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CINEMA AS DISQUIET

The Ghostly Realism of Pedro Costa

THE WORK OF Portuguese director Pedro Costa proceeds by slow, measured steps. Although each film enacts a formal departure from the previous one, taken as a whole, the trajectory displays an ever-distilled vision that brings into closer focus the everyday lives of Lisbon's poor, while opening up immense historical vistas—the African diaspora, the slave trade—in which they might be set. Renowned among cinephiles for his stringent, monumental 'Fontainhas trilogy', Costa remains largely unknown beyond that world. How and where should his oeuvre be situated? By what scale of values should his work be judged? Attempts to define his cinema in terms of conventional categories—geo-cultural context, subject matter and settings, cinematic modes, the personalized film language of the *auteur*—have a disconcerting tendency to destabilize the categories themselves.

Context, first of all. Costa's work might initially be situated in the reflexive tradition of contemporary European cinema, grounded in the critical canon-making of the new wave and neo-realist theorist-practitioners. His early career benefited in a general sense from the plentiful EEC funding that helped to sustain Portuguese film schools and support a rebirth of national cinema after the 1974 Carnation Revolution. Yet Portugal, as diagnosed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the country's leading social philosopher, has long existed within two zones, or time-spaces: not just a European but a 'colonial zone', spanning the oceans; and occupying peripheral and backward positions within both. For Portugal, as for its former colonies, 'lagging behind meant having a problematic past'—and 'as a problem, the past became an inescapable part of the present.'¹ Within the Lusophone world, post-colonial relations between

Portugal and Brazil have patterned those of the UK and US—the former colony soaring above its one-time ruler in world importance and cultural production—though cast in a more disorderly, archaic and surprising register, within which Africa bears a decisive weight. Not just the European New Wave but the revolutionary aesthetics of Brazil's *cinema novo* had a formative influence on the generation of Portuguese directors that immediately preceded Costa's, including his gifted and idiosyncratic teacher, the ethnographic film-maker Antonio Reis.²

The inescapable presence of the problematic colonial past, as de Sousa puts it, forms a subtext in much contemporary Portuguese cinema.³ Yet Costa's deliberate and sustained choice of Cape Verdean settings and subjects represents a different type of commitment. His Fontainhas trilogy was set in the jerry-built homes and alleyways of Lisbon's hidden ghetto. When the neighbourhood was torn down and its residents shipped out to bright and flimsy high-rises on the city's edge, Costa filmed the destruction and followed his characters out, documenting the loss of a group made immigrants once again. This persistent and patient gaze on a particular locale and its inhabitants marks out his singular approach. Costa's subjects are, as Jacques Rancière has noted, 'workers without work', without a working class or class struggle, seemingly trapped in the ahistorical time and space of the everyday.⁴ In a recent essay, Emilie Bickerton has considered Costa's work in the context of a new genre of post-industrial 'proletkino' cinema, discernible in the films of the Dardennes, Guédiguian and Loach.⁵ As Costa himself has put it: 'Most of mankind's

¹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 'Portugal: Tales of Being and Not-Being', *Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2009.

² Manoel de Oliveira returned to film-making after a twenty-year gap with the Brechtian *Rite of Spring* (1963) and Paulo Rocha's *Change of Life* (1966), both staged using non-professional actors in 'ethnographic' rural settings in northern Portugal. António Reis worked on both films before collaborating with his companion Margarida Cordeiro on the ground-breaking *Jaime* (1974), *Trás-os-Montes* (1976) and *Ana* (1982).

³ See Carolin Overhoff Ferreira, *Identity and Difference: Postcoloniality and Transnationality in Lusophone Films*, Berlin and Zurich 2012, p. 17. Notable works on colonial and post-colonial Portuguese-African relations include João Botelho's *Um Adeus Português* (1986), Manoel de Oliveira's *NON, ou a Vã Glória de Mandar* (1990) and Miguel Gomes, *Tabu* (2012). Ferreira's book also surveys a wide range of Luso-African and Brazilian co-productions.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, 'The Times of Cinema', in *Modern Times: Essays on Temporality in Art and Politics*, Zagreb 2017, pp. 158–9.

⁵ Emilie Bickerton, 'A New Proletkino?', NLR 109, Jan–Feb 2018.

stories—I mean the stories of the lower classes—either have been told wrongly or haven't been told at all. So cinema has to step in.⁶ Yet as Bickerton suggested, Costa's formal experimentalism and use of multiple cinematic modes and genres—fiction, ethnography, documentary, realism and surrealism; noir, zombie, melodrama, quest—also made him an outlier in this company of naturalistic feature-makers.

'All great fiction films tend toward documentary, just as all great documentaries tend towards fiction', Godard proclaimed, on seeing Jean Rouch's *Moi, un Noir* in 1958. Rouch's innovation was to extend the radical ethnographic tradition pioneered by Robert Flaherty, in which the subject became an active participant in the film-making process, to introduce an improvised fictional element, forging a new mode between fiction and documentary. The ethnographic dimension of Costa's work foregrounds the symbolic structures and institutions analysed by anthropology—the home, the hospital, the workplace, the state, the street—thus posing them also as questions for film criticism. Indeed for Costa, as he put it in a talk at the Tokyo Film School, these symbolic structures have been part of cinema's repertoire of meanings from the start: 'The Chaplin character in *The Tramp*, as soon as he enters a deluxe hotel or a bank, he's immediately thrown out. You see that repeatedly in Chaplin's films: as soon as he enters, he's rejected, someone throws him out. It's systematic.' Chaplin's lesson? 'Cinema belongs to the street. It was born in the street and it stays in the street, with those who are powerless.'⁷

If these are common themes across his work, however, the reflexive character of Costa's cinema also ensures that each film represents a critical development from the one that went before. What follows, then, will proceed heuristically, examining the use of modes and genres, settings and structures, cinematic language and social meaning, in an attempt to provide some provisional answers for our framing questions.

Beginnings

Costa's biographical and cinematic formation was inextricably bound up with the 1974 Portuguese Revolution and the dynamics of cultural

⁶ Aaron Cutler, 'Horse Money: An Interview with Pedro Costa', *Cineaste*, Summer 2015.

