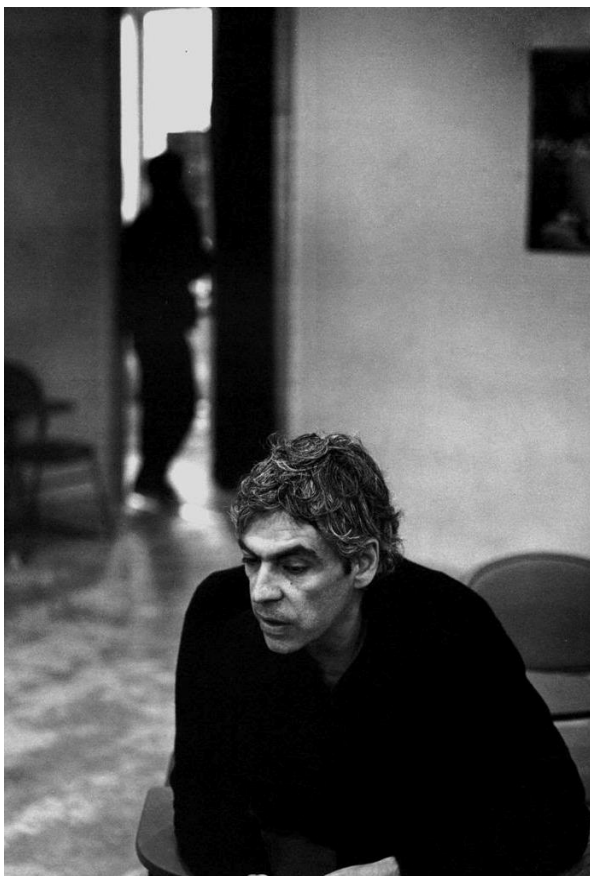


## ARQUIVO DOCUMENTAL

Relativo à visibilidade internacional da obra  
de Pedro Costa



EM 2009, iniciativas lideradas pela Tate Modern de Londres deram uma nova visibilidade internacional aos filmes e à figura de Pedro Costa; em 2010, a Criterion editou em DVD a “trilogia das Fontainhas” e uma selecção de extras. O dossier que a seguir publicamos dá conta desse efeito de consagração, traduzido em artigos e entrevistas em revistas de referência.

### Artist spotlight : Pedro Costa Ryland Walker Knight, 2009

PEDRO COSTA has made digital works since the turn of the 21st Century due to a number of influences and philosophical premises. Through his 1997 film, *Ossos (Bones)*, Costa shot on film and perfected a style of shadow and elision equal parts Bresson, Rivette, Ford and

Tourneur. After working in the Lisbon slums of Fountainhas while filming *Ossos*, Costa realized the inefficiency and intrusion of a 35mm camera crew, no matter their limited size/footprint. He realized that to work with any grace, any honesty, any integrity, he would have to abandon the troupe of filmmaking.

Thus he forsake film's emulsion for digital's arrayed pinholes of light and began to shoot his next film, *No Quarto da Vanda (In Vanda's Room)*, by himself with a "consumer-grade" camera. This was not simply a democratic, or even simply a Marxist, impulse. It's more complicated, more radical. His new art—in and of the margins—gives face to the mosaic of poverty too rarely seen on cinema screens. It builds the world in blocks of time and space into a concrete object of witness. It's document without the guile of documentary. It gives us heroes without capes (although they wear masks, as does everybody, the argument goes): the ordinary, made material, exceeds representation.

Costa's cinema refuses. As he says, it's **a closed door that leaves you guessing**. The impulse to separation is a denial of not just audience identification but the very way of seeing that keeps poverty hidden. It's a paradox. Pedro Costa looks at the rift and creates a cinema of faith — in the world, in our bondage to it as much as our flight from it. This faith, of course, supercedes politics, however political his image-making may be, into the space of ethics. — How we look is how we make the world.

