for being so generous and sharing it. And thanks again for taking the time.

From Stream Close Up: João Rosas - *The Luminous Life* - Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, Aug 7, 2025