⁷ Pedro Costa, 'A Closed Door That Leaves Us Guessing', transcript of lectures on film-making delivered at the Tokyo Film School, 12–14 March 2004, first published in *Pedro Costa Film Retrospective* by Sendai Mediatheque, Tokyo 2005; available at rouge.com.au

liberation that were its initial legacy. Born in 1958, he was a teenager when the 25 April movement erupted—‘a kid’, in his own words, ‘yelling in the streets’, taking part in school and factory occupations, discovering ‘music, politics, films and girls’ all at the same time.⁸ In 1979, by way of the Lisbon punk scene and a half-completed history degree, he enrolled in the pioneering Film School at the National Conservatoire. Initially a rebellious presence at the back of the class, he recognized in António Reis a teacher to whom he had to listen: ‘He made “direct cinema” and he himself was direct.’⁹ Together with his wife, the psychologist Margarida Cordeiro, Reis had made a trio of films that integrated documentary and fiction, ethnography and poetry. Filmed in Cordeiro’s native north-east, *Trás-os-Montes* (1976) documented the historical and psychological time of the eponymous province ‘beyond-the-mountains’: a landscape of rolling hills giving way to communities of stone houses without electricity, where rituals of labour and leisure had been passed down for generations—a living rebuke to the grandiose claims of the Estado Novo regime. The couple and their small crew travelled from village to village on foot—the region was unreachable by paved roads at the time—befriending the people who became the subjects of the film. Jean Rouch saw in *Trás-os-Montes* the revelation of ‘a new cinematic language’, ‘disquieting objects’ born from the stubbornness of the directors’ commitment to give expression to the difficult communion between villagers, landscapes and seasons.¹⁰ No less than with Bresson or Straub-Huillet, the guiding principle was the search for what Cordeiro, in an interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, termed ‘literal images, images of an immediate and adequate vision’.¹¹

For Costa, discovery of the films of Reis and Cordeiro, as well as works like Paulo Rocha’s *Os Verdes Anos* and *Mudar de Vida* (1966), meant understanding that what he wanted to do already had a past in Portuguese cinema—‘I wasn’t starting from scratch anymore.’ Like the

⁸ Pedro Costa, interviewed by Michael Guarneri, ‘Documentary, Realism and Life on the Margins’, *BOMB*, 16 June 2015. See also the *Cineaste* interview on *Horse Money* with Aaron Cutler, Summer 2015.

⁹ Anabela Moutinho and Maria da Graça Lobo, ‘Conversation with Pedro Costa: The Encounter with António Reis’, in *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2015, pp. 17–22.

¹⁰ Jean Rouch, postcard to Centro Português de Cinema, 25 June 1976, available at antonioreis.blogspot.com.

¹¹ Margarida Cordeiro, ‘A propos de Ana’, interview with Yann Lardeau in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 350, August 1983.

Film School itself, Reis was steeped in the cinephile canon and taught on the basis of a dozen or so films, including Eisenstein, Murnau, Welles, Tati, Hitchcock, Rossellini, Straub, Ozu, Godard and Bresson—‘Bresson most of all’, whose *Notes on the Cinematograph* echoed Reis’s own mode of injunction to his students: ‘You must go see Velázquez in the Prado; ‘You must go to the Lascaux caves’; ‘You must go to Iran to see the rug motifs. Save up the money to travel, and go alone.’ Reis helped to impart not only new ways to see and hear—‘Don’t be afraid of filming what surrounds you. If it’s cars, it’s cars. If it’s rocks, it’s rocks’—but also patience and discipline. Costa recalled learning ‘the pleasure of obsessive control over the different shades of everything, from the first word to the last second of the film.’ At the same time, Reis and Cordeiro’s work involved a commitment to ‘a certain field of action, of combat, of work’, that Costa would call ‘the field of the humble’, referring both to their choice of subject—spending a great deal of time with people in impoverished communities—and to a cinematic method that depended upon ‘capture’, not invention. ‘Good movies don’t have to invent anything, they only have to watch and reproduce. But reproduce in a different order.’ In this sense, Reis and Cordeira’s films were ‘supernatural’, because ordered in a way that had never before been seen.¹²

Noir on noir

It took some time for this formative context to find expression in Costa’s cinema. During what he called the ‘horrible decade’¹³ of the eighties—years that saw Portugal swap a ‘transition to socialism’ for an EEC-led ‘transition to capitalism’, in de Sousa’s terms—Costa served a lengthy apprenticeship as assistant director, which he reports disliking, finding in the professional film industry the mimic of power and class relations he would later upturn. Throughout this period, Costa slowly pieced together the script for his first film *O Sangue* [Blood], released in 1989. With backing from the Portuguese public-broadcasting company RTP and the Instituto Português de Cinema, the team involved—both cast and crew—were for the most part recent graduates from Lisbon’s Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema, plus the German cinematographer Martin Schafer. A moody, black-and-white nocturne, *O Sangue* follows two brothers, the older Vicente (Pedro Hestnes) and the younger Nino

¹² Costa, ‘Encounter with António Reis’, pp. 19, 18, 21–22.

¹³ Costa, ‘Encounter with António Reis’, p. 19.

(Nuno Ferreira), who are trying to navigate the world after the disappearance of their no-good father.

The powerful pre-credit sequence encapsulates the themes of patriarchal violence and marginal youth, in a cinematic language that mingles the tropes of 1940s American *noir* with the non-professional actors and ‘found’ locations of neo-realism. Out of the black appears a close-up of Vicente before his portrait is interrupted by the slap that lands across his face. A counter-shot reveals the hand as belonging to an older man, the father named only as *pai*. Another counter-shot and the first words are spoken by the son: ‘Do what you want with me.’ The father picks up his suitcase and walks away. ‘Don’t leave me’, says Vicente. And then, ‘What am I going to tell Nino?’ ‘That I’m dead.’ The screen dissolves to black once more, and re-opens seconds later to the father walking alone between twisted trees, the opening bars of Stravinsky’s *Orpheus* accompanying a figure lost in the darkening landscape.