## 2009/2010, anos da consagração

### João Maria Mendes

PEDRO COSTA nasceu em Lisboa em 1959, frequentou História na Universidade de Lisboa, mas interrompeu o curso para ingressar na Escola de Cinema, área de Montagem, onde concluiu estudos em 1981. Trabalhou como assistente de realização de Jorge Silva Melo e João Botelho antes de iniciar a sua própria carreira como realizador. Ganhou o Leopardo de Prata no Festival de Cinema de Locarno (2007), o Prémio da Associação de Críticos de Los Angeles para Melhor Filme Independente / Experimental (2007) e o Prémio France Culture para o Cineasta Estrangeiro do Ano (2002). O seu trabalho estende-se à instalação vídeo, e as suas obras têm sido apresentadas em museus e galerias — no centro Witte de With, no Museu de Serralves, na Mediateca de Sendai (Japão), no Museu de Belas Artes de Bilbao e na PhotoEspana. Em 2009, a Tate Modern de Londres dedicou-lhe uma retrospectiva completa, que deu ao realizador uma nova projecção internacional.

Filmografia como realizador: *Cartas a Júlia* (série de curtas metragens, 1987); *O Sangue* (1989, 35mm, 1:1, 33, B&W, 95'); *Casa de Lava* (1994, 35mm, 1:1,66, cor, 110'); *Ossos* (1997, 35mm, 1:1,66, cor, 94'); *No Quarto da Vanda* (2000, 35mm, 1:1,66, cor, 178', Dolby SR); *Où gît votre sourire enfui? / Onde Jaz o Teu Sorriso?* (diálogos com Jean-Marie Straub e Danièle Huillet, 2001, 35mm, 1:1, 66, cor, 104'); *6 Bagatelas* (2003, DVCam, 1:1,33, col – b&w, 18'); *Ne Change Rien* (2003, DVCam, 1: 1, 33, B&W, 11'); *Juventude em Marcha* (2006, 35mm, 1:1,33, cor, 154'); *Tarrafal* (2007, DVCam, 1: 1, 33, cor, 16'); *The Rabbit Hunters / A caça ao coelho com pau* (2007, DVCam, 1: 1, 33, cor, 24'); *Ne Change Rien* (2009, DVCam, 1: 1, 33, p/b, 95').

O cinema de Pedro Costa começa a dar origem a uma bibliografia específica, relacionada com a sua obra: *Pedro Costa — Film Retrospective in Sendai*, Sendai Mediatheque, 2005, edição em japonês e inglês sob a orientação de Shigehiko Hasumi; *Pedro Costa: Whispering in Distant Chambers*, Sendai Mediatheque (edição japonesa); *Cem Mil Cigarros — Os filmes de Pedro Costa*, coord. Ricardo Matos Cabo, ed. Orfeu Negro, colaborações de Thom Andersen, Philippe Azoury, Johannes Beringer, Nicole Brenez, Rui Chafes, João Bénard da Costa, Richard Dumas, Bernard Eisenschitz, Chris Fujiwara, Tag Gallagher, John Gianvito, Jean-Pierre Gorin, António

Guerreiro, Shigehiko Hasumi, João Miguel Fernandes Jorge, Philippe Lafosse, Jacques Lemière, Dominique Marchais, Adrien Martin, José Neves, João Niza, Mark Peranson, James Quandt, Jacques Rancière, Andy Rector, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Paolo Sapziani, Luce Vigo, Jeff Wall; *Fora! Out!*, concep. João Fernandes, ed. Fundação de Serralves, 2007; *Onde Jaz o teu Sorriso?/ Où Gît Votre Sourire Enfui?* — Diálogos Pedro Costa Danièle Huillet Jean-Marie Straub, col. Livros de Cinema, Assírio & Alvim, 2004.