The bleak rural setting, the *recto tono* dialogue, the paternal rejection, the slap itself all echo Bresson’s *Mouchette*, and indeed Costa’s is a film about children, orphaned or alone. Its narrative unfolds from this initial action. With Clara (Inês de Medeiros), an assistant at the village school, the two boys briefly explore a life of liberty. ‘Dad’s not coming back’, Vicente tells Nino in the woodland by the river, which is the film’s site of freedom and romance, the safety of hidden thickets softly lit. ‘Now we can do what we want.’ Costa captures the romance of this adolescent idyll with nights that are inky, relentless, velveteen black, and white-lit faces that emerge as apparitions from the shadows. At the fairground, Clara’s slight figure in a white dress cuts a diagonal line across the screen as she descends the darkened hillside toward the carnival. The teenage reverie, with Vicente in his too-small bomber jacket, a motorbike in the background, evokes a scene from Nicholas Ray, Costa’s own 50s nostalgia only contradicted here by the distinctive New Wave synth melodies of The The, which proclaim his post-punk affiliation.

The trio’s idyll is interrupted by the arrival of a wealthy uncle from the city, who kidnaps Nino, and the small-time crooks who have come to collect the patrilineal debt that has been passed down to Vicente—money stolen from a trade-union fund. By contrast with the shadowy woods and moonlit water of the Tagus Valley, Lisbon’s new-built landscape of commercial capitalism features as a sort of consumerist prison, where Nino

will be held captive by his uncle, a playmate for his own disabled son. It is matched by the criminal corruption undermining the trade-union movement. 'We lost the revolution', Costa has said of his country, and *O Sangue* could be read as the film of that defeat.¹⁴ At the same time, it is a highly referential work. In its narrative structure of three—a boy, a girl and a child—banded together, *O Sangue* recalls *Rebel without a Cause*. In its featuring of the blood-bond between orphaned siblings on the run from malevolent forces, it evokes Laughton's *Night of the Hunter*, though here the forces are those of Portugal's uneven modernization. The film is drenched in the poetry of teen loneliness and nightfall, and Costa confesses to having been 'completely enchanted' by American movies when he made it, although the final shot—Nino piloting a motor-boat up the broad Tagus River, the wind in his hair—evokes as much the open seascape at the end of Truffaut's *Quatre Cent Coups*. A supremely assured début, *O Sangue* nevertheless lacks the suspense and narrative tension of the genres to which it pays homage, where fear is conjured as cinematic affect. Well received at home, it was Portugal's nomination for Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards.

Over the ocean

Costa's next film would be a radical departure from *O Sangue*, both in setting and in cinematic horizons. A Franco-Portuguese co-production under the auspices of Paulo Branco, *Casa de Lava* (1994) was premised on a grander scale. Part of Costa's motivation for decamping to the volcanic island of Fogo in Cape Verde for the shooting was nevertheless a desire to get out of 1990s Portugal, with its 'miserable humiliations, political, social, artistic', in which the centre left and right colluded.¹⁵ It would be a chance 'to see things from afar'. The archipelago's function as a nexus for the South Atlantic slave trade, a place of involuntary settlement and captivity, had been addressed by Chris Marker in his epistolary documentary, *Sans Soleil* (1983) with scenes shot on Fogo. The Portuguese dictatorship had used the prison colony at Tarrafal as a labour camp for anti-colonial militants and political opponents through to the 1960s. When Costa arrived in Fogo, ten years after Marker, he envisaged making a political movie, though 'in a way that sees politics as

¹⁴ Costa in Cutler, 'Horse Money'.

¹⁵ Jacques Lemièrre, "'Terra a Terra": O Portugal e o Cabo Verde de Pedro Costa', in Ricardo Matos Cabo, ed., *Cem Mil Cigarros: Os Filmes de Pedro Costa*, Lisbon 2009.

a long chain of death and torture', spanning generations and borders.¹⁶ Yet the film actively tends towards undoing our expectations, narrative, political, aesthetic.

Unlike *Sans Soleil*, *Casa de Lava* was originally conceived in fictional mode. As with *O Sangue*, a 1940s genre movie supplied an initial point of reference: Jacques Tourneur's 1943 *I Walked with a Zombie*, in which a young nurse, hired by a Caribbean plantation owner to care for his wife who has fallen into a mysterious trance, is drawn into the island's voodoo culture. Belying the trashy title imposed by Hollywood producers, Tourneur's film is a masterpiece of poise and reflection, in which Afro-Caribbean folk rituals take on an animating force while death comes, ultimately, from the white plantation owner, wielding an arrowhead drawn from the Catholic icon of Saint Sebastian. The notebook of Costa's first research trip to Cape Verde reveals a further set of 'texts' informing the film: a newspaper article on dangerous vaccines that Lisbon was exporting to the Lusophone African countries; a postcard from the islands; the love poems of the French surrealist Robert Desnos.¹⁷ He was also learning the islanders' language, a particular form of Creole.

The remarkable opening sequence establishes a multiplicity of cinematic modes and time frames. After almost ninety seconds of archival footage of the volcano's eruption in 1957, Costa interjects Paul Hindemith's fourth movement from his viola sonata (Op 25/1), itself a high-modernist *scherzo*, consisting purely of crotchets played at breakneck speed. Shots of the dark mountains, spitting fiery lava, then yield to portraits of the island women, motionless, mostly staring out of shot, with strong, unyielding faces. The montage itself, cut to Hindemith's ever-changing time signature is a masterpiece of editing, displaying the musical quality of Costa's work and his attention to rhythm. The drama of the music heightens the power of the portraits—until, in the movement's final seconds, we cut to the complementary shot: here are the island's men, in a colder climate, dressed in jumpers and blue hard hats, streaming out past the camera onto a Lisbon construction site, as the sonata sounds its final C—a shot that recalls the Lumières' 'Workers Leaving the Factory', only in reverse.

¹⁶ Costa, 'Pedro Costa: An Introduction', p. 11.

¹⁷ In Costa's telling, 'because I was reading a book by Robert Desnos, I signed his name on the back of the postcard, and suddenly the whole story became clear': 'I Died a Thousand Times' in Costa, *Caderno*.

This is where the film's action takes off: the camera closes in on one worker, Leão (Isaach De Bankolé), shown poised high on the scaffolding against the roar of machinery; a narrative ellipsis elides whether his mysterious fall is deliberate or accidental. The next shot has him horizontal on a hospital bed. He has been comatose for seven weeks, and after an anonymous letter and cheque have arrived, calling for his return, a young white nurse Mariana (Inês de Medeiros) volunteers to make the journey. Cut to a cloud of noise and dust as Mariana and her stretchered charge are abandoned on a barren landing field in Fogo, the helicopter pilots shouting as they take off again that they won't be back for a week—symbol of an international order that has left Cape Verde behind.

This establishing sequence is a model of economic storytelling, covering in ten minutes the narrative time of several months. The initial propulsion of 'the quest'—Mariana has seven days to discover who from the island has sent the money for the comatose Leão's return—provides the structuring tension of the film. Mariana, tiny, young and fearless in her increasingly grubby red summer dress, makes a determined investigator, visually captured in a long tracking shot as she marches past the run-down painted houses of the little town, the islanders about their daily business. The contrast of cinematic language with the imprisoning, monochrome interiors of Costa's first film could not be starker: here the screen is full of light, capturing the island's sun-bleached, oceanic hues: red dust, ochre fields, huge old trees, pastel houses, washing spread out to dry. Costa's director of photography on *Casa de Lava* was Emmanuel Machuel, who worked on Bresson's *L'Argent* (1983); the wide-angle grandeur of his landscape shooting is one of the film's most remarkable qualities. Machuel and Costa took evident pleasure in photographing the shallow browns of the volcanic landscape, in compositions that recall Rossellini's imagery in *Stromboli*. At the same time, Costa has described the process of the shoot as 'like boycotting my own film', abandoning whole sections of script ('a script is always a book of law, of rules')¹⁸ for a more exploratory style. He set off with Machuel to improvise scenes with islanders, alongside the professional actors.

The upshot is a fiction film that tears itself away from its own narrative structure. What is to be discovered ceases to be pre-determined by the formal plot device and becomes instead the discovery of the island's

¹⁸ Costa, 'A Closed Door That Leaves Us Guessing'.

world. Yet, in contrast to *O Sangue*, the film retains a real dramatic tension, for we never know what Mariana's search will yield. The social world of the island is only gradually revealed; and is first heard, rather than seen, in the music of the old fiddle-player, Bassoe (the Cape Verdian violinist Nho Raul Andrade), picking up in gipsy fashion the echoes of Hindemith. A desiccated, weather-beaten figure, Bassoe tells Mariana of his peripatetic life as a musician, travelling around the islands; she follows him up to a night-time party at his home in the lava hills, a remarkable scene—warm bodies dancing to the gipsy sounds in lamplight darkness. With this transition, the ratio of film time to narrative time slows dramatically, the jump cuts of the opening ten minutes giving way to the expansive scenes and wide-frame takes, where the ratio—though full of ellipses—is something like 100 minutes to 48 hours.

In the process, the would-be linear narrative device of the quest becomes instead a situation. Through a series of settings and structures, each with its representative figure, the institutional history of Portuguese colonialism is fleetingly invoked and the island's present, timeless state of post-colonial dependency portrayed. Each symbolic structure—hospital, political prison, migrant-labour regime—contains its own dichotomies. At the former leper colony where Leão lies, the traditional cures with which the resident nurse, Amalia, restores him to consciousness are counterposed to the contaminated vaccines that Mariana has brought from Portugal; yet neither can cure the strange sleeping sickness that afflicts the islanders. Work and death, or workless life, are intimately related. There is no work on the island and the only option is to seek a ticket to Lisbon and a job on a construction site—face of Portugal's Euro-funded development. The division of labour is gendered and the island women, gazing out over the ocean, dream of ending their days in Lisbon's industrial slums.

The film's dichotomies are at the same time formal: fiction and documentary, voodoo-trance movie and *cinéma engagé*. Its visual motifs are structured around the forward propulsion of Mariana's slight figure and the dead weight of Leão's horizontal one. Cape Verde is at once exotic and impoverished; Bassoe's many sons are giving up their music for the promise of unskilled work in Portugal. Leão's reverse migration runs against the tide of Cape Verdeans leaving for Europe. Edite, the white colonist who has lived on Fogo for decades (having never returned to Portugal after the death of her husband, a Portuguese political prisoner

at Tarrafal), uses her pension cheque to fund the community's emigration, one by one, month by month. Compared to Costa's first film, *Casa de Lava* proposes a richly suggestive set of meanings, not least the structured contrast between the world of the metropolis and that of the former African colony. But Lisbon is not necessarily preferable, and when the film ends *in medias res* after a few days and nights on the island, it's not clear that Mariana will go back, and though Leão has by now awoken from his coma, he nonetheless persists as a figure caught between life and death, Fogo and the Portuguese metropole.

A home in the alleyways

This arresting work paved the way for Costa's future film-making, in a quite literal sense. The islanders he had been working with on Fogo charged him with delivering messages and gifts to their relatives in Lisbon, many living in the ghettoized slum of Fontainhas, an obscure network of alleyways and shanty housing on the city's edge. When Costa arrived, laden with letters, coffee and tobacco, Fontainhas was a closed neighbourhood, a hub for the 1990s heroin trade, guarded by gunmen and entered through a darkened tunnel. Having gained access, helped by his ability to communicate in Creole, Costa immediately knew he wanted to make a film there. Produced again by Paulo Branco, *Ossos* [Bones] (1997) takes as its 'text' a newspaper story about a mother from one of Lisbon's *bairros de lata*—tin-shack neighbourhoods—who tried to sell her baby at the central railway station. At one level a low-energy melodrama—the *faits divers* story a staple of that genre—*Ossos* is also a film about watching and listening, in ethnographic mode. The film begins, once again, with a black screen and a soundtrack of raindrops and casual voices. It is carried by the non-professional actors, Fontainhas residents and junkies, who worked with Costa on the film; notably Vanda Duarte as Clotilde, a young Mother Courage offering tentative solidarity to the suicidal teenage mother Tina (the Russian actress Mariya Lipkina), whose equally young boyfriend (Nuno Vaz) uses the baby as a prop for begging, before trying to sell it.