No sistema dos *media*, num circunscrito mundo intelectual e na crítica especializada, 2009 foi o ano que confirmou a consagração internacional de Pedro Costa. A peça mais característica é a do crítico cinematográfico britânico Peter Bradshaw (“Pedro Costa: The Samuel Beckett of Cinema”), publicada em *The Guardian* de 17 de Setembro de 2009, dias antes da iniciativa da Tate Modern, organizada pelo curador Stuart Comer e Ricardo Matos Cabo. Neste curto texto, encontramos o exercício fundamental da consagração de um “jovem” cineasta: ele é primeiro comparado a grandes nomes da história do cinema — é tornado mais um entre pares — e depois à inspiração de grandes autores literários. *Ossos* — o preferido do autor — é comparado a *Les 400 coups* de Truffaut, e Bradshaw diz que o filme também lhe faz lembrar *Los Olvidados*, de Buñuel, e que contém uma referência hollywoodiana a Nicholas Ray e ao *The Night of the Hunter* de Charles Laughton, bem como ao *Eraserhead* de David Lynch; o Dickens de *Bleak House* também é evocado a propósito de *Ossos*. Mas é com *No Quarto da Vanda* que Costa é comparado a Samuel Beckett: se *O Sangue* fazia Bradshaw pensar na fase “Moloy/Watt” de Beckett, *Ossos* é a sua fase “Godot”, e *No Quarto da Vanda* e *Juventude em Marcha* são a sua fase “Imagination Dead Imagine”.

Noutro registo, o texto de Jacques Rancière (“The Politics of Pedro Costa”) executa o mesmo movimento: Pedro Costa é comparado a Francesco Rosi e Jean-Marie Straub, obriga o autor a pensar em Brecht e em Rilke, e depois em Bresson, Dreyer e Tarkovsky. Ou, mais ainda, e seguindo uma sugestão do próprio Pedro Costa, em Raoul Walsh e Jacques Tourneur. Adiante, no mesmo texto, *La nouvelle Héloïse* de Jean-Jacques Rousseau juntar-se-á à colação.

Shigehiko Hasumi (“Adventure: An Essay on Pedro Costa”), escrevendo para a retrospectiva de Sendai, compara *À bout de souffle* de Godard com *Ossos*, uma cena do mesmo filme lembra-lhe *Three Godfathers* de John Ford, e a propósito de *Casa de Lava* recorda *Stromboli, Terra di Dio*, de Roberto Rossellini.

Miguel Gomes, escrevendo para a *Sight & Sound* de Outubro 2009 (“Serenity”), diz que uma cena de *No Quarto da Vanda* o faz pensar num gag de Jacques Tati, e também evoca a dupla Jean-Marie Straub - Danièle Huillet (com quem Costa trabalhou), além de Yasujiro Ozu. Kieron Corless, entrevistando Pedro Costa para o mesmo número da revista (“Crossing the Threshold”), lembra que as referências do cineasta são assumidamente John Ford, Chaplin, Ozu e Straub - Huillet — Straub que Pedro Costa chama seu “mestre”. Na entrevista publicada por Daniel Kasman a 16 de Junho de 2009, que não reproduzimos aqui mas pode ser lida em <[www.theauteurs.com](http://www.theauteurs.com)>, Pedro Costa fora já apresentado como próximo de Tourneur, Ford, Ozu, Nicholas Ray e Straub-Huillet, e identificado como realizador que, desde o Festival de Cannes 2006, onde passou *Juventude em Marcha*, surgia como “um novo mestre que subitamente saltara para as luzes da ribalta” (*a new master had suddenly jumped into the limelight*).

No seu conjunto, e desde que apoiada por uma instituição de prestígio internacional (como, neste caso, a Tate Modern), uma operação desta envergadura e com estas características é comparável às atribuições de títulos *honoris causa* inter-pares, ou por um círculo de *opinion makers* e de árbitros do gosto que publicitam os seus argumentários nos *media* especializados. A operação de transfiguração de Pedro Costa só tem, entre cineastas portugueses, dois precedentes — Manoel de Oliveira, que se mantém como primeira referência do *cinema português*, e João César Monteiro (mas neste caso foi interrompida por morte do cineasta).

Depois, o programa Carte Blanche, da Tate Modern, passou alguns dos filmes preferidos de Pedro Costa, sobre os quais o próprio realizador escreveu pequenos textos de apresentação:

*Itinéraire de Jean Bricard*, de Jean-Marie Straub e Danièle Huillet, 2008, 40 min; *Sicilia!*, também da dupla Straub - Huillet, 1999, 66 min; *The Struggle*, de DW Griffith, 1931, 84 min; *Puissance de la Parole*, de Jean-Luc Godard, 1988, 25 min; *Beauty #2*, de Andy Warhol, 1965, 66 min; *Le Cochon*, de Jean Eustache, 1970, 50 min; e *Routine Pleasures*, de Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1986, 81 min.. A seleção alarga as referências básicas do cineasta e reitera as já conhecidas, estabelecendo-o como parte de uma fileira, de um grupo de pertença.