The film's sense of desperation is condensed and intense, evoked not least by the wordlessness of its characters; but *Ossos* is above all a work of astonishing visual beauty. Costa again makes use of Machuel as director of photography, this time in a more classically Bressonian vein, though the palette of the sustained, beautifully composed shots of the

Fontainhas interiors, often multiply framed by doorways or windows, is more reminiscent of Vermeer. The cinematic language is thus very different to *Casa de Lava*, the camera usually kept at close range, focusing on faces or hands—the exception being an extraordinary long tracking shot that follows the father into town, swinging (though later cradling) the black plastic bag that contains his baby. There is in all this a sensuous element. Static compositions dimly lit linger on the mess of a kitchen table—forgotten crockery, a tangle of electrical cords, a strewn plastic bag—a Dutch still life on celluloid. It's a world away from the middle-class apartments where Clotilde works as a cleaner, Machuel's camera capturing the light pouring in through plate-glass windows.

Costa, then, overcomes something of the coldness of Bresson's late work, adding to the intensity of the earlier films a commitment to depicting a particular, marginalized social reality. One remarkable shot looks through an open window into Tina's room as she blasts a tape of Wire's punk-minimalist 1977 classic, 'Lowdown', and then out through the window on the other side to capture passers-by in the alleyway beyond; everyday life going on to the song's low, bluesy grind. All the while, Costa carefully negotiates the distance between camera and subject, and foregrounding the ethical concern in formal terms. Evocative as these painterly images are, they consistently preclude any effect of naive realism, or suggestion of transparent access to the world of Fontainhas. The film's opening offers an emblem of this: after the black screen and diegetic Fontainhas soundtrack, a dark-lit medium shot of a young woman in a blue jumper appears, her reddened eyes by turns engaging the camera directly and retreating to self-absorption. Lasting some forty seconds, over the continuing noises from outside, the scene will leave this anonymous character still unknown to us. She will reappear at various junctures, always on the periphery, watching, listening, never explaining herself.

This haunting presence accords with Costa's view that 'sometimes in the cinema, it's just as important not to see, to hide, as it is to show'. *Ossos* is always withholding, repeatedly demarcating the limits of what its viewers can see, not only with its multiple framings and elliptical editing that veil the ubiquity of heroin, but at the level of the image, with the symbol of the closed door. The basis of this is a modernist insistence on the materiality of film-making, against the comforting illusionism of Hollywood—the genre of the good-time movie, in which 'what you see is

nothing other than yourself, a projection of yourself': 'You don't see the film on the screen, you don't see a work, you don't see the people who make things, you see yourself—and all of Hollywood is based on this.'¹⁹ Against the falsity of transparency, Costa defines cinema as 'a closed door that leaves us guessing', a metaphor that finds concrete expression in *Ossos*, with its Bressonian shots of doors, passageways and locks. The closed door also literally marks the end of the film, where Tina is last seen in close-up through a crack in the door, shrouded by the black of dark timber, before she drops her gaze and shuts us out. The sounds of the neighbourhood continue as the credits roll; these lives continue, but we can go no further.

The liberated camera

Premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 1997, where it was nominated for a Golden Lion, *Ossos* was immediately acclaimed at home and became a surprise success at the Portuguese box-office.²⁰ Behind the camera, however, the visual artistry of *Ossos* came at a price. Shot on 35mm, with tracking, floodlights and a large production crew, the film-making itself represented an invasion of the crowded neighbourhood, which Costa would later liken to a police raid or a military operation, with production assistants paying off disgruntled local residents.²¹ His criticism was shared by Vanda Duarte and her sister Zita, the unnamed watcher in *Ossos*, who invited him to film them as they really lived. Such a challenge would entail, Costa understood, a wholesale reinvention of his tools and methods: no script, no lighting, no production crew or professional actors—and a switch from celluloid to digital video, which Costa could shoot himself. This *arte povera* form of ethnographic film-making reversed the formula of *Ossos*: no money, but time regained. Taking advantage of the working possibilities offered by DV, Costa developed a form of intimate, artisanal cinema, operating at the pace of everyday life: going into the neighbourhood each morning, looking, working, shooting footage that might possibly give rise to a scene. This was also a move away from the auterist film-making of *Ossos*, the director in control of

¹⁹ Costa, 'A Closed Door That Leaves Us Guessing'.

²⁰ Cyril Neyrat, 'Pedro Costa's Fontainhas Trilogy: Rooms for the Living and the Dead', *Criterion*, 30 March 2010.

²¹ Costa, 'I'm not a video artist, I am a film-maker'. See also Costa in conversation with Laura Mulvey, ICA, London, September 2015, available on the Second Run DVD of *Ossos*.

every move, to a more collaborative practice: Costa has described Vanda as his co-director on the project.

Over two years, working with a small digital Panasonic camera, a mirror he had found on site, and some cobbled-together reflectors, Costa collected the 140 hours of footage he would later edit down to the three-hour film: a magisterial work of portraiture devoted to Lisbon's neglected poor. *In Vanda's Room* (2000) follows the rhythms of its eponymous protagonist as she and Zita lounge on their bed, talk, cough and smoke scrapings of smack from bits of tin foil, chased back with tobacco. Costa's poised, attentive camera, facing the bed where they usually lounge, relies largely on the light that streams into Vanda's green-walled room through a single tiny window, creating a semi-religious darkness. In stark contrast with the wordless, still-life tableaux and anomic fictional characters of *Ossos* is the vitality and agency of Vanda and her friends. In its own way, this is a more political film. The sisters talk non-stop, sometimes with visiting friends who walk in to the pre-established frame, mostly listening as Vanda holds court. With a racking cough, lingered on by Costa and amplified by a post-production soundtrack, Vanda is nonetheless a mesmerizing screen presence, issuing trenchant verdicts as she unfolds the story of their lives: the death of a local dealer friend, the incarceration of her sister Nela, another friend imprisoned for stealing stock cubes—eliciting the excoriation from Vanda: 'Sent to jail for stock cubes! Our country is the poorest, the most pathetic of them all.' All the while, the physical and social fabric of Fontainhas is being violently destroyed by a slum-clearance programme that got underway as Costa was filming. The camera occasionally ventures out into the sunlight to capture the devastation, while the sound of jackhammers and mechanical diggers floats in through open windows.

Costa films predominantly inside the slum dwellings, knitting together scenes from Vanda's bed, and her mother's adjacent room—its doorway opening onto the street, a TV flickering with the glimmer of white faces, the mother a tired but kindly presence. The third space is the vacant room where Pango, a young Cape Verdean, sets up home: diligently sweeping the floor, tacking a poster to the wall, adjusting the position of a purloined corner cabinet, while his friends come round to shoot up and hang out—a regular domestic scene, with the addition of needles, syringes and straps. Costa punctuates these scenes with Ozu-inflected

'pillow shots', everyday scenes from the neighbourhood, the street under threat from the bulldozers.

The shallow space, the patient and painterly form and the charismatic quality of Vanda herself all evoke the epic minimalism of Andy Warhol's mid-60s cinema. Combined with Costa's digital video which sharpens the atmosphere, isolating each fly, the film develops a photographic realist technique, extending it to an almost hallucinatory degree. But where other digital minimalists like Wang Bing or James Benning use fixed-camera long-takes to focus the viewer's gaze on outdoor landscapes or industry, Costa's domestic cinema achieves a staggering intimacy by keeping the camera indoors. Without sparing us Vanda's gruesome coughing fits, or the filth in which she lives, Costa labours to make his compositions pristine, overtly beautiful: crutches propped against a wall, a naked man bathing in steaming water amidst the crash of demolition, a red plastic bin full of spent lighters, the lilac purple of Vanda's jumper against her Fontainhas-green wall. Sometimes these images verge on the devotional, and Costa at one point allows the soundscape of coughing, bulldozers and dogs to cease as Bach's Agnus Dei aria from the B-Minor Mass drifts in from the TV. Vanda begins a discussion of the pilgrimage shrine of Fátima, before caustically undercutting her own wistfulness—it's 'a goldmine for pickpockets and vendors'.

In the dignity that Costa affords his subjects, drugs are everywhere in *Vanda's Room*, but without judgement—another inheritance from Warhol. The rituals of drug consumption—the manual labour of scraping, rolling, burning, the fuss over needles and foil—are always figured alongside the work of domestic chores. Pango's friend helps with the cleaning as a needle dangles from his arm. When she's not smoking or hawking vegetables, Vanda is shown helping her mother around the house; Zita is enlisted to help skin a rabbit. Survival itself is a form of labour in Fontainhas, and Costa has referred to the unemployment there as 'the worst capitalist exploitation'.²² Vanda and her friends are reflective on the topic. 'We're unemployed, but that's work', one man tells another. Vanda tells a friend that 'we choose this life of drugs. This is the

²² Linking the 'unemployment, poverty and sadness' of Fontainhas with Portugal's long history of colonialism, Costa has said of Vanda and her friends: 'Drugs are just another punishment imposed on them. And it became clear to me that they are working, and not in terms of dealing.' Costa, 'Pedro Costa: An Introduction', p. 13.

life we want.’ But the question of free will remains an open one, as the soundtrack of jackhammers builds to a crescendo and the very walls of Fontainhas are dismantled.

Again into exile

Costa has spoken of *In Vanda's Room* as his first film, in so far as it was ‘the first time that I found the possibility of family’. His subsequent work would be propelled by a sense of deep personal commitment, and with the destruction of Fontainhas, Costa became ‘part of the caravan’ and followed its inhabitants to the stark white high-rise complex of Casal da Bobo, to which they had been relocated—the second major site of exile in Costa’s canon.²³ The product, *Colossal Youth* (2006), is a 150-minute film chiselled from 320 hours of footage shot by Costa over a year and a half. Yet its mixture of cinematic modes would be a radical departure from the documentary realism of *Vanda's Room*. In the intervening years, Costa had filmed a documentary for Arte, *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?*, on the editing of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet’s *Sicilia! Restricted to the editing room, with Huillet working at the moviola on the left side of the screen and Straub keeping up a running commentary from a doorway on the right, this double portrait might as well be called *In the Straubs' Room*—another chamber drama. *Colossal Youth* sees Costa experiment with a more theatrical and metaphorical *mise en scène*, akin to Straub and Huillet’s practice of having the players declaim their lines in a carefully rehearsed manner—‘quoting them’, as Brecht had said.²⁴ And as with Straub-Huillet’s Italian productions, Costa’s subjects stand here on a grander historical stage: post-colonial exile and Portugal’s unfinished revolution are Costa’s themes, never given strictly realist treatment, but evoked as the backdrop to Fontainhais.*

As such, *Colossal Youth* is a yet bleaker film than *Vanda's Room*, stripped as it is of much of the visual pleasure that Costa salvaged from Fontainhas. Another double portrait, it combines ethnographic footage from Vanda’s new room—she recounts the harrowing tale of her heroin baby’s birth, and laments the deaths of her mother and sister, Zita—with the quest of a second protagonist, Ventura, for which Costa develops a new, more

²³ Mark Peranson, ‘Pedro Costa: An Introduction’, *Cinema Scope*, no. 27, summer 2006, pp. 6–15.

²⁴ For *Colossal Youth* Costa rigorously rehearsed his actors, sometimes doing thirty takes to achieve the delivery required.

experimental cinematic language, while also re-deploying political and aesthetic motifs from *Casa de Lava*. Brought up in Cape Verde, Ventura had arrived in Lisbon in 1972 as a teenage construction worker, one of the first generation of Africans to build his home in Fontainhas. By the time Costa encountered him there, during the shooting of *In Vanda's Room*—a strikingly tall, enigmatic presence, with a piercing gaze and a zombie-like stiffness, as though from a Jacques Tourneur film—he was considered a ‘failure’ of the community, diagnosed with schizophrenia and dosing himself with alcohol. In *Colossal Youth*, elegant in a black suit and open-necked white shirt, he becomes the film’s hero and guide.²⁵

Ventura (aptly named) resembles a lost soul on an odyssey. We first see him silhouetted against the tall white rectangles of Casal da Bobo, calling Vanda’s name—answered from one of the tiny windows: ‘Hey, Ventura!’ His quest would seem to be the recovery of community. He conducts us through the white cells of the Casal da Bobo public-housing blocks, but also into the darkened realm of high culture—sprawling on an ornate velvet sofa beneath Rubens’s *Flight into Egypt* at the Gulbenkian—and back to the delirious days of the Portuguese revolution. His search takes him from room to room, listening to the stories of his various ‘children’, real or imagined, each with their own tale of woe, amplifying the film’s choral quality. Zita is absent but we watch as her funeral procession seems to occur off-camera, with Ventura paraphrasing from Renoir’s *La Bête Humaine*: ‘It wasn’t the poison she took, it was all the poison taken for her before she entered this world.’ In an encounter with a municipal official—another Cape Verdean, be-suited and embourgeoisified—Ventura demands to be re-housed in an apartment big enough for all his twenty children. With his daughter, Bete, who still lives in one of the few remaining dwellings in Fontainhas, he looks for shapes and patterns in the patinas of the time-worn painted walls, the Fontainhas green a contrast to the stark, white-washed plasterboard of Casal da Bobo. ‘When they give us white rooms, we’ll stop seeing these things’, says Bete. ‘It will all be over.’