Esta consagração de 2009 viria a repetir-se no final do primeiro trimestre de 2010, com o lançamento pela Criterion, de Nova York, de uma caixa de quatro DVD contendo a “Trilogia das Fontainhas” (*Ossos*, *No Quarto da Vanda* e *Juventude em Marcha*). O quarto DVD contém as curtas-metragens *Tarrafal*, *The Rabbit Hunters* e a instalação *Minino Macho*, *Minino Fêmea*, com imagens não editadas das Fontainhas e que entretanto passaram por diversos museus, além de uma conversa entre Pedro Costa e Jean-Pierre Gorin, de comentários de Jacques Rancière e Cyril Neyrat e do documentário *Tout Refleurit*, de Aurélien Gerbault, feito durante as filmagens de *Juventude em Marcha*. A caixa da Criterion vem igualmente com um *booklet* de 46 páginas, com textos inéditos e outros de autores que colaboraram no livro *Cem Mil Cigarros*. A crítica cinematográfica novaiorquina (designadamente no New York Times, The New Yorker e na Interview) saudou a iniciativa da Criterion, contribuindo para a divulgação da edição no universo da cinefilia norte-americana.

Não menos interessante, no contexto desta consagração / celebração, é a transcrição do curso intensivo de realização cinematográfica dado por Pedro Costa, em 2004, na Escola de Cinema de Tóquio, traduzida para inglês sob o título “A Closed Door That Leaves Us Guessing”, e que também aqui publicamos. Neste curso, o cineasta posiciona-se perante a história do cinema, reidentifica os seus mestres e referências principais, reafirma solidariedades e cumplicidades. Esperamos que este conjunto de textos, aqui antologiadados como documentação, ajude os nossos leitores a reavaliar um cineasta agora reconhecido como parte do *World Cinema*, apesar da “dificuldade” que caracteriza a sua obra.

### Documento 1.

The Guardian, 17 de Setembro de 2009

## Pedro Costa, the Samuel Beckett of cinema

A retrospective of the stern, uncompromising works of the Portuguese *auteur* Pedro Costa reveals unexpected pleasures

### Peter Bradshaw

NEXT WEEK, Tate Modern in London is unveiling a complete retrospective by a director who I can only describe as the Samuel Beckett of world cinema: and even that comparison doesn't quite convey how severe and how uncompromisingly difficult his movies have latterly become. This is the Portuguese film-maker Pedro Costa – a cult master, a figure who is widely considered on the festival circuit to be for hardcore auteur followers only. A Pedro Costa film does not get a "release". It does not "do business" – any more than a piece by Edgar Varèse rules the iTunes chart. I myself have seen critics and writers at festivals gird their loins reasonably happily for a Béla Tarr film. But at the words "Pedro Costa", they flinch. A haunted look comes into their eyes.

Now, I can understand this. But considering the arc represented by Costa's major features *O Sangue*, or *Blood* (1989), *Ossos*, or *Bones* (1997), *No Quarto Do Vanda*, or *In Vanda's Room* (2000) and *Juventude Em Marcha*, or *Onward Youth* (2007), I now believe that his career arc is one of the most fascinating in modern cinema. Following this career is not, however, easy and

Costa does not make it easy, increasingly setting his films in the collapsing rubble of Fontainhas, Lisbon's grimmest slum. He favours interminably long shots, long silences, long aimless semi-audible conversations between semi-comatose drug addicts: like watching a Big Brother live feed direct from some of the most poverty-stricken places in Europe. When *Onward Youth* was briefly shown in the UK last year, it appeared under the title *Colossal Youth*, and the trade press cheerfully dubbed it "Colossal Bore". My colleague Cath Clarke wrote about this film last year with great insight.

This director increasingly contrives scenes in cramped rooms in semi-darkness, shot from below, with perhaps one light-source in the form of a window in the top right corner of the frame, which glows without illuminating the scene. His most recent film is *Ne Change Rien*, which applies this technique, eccentrically, to a film about the singing career of the French film star Jeanne Balibar, who is shown rehearsing, performing and recording in a weird crepuscular darkness.

The retrospective shows Pedro Costa's work evolving from conventional dramatic movie-making into an experimental docu-installation form, which is something between a real-time "reportage" cinema and an exhibition of animated portrait images. However difficult and punishing his films are, I am becoming weirdly hooked on them. They deserve a hearing from people who are open-minded about cinema as an art form, and particularly as an experimental art form. In scheduling the Pedro Costa series the Tate's curator Stuart Comer is effectively challenging movie writers to re-examine the criteria on which they discuss cinema.

*Blood* (1989), is Costa's first film, made in black-and-white, about the relation of two brothers and their father. It looks beautiful, and is clearly influenced by *Truffaut's The 400 Blows*, and I think also has something of Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*. It could have been made 40 or even 50 years ago, and Costa contrives a Nouvelle Vague feel, along with a Hollywood-ised reference to Nicholas Ray and maybe Charles Laughton's *Night Of The Hunter*.

*Bones* (1997) is, I think, Costa's best film. Maybe it's even some sort of masterpiece: a dark, mysterious and mesmeric movie, shot in colour and set in Lisbon, among the urban poor. The faces that Costa captures are compelling, and disquieting, the kind of faces you would see in an unsettling dream: particularly the young woman at the very beginning, and also the face of Tina, who has just had a baby, and whose partner, played by Nuno Vaz, takes it away to try to get rid of it, trying first to give it to the hospital nurse and then to a prostitute. They are like the faces of ghosts, or faces of the dead. The atmosphere of *Bones* is extraordinary, like a horror film without the horror, or like a social-realist version of David Lynch's *Eraserhead*.

Like many of Costa's films, it has been wearily or amiably dismissed as miserabilism – and yet this isn't how I responded to it. The film is about poverty, yes, and this is a subject which some people in both the movie business or the journalism business think is bad taste, as if poverty doesn't really exist all that much and to emphasise it is a callow pose or crass exaggeration of style. Costa's film takes poor people seriously and does not apologise for the moral and even spiritual seriousness of what it is doing. Watching this, I remembered a resonant line from Dickens's *Bleak House*: "What the poor are to the poor is known only to themselves and to God."

With *In Vanda's Room* (2000) and *Onward Youth* (2007), Costa's work moves to a dauntingly austere mode, a mode in which traditional cinephilic references are much less useful. To continue the Beckett analogy, *Blood* represents his "Molloy/Watt" phase, the early phase in which his work is at its most traditional and accessible. *Bones* is the "Godot" phase, in which his identity becomes strongest and most distinctive, and yet still accessible in normal cinematic terms, and *In Vanda's Room* and *Onward Youth* are his opaque and difficult, later phase, his "Imagination Dead Imagine" phase.

In *Vanda*, we see the return of two personae from *Bones*. They are the sisters Zita and Vanda Duarte, now overtly playing themselves, and in fact the film now sheds the ostensible fictional mode of *Bones*, and now becomes far more of a documentary portrait. Zita – whose face in closeup was so haunting at the beginning of *Bones* – and Vanda are now fully paid-up heroin addicts. Long, long scenes show them in their dark, cramped, squalid room in the Fontainhas slums of Lisbon, doing smack and talking inconsequentially about nothing much. The movie itself, with its series of fixed camera positions, is closer in spirit to an exhibition of photography, a succession of cinematic tableaux. The vivid, ghostly close-ups of *Bones* do not feature.

The people, living fragmented and embattled lives, are shown in tenements which are in the very process of being torn down. Yet there is no positive spirit attached to this, no sense that the Portuguese state is moving them to better quarters: just a grim feeling that these houses are awful and even these are being destroyed. In one scene, taking place in crepuscular gloom, one man complains of a fear of death, and another says to him: "The bad never die. It is the innocent who die" – a very Beckettian line, especially when you realise that it is meant to be reassuring, and that the speaker considers himself and his companion to be one of the "bad".

The Pedro Costa retrospective isn't for everyone; but if you want to see challenging art on screen then it is a must. Go and see *Bones* – one of the most enigmatic and haunting films of modern European cinema.

## Documento 2.

Entretien avec Pedro Costa

## L'enfermement et la fiction

Nicolas Azalbert

Propos recueillis le 19 décembre 2009. Cahiers du Cinéma, Janvier 2010, N° 652

« JE ME SOUVIENS très bien qu'un jour, sur le tournage d'un de mes premiers films, je me suis dit que je n'étais pas fait pour filmer des paysages. Je me sens beaucoup mieux dans une chambre, dans des couloirs, dans cette espèce de laboratoire humain où il y a des gens qui s'agitent, qui cherchent, avec très peu de moyens, avec des cendriers, des lampes de poche. Pour le film avec Jeanne Balibar, comme pour le film avec Jean-Marie Straub et Daniele Huillet (*Où gît votre sourire enfoui ?*, 2001), j'essaie d'aller plus loin qu'un simple documentaire sur le travail artistique, j'essaie vraiment d'aller vers une fiction. Pendant qu'ils cherchent, pendant qu'ils travaillent, pendant qu'ils doutent, j'essaie de trouver une histoire là-dedans, un petit fil d'histoire qu'on pourrait suivre, et qui naît de l'espace et de la lumière. Dans le film sur les Straub, c'était le couple, l'homme et la femme, l'écran du moniteur de Daniele et la porte du couloir de Jean-Marie, les allers-retours. Dans le film sur Jeanne, j'ai cherché à construire un espace sans jour, sans nuit, hors du temps, quelque chose d'intense et de très, très long qui pourrait donner l'envie de suivre une histoire. Je me suis fabriqué la fiction d'une bande de quatre types qui sont perdus dans une cabane en pleine forêt. Il y a un feu de cheminée, il y a clairement le chef du gang, il y en a un autre qui ne parle pas et qui est très anxieux. Enfin, il y a Jeanne qui apaise tout ça, dans son coin. Comme dans un polar ou un western des années 40. Quand j'étais enfant ou adolescent, j'éprouvais devant les westerns une sensation d'enfermement beaucoup plus grande que dans des films étouffants comme ceux de Joseph H. Lewis. Même films dans de grands espaces, les westerns d'Anthony Mann, pour moi, manquaient d'air. Je ne voyais pas l'ouverture mais l'enfermement. »

### **Le noir et le blanc**

« Pendant tout le tournage, j'ai évidemment filmé en couleurs avec ma petite caméra. Au début, je ne pensais pas faire le film en noir et blanc. C'est une décision de montage. Chaque fois que je visionnais les concerts que j'avais filmés, je me disais que les lumières des salles de concert étaient très moches. Alors, dans un geste de désespoir, j'ai tourné le bouton de saturation de couleur et tout d'un coup il y avait le noir et blanc. Les concerts passaient beaucoup mieux ainsi que d'autres plans comme celui où Jeanne répète avec sa directrice musicale l'opéra d'Offenbach. Son visage devenait, je ne sais pas si c'est plus réel, plus concret ou plus irréel, mais on voyait des choses qu'on ne voyait pas en couleurs, par exemple les rides, les dents, les nerfs, le cou. Il y avait une toute autre sensualité. J'ai donc décidé de tout passer en noir et blanc. Puis j'ai pris la décision un peu folie de transférer la petite vidéo en noir et blanc en négatif 35 mm, un vrai négatif noir et blanc. Et c'est une histoire triste parce qu'à la fin de notre travail de kinescopage et de tirage de copie, les techniciens d'Éclair m'ont dit: "*Dommmage, c'est beau, mais dans deux ans tu ne pourras pas en faire un autre comme ça, ce sera fini.*" Donc, quelqu'un comme Garrel, je ne sais pas comment il va faire, mais ce ne sera plus possible... »

### **Le rêve et l'action**

« *Ne change rien* repose sur des blocs assez opposés, avec des genres de musique très différents (Offenbach et le rock). À partir du moment où, au montage, j'avais choisi ces blocs, je me suis un peu perdu moi-même dans les paroles des chansons. Dans l'histoire de la Périchole, dans les histoires que Jeanne chante, je commençais aussi à voir une histoire d'amour où il était question de solitude, de torture, d'amour perdu. J'ai suivi un peu ça en assemblant les blocs par thèmes. Il y a 80 % de musique dans le film, mais je n'ai pas trop fait attention aux chocs, aux raccords musicaux. Le montage ne suit pas ça, ce n'est pas du tout une alternance de musique douce et de musique plus violente. On voulait aller vite. Sans transition, sans respiration. C'était plutôt ce que Jeanne chante, ce qu'elle essaie de raconter qui m'intéressait beaucoup parce que, à travers elle, revenaient d'autres femmes de mes films, comme Vanda ou Edith Scob. C'était comme la construction d'une femme qui n'est pas là mais qui vient avec Jeanne, avec ses mots, avec ses paroles. C'est donc finalement un film propice au rêve. Alors que je pourrais dire que je déteste le rêve. Le cinéma, c'est le rêve mais c'est aussi l'action. Disons qu'avant j'étais beaucoup plus dans le rêve que dans l'action. Maintenant, je suis beaucoup plus dans l'action pratique, dans la routine du travail un peu chiant, acheter du papier aluminium pour l'éclairage, transporter le pied de caméra, faire moi-même les sandwiches. Et ça c'est de l'action, ce n'est pas du rêve. Mais je n'aime pas non plus l'action. Je veux dire que je déteste le rêve comme l'action. Mais comme je dois faire avec les deux, je les mélange. Ce n'est pas une chose plus qu'une autre. Je ne suis pas dans un rêve de cinéma, je ne suis pas dans un petit rêve de scénario, je ne suis même pas dans un petit rêve de perfection, d'idéalisation d'un film à faire. Je suis beaucoup plus dans les emmerdements de la routine, qui peuvent être une torture mais dans lesquels j'ai aussi appris à trouver du plaisir. »

### **Documento 3.**

## **Autour du cinéma de Pedro Costa**

— Travailler à Fontainhas: Parcours à travers divers entretiens\*2001 / 2008

Publié par "Dérives – revue autour du cinéma", <[www.derives.tv/spip.php?article276](http://www.derives.tv/spip.php?article276)> (Documents de cinéastes).

PEDRO COSTA a réalisé *O Sangue* puis *Casa de lava*, au Portugal et au Cap-Vert, avant de découvrir le quartier de Fontainhas, en banlieue de Lisbonne, et d'y tourner *Ossos*, en 1996. Depuis, il a abandonné le monde du cinéma, sa machinerie et ses équipes, mais n'a plus quitté

ce quartier. Il y filme tous les jours, avec une petite caméra vidéo, la vie quotidienne de ses habitants, en marge du monde, ainsi que des histoires, écrites avec eux. Il a réalisé depuis *Dans la chambre de Vanda* (2000) pendant la destruction de ce quartier, *En avant jeunesse* (2006) où l'on voit les habitants relogés dans des appartements neufs, puis *Tarrafal* (2007), ou ceux-ci cherchent un lieu où vivre à nouveau, dans une forêt en bordure de la ville.

### **Le quartier**

Un jour, je suis entré dans le quartier avec des messages, des lettres, des cadeaux que les gens du Cap-Vert qui nous avaient aidés sur le tournage de *Casa de lava* m'avaient donnés à l'attention de leurs parents émigrés à Fontainhas. J'ai fait un peu le facteur. Et j'ai découvert un quartier que je ne connaissais pas. Ce n'est pas un quartier qu'on va visiter comme ça, pour se balader. Je parlais un peu créole, ce qui fait que j'ai peut-être été plus vite accepté. Alors j'ai commencé à y passer des journées, à traîner, boire, parler. Ça m'a beaucoup plu, ces choses que je devinais chez ces capverdiens, quelque chose de très concret et en même temps de très mystérieux : une espèce de tristesse, qui n'était pas loin, sûrement, de la mienne. Je me suis dit : peut-être qu'il y a quelque chose à faire ici, puisque j'y trouve un accord avec ma sensibilité et qu'en plus plastiquement, ça me plaît beaucoup. Mais davantage que les couleurs, les espaces et les sons, il y avait la force un peu désespérée de ce groupe de gens très en marge, très perdus, très misérables et très invisibles. (1)

Au début, je pensais que c'était un choix, de choisir un monde et pas un autre, certaines couleurs et pas d'autres, des choses esthétiques avec du danger, une espèce d'absence de parole chez des gens qui peuvent pas parler, qui sont exploités. Il y avait un danger, une fascination du moins et du vide, mais toujours avec une espèce de justice, de choses justes qu'il y aurait à filmer d'un point de vue juste. Ça a donné ces films, qui peut-être sont trop perdus, où je voulais essayer de comprendre ces gens-là, ce monde-là, qui n'est pas le mien, qui est même une autre classe. (2)

Au début, je pensais ne pas pouvoir tenir, que cela me demanderait de fournir un effort énorme. Je voulais faire quelque chose, je ne savais pas très bien quoi, à part filmer Vanda, pas exactement filmer sa chambre mais la filmer elle. Je ne savais pas si j'arriverais à entrer dans le monde Vanda. Tout l'effort consistait à essayer d'appartenir à ce quartier, et le faire de manière intéressante et vivante à l'image, avec des moyens impossibles, dans un espace réduit. La chambre de Vanda ne fait que 3 mètres carrés à peine, une toute petite pièce et où le cinéma arrive à fabriquer des choses " bigger than life " comme ils disent. Il y a le lit dans la chambre et environ cinquante centimètres d'espace où j'étais à la filmer, debout. Contre le mur ou contre le lit. Je voulais parler de cela car je sentais que l'on pouvait le faire ressentir dans le film. Deux ou trois choses de la vie des gens, tout simplement. (3)

### **Le travail**

Il n'y a pas de différence entre les repérages et le tournage, je suis là tout le temps, c'est comme si je filmais chez moi, dans mon quartier. Le film commence donc par du doute, de l'approche, du brouillon, des essais. C'est long, la discipline prend forme, puis vient un moment où tout cela s'efface et laisse place à un désir et une certitude immenses. On comprend que c'est possible, que Ventura ou Vanda peut le faire, et moi aussi. Ensuite, c'est une question de temps et de travail. C'est par le travail qu'on passe du probable au certain. Ma rencontre avec le quartier, ce lieu d'histoire, et d'histoires à raconter, m'a permis ça aussi. Mais il ne suffit pas d'avoir cette approche, après il faut travailler, être sérieux, soigner les couleurs, les plans, les dialogues, le son, construire son film comme si c'était le film le plus riche d'Hollywood. Je n'ai pas l'impression de faire des films pauvres. (4)

On tournait de lundi à samedi, on se reposait le dimanche. L'idée que j'avais, c'était de voir si on pourrait tenir un an, deux ans, comme on fait partout : les gens "normaux", ils travaillent tous les jours, ils vont au bureau, ils vont à l'usine tous les jours. Or je ne voyais pas pourquoi un film devrait se faire sur une petite période, après quoi tout s'arrête... C'est-à-dire que c'est un travail qui a à voir avec le quotidien : le cinéma est dans le quotidien, pas extérieur à ça, ce

n'est pas un truc de science-fiction qui vient d'ailleurs et qui se met à tourner pendant quatre semaines. (1)

Dans la chambre de Vanda, c'était un film fait quasiment par moi tout seul, avec un copain au son, et avec la liberté totale d'un type qui n'a pas d'argent mais pas de problème pour survivre et tourner en même temps, quand il veut et autant qu'il peut. Ca s'est fait avec des cassettes et des soupes ! Les gens du quartier me voyaient tous les jours, soleil ou pluie, souffrir avec Vanda. Pour *En avant, jeunesse*, on s'est plus approchés d'un tournage, disons, normal. On avait une petite équipe, on était beaucoup plus que sur Vanda : on était quatre ! le double ! Donc un tournage plus traditionnel, mais en gardant souplesse et liberté dans notre organisation, c'est-à-dire sans producteur qui impose un rythme de travail. ... Et pour la première fois, je me sentais travailler et non pas filmer. Sur les autres films, je me sentais « faire des plans », « faire des compositions plastiques », « trouver des idées », « répéter avec les acteurs », tout