Colossal Youth combines the horizontality of a public-housing chamber drama with the vertical lines of the epic form. We are no longer in the

²⁵ Costa in conversation with Laura Mulvey, September 2015. The ironic reference of the film’s Portuguese title, *Juventude em Marcha*—youth on the march—to the language of anti-colonial and communist movements is lost in the English translation.

dense, musical present of *Vanda's Room* but in a multiple and ambiguous time, its interrelated layers intelligible only through Ventura's memory. The film opens with a close-up, shot in virtual darkness, of an African woman holding a knife blade, telling how she drove her husband—Ventura?—away. Costa's spare minimalism provides little visual signposting for his 'flashback' scenes—certainly not the usual signifiers of costume or perceptible youthfulness. In one of these moments Ventura shares the problems of his friend Lento, a fellow Cape Verdean construction worker, standing in a shack that has been torched. Together they memorize a love letter, derived from the same Desnos poem that featured in *Casa de Lava*:

Nha cretteu, my love,
 being together again will brighten our lives for at least thirty years.
 I'll come back to you strong and loving.
 I wish I could offer you 100,000 cigarettes, a dozen fancy dresses,
 a car, that little lava house you always dreamed of, a three-penny
 bouquet.
 But most of all, drink a bottle of good wine and think of me.
 Here it's nothing but work . . .

The poem's lines function in Costa's cinema as a thread of male longing spun across the long distances of migration, exile and deportation, figuring the contradiction between work and love. In *Colossal Youth*, it also accompanies Ventura's retreat into madness, as he and Lento, presumably now in 1974, recite the poem to one another amidst a rising revolutionary fervour that they both interpret as inherently threatening—the heaped-upon miseries of present-day Casal da Bobo an indictment of a revolution betrayed. We watch as they eventually board up their shack—the closed door that keeps us guessing—and we're left in darkness.

Ventura's revolution

Complementary to *Colossal Youth*, and in some respects its sequel, *Horse Money* (2014) departs from the domestic scene to privilege the site of traumatic memory and haunted consciousness, with all the narrative fragmentation this entails. The film takes as its 'text' Ventura's painful recollections of the 1974 revolution, and Costa's realization that, despite the large immigrant population in Lisbon at the time, there

were virtually no black faces on the mass demonstrations of 25 April. Raised in conditions of extreme poverty and brutal political repression in Portugal's colonies, Ventura and other young African immigrants in Lisbon were hiding in the bushes, terrified of what the soldiers of the Movimento das Forças Armadas—sections of the former colonial army, now risen against their own dictatorship—might want to do. As Costa has said, it's a dangerous enterprise to put collective memory into the trembling hands of a madman: 'At the same time, cinema seems to have been invented to do exactly this.'²⁶

The mode of the film is poetic, associative; its structure mirrors the topography of Ventura's own troubled mind, as he makes his journey into what Costa has described as a 'Baudelairean night', wandering through a vast network of cloisters and tunnels that are both the chambers of his hallucinating mind and the hospital where he is being treated. But *Horse Money* is, once again, a collective project, developed over years of intense work involving Costa, a slightly expanded crew of two or three others, plus the small group of African immigrants who star in and co-develop the film, talking and improvising scenes—a practice that has more in common with a small theatre company than a film set. Costa himself has said that there are things in the film that he doesn't understand, which come from the Cape Verdeans—and especially from Vitalina Varela, a 50-year-old cousin of Ventura's who arrived from the islands during the filming.

The film's plot defies any rationalization; in place of any sustained continuity of space or chronology, *Horse Money* delivers itself in haunted images. The opening sequence, a silent montage of extraordinary early photographs of *fin-de-siècle* New York tenement life by the journalist and social campaigner Jacob Riis, cuts to a formal oil portrait of a black man and then to a panning shot (the first since *Ossos*) of Ventura descending a dark staircase that leads down to an iron gate, as though out of Goya's Madhouse. Descent into memory, into the past, but also into a dungeon that conjures slavery. For much of the film, Ventura remains underground, or in hospital; he variously maunders around, stops to be conversed with in cramped examining rooms, or lies in bed receiving visits from Cape Verdean friends, each with his own tale of woe.

²⁶ Costa in Cutler, 'Horse Money'.

One visitor, Delgado, set his house on fire with his family inside and never spoke again; Benvido fell from the third floor of a construction site; Lento sold drugs to supplement his labourer's income and got hooked. Later, Ventura visits the abandoned factory he once worked in, where Benvido tells him of a man ground to death by a malfunctioning machine. The bitter reality of industrial accidents and broken families is a refrain that runs through the film: 'We'll keep on falling from the third floor. We'll keep on getting mangled by the machines . . . We'll be burned. We'll go crazy. It's all that mould in the walls of our houses. We've always lived and died this way. This is our sickness.'

Horse Money is a lacunary film and the discontinuity is unsettling. Ventura here frequently changes costume, sometimes subdued in striped hospital pyjamas, at others glorious in a frilled shirt and red trousers; elsewhere adorned in only a flap cap, boots and red underwear. Reality remains indeterminate; sometimes Ventura is manifestly the elderly retired labourer we see, at others he still seems to be living in his own past. Early on, he announces, 'I am 19 and three months', and later, the dialogue depicts him as a young man yet to build his shack in Fontainhas, or to bring his wife Zulmina to join him. One figure tells him, 'You've died a thousand deaths, Ventura. What's one more?' Caught in a nightmare, he is living every moment of his life at once, all the glory and the squalor simultaneously.

Ventura shares the film with Vitalina, a ghostly figure who emerges out of the darkness as though direct from Ventura's imagination. She has arrived in Lisbon too late for her husband's funeral—one of the many Cape Verdean contractors, separated from their wives and children back home. She delivers her story in whispered declamations: the shattering news of the death, the struggle to gain a passport and an airplane ticket, the agony of a flight in grief, and the redoubled loss upon arrival: 'I arrived in Portugal with a burning fever, soaked, freezing. This was June 30th 2013. My husband's funeral had been three days earlier.' In the same muffled tones, she establishes her presence by reading from the bureaucratic testaments to her life: her birth certificate of 1960, the official Cape Verdean marriage certificate of 1982, the certificate of her husband's death. Lacking citizenship papers, she knows she is precarious, and she stalks the shadows of the film. A figure cutting across the genres of fiction and documentary, Costa in interview emphasises the reality of her struggle: 'Vitalina Varela is not Madam X. She's not a ghost.'

She's a fifty-year-old Cape Verdean woman who still hasn't gotten her Portuguese legal papers. She's someone who still cannot get a miserable pension from her husband's death.'

The film culminates in a terrifying twenty-one minute sequence in which a pyjama-clad Ventura finds himself stranded in an elevator with a motionless armed soldier covered in dull silver paint.²⁷ The soldier strikes different postures from shot to shot, but cuts eclipse his movement. He appears to speak, though his lips are still. He taunts Ventura, asking: 'Are you with us? Are you with the revolution?' Ventura trembles in fear at the apparition. 'Viva the revolution. United we stand, united we fall', he replies, mangling the slogan in his dread. Like the other settings of *Horse Money*—ghetto, dungeon, hospital, factory, crypt—the military-administrative space of the elevator is itself a highly symbolic structure. Costa's most ethereal film, *Horse Money* is in one respect also his most concrete, insofar as it directly challenges the legacy of the 1974 Carnation Revolution, and all that flowed from it.

Ventura's closing ordeal in *Horse Money* reflects Costa's philosophy of cinema as unrest, that Buñuelian idea of disquiet, which entails making the viewer 'feel that something isn't right'. The first film ever to be screened, Louis Lumière's *Sortie des ouvriers de l'usine Lumière* (1895), and the first photograph ever to be published—Nadar's still of twelve dead Communards (1871)—are both 'somewhat terrible things', he insists: not love stories, but 'anxieties'. The men and women captured smiling as they empty out of the Lumière works onto a sun-drenched street—under their master's gaze—are not exiting a factory, but a prison. The site of Fontainhas has now been turned into a vast shopping centre, where Costa has not, and will not, film again—the place no longer 'the street' in Chaplin's sense, resembling more the bank or the hotel, from which the tramp—and director—have been thrown out. But his eighth feature film, now in post-production, continues to show the anxieties that surround Fontainhas and, working closely with a similar cast, takes as its subject Vitalina's arrival to Lisbon, and her discovery of the neighbourhood's destruction. Reflecting on a trajectory

²⁷ This scene, the first one shot for the film, appears in a differently edited version as *Sweet Exorcism*, Costa's contribution to the 2012 portmanteau feature *Centro Histórico*. As this alternate title implies, Ventura's battle with his own demons here is a kind of therapeutic exorcism, both confession and trial.

that has led from cinephilia and genre *hommage* through fictionalized ethno-documentary to experimental expressionism, Costa has declared, echoing Godard, that ‘real directors don’t distinguish between fiction and documentary—we film life.’²⁸

The other half

Where, then, should Costa’s work be located? Among contemporary practitioners, his work might be placed on an arc between that constellation of committed, principally ethnographic-documentary film-makers—Wang Bing, Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman among them—and more expressionist or surrealist directors like Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Yet it is hard to conjure a director, past or present, who has married such rigorous formalism with such a patient, almost therapeutic interest in those with whom he works. The combination of social commitment with formal radicalism recalls the work of Straub-Huillet, the subject of Costa’s extraordinary documentary, *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* But where the French couple took the texts of European high culture as their starting point—Hölderlin, Brecht, Pavese, Cezanne, Corneille—Costa’s primary texts have been more eclectic: genre films; found fragments like the Desnos poem; settings, like Cape Verde or Fontainhas; above all, the individual characters themselves—Vanda, Ventura, Vitalina: texts he admits to not always understanding himself.

At the same time, rejecting a contemporary culture that ‘has turned its back on the world, and therefore on people’, he has aligned himself in a certain sense with the tradition of documentary-realist photography and cinema: along with Chaplin’s injunction to film the street, his *oeuvre* sits in a lineage with Jacob Riis, Walker Evans and other citizen photographers who took the side of the ‘other half’. In these terms, realism becomes an ethical injunction—to ‘make the invisible visible’, as he puts it²⁹—closer to Brecht’s modernist realism than to Lukács’s historicized understanding of the concept. Whereas Lukács identified realism with an evolved and binding repertoire of forms, without which the representation of reality cannot be achieved, Brecht regarded realism as an end, the disclosure of reality, to be approached by a variety of formal means, all that depending on the case, situation or purpose in question.

²⁸ Costa, ‘A Closed Door That Leaves Us Guessing’.

²⁹ Costa, ‘A Closed Door That Leaves Us Guessing’.

Indeed, 'realism' for Costa seems to be his own singular formula. His films, at once documentary and poetic, are far removed from mimetic naturalism. His highly composed tableaux, mysterious beings and at times surreal events—the silver soldier in the elevator—present a cinema that is elliptical and enigmatic, populated by characters whose motives we can only work at knowing; that is what makes them 'real'. The private languages of dreams and images may pay a price for their integrity in loss of comprehension and with *Horse Money*, he clearly decided to run the risk of excluding audiences by privileging Ventura's own take on his times. Costa, then, is a committed realist whose work is in obvious ways not realist at all. Many formal elements in Costa contain this elementary paradox: Fontainhas is both the locus of Costa's realism, in so far as it is this reality he seeks to capture, but he also withholds our access to the place, shuts the door. His characters seem to straddle a kind of neo-realist representation, on the one hand, whilst on the other, Costa figures them as ghosts of history, zombies of the construction site. His films are not easy—but then, as Costa has pointed out: 'Difficult used to be a good thing.'³⁰

³⁰ Costa, 'On Revenge and Tragedy in Cinema and Life: In Conversation with Pedro Costa' in *Four by Three Magazine*, available at fourbythreemagazine.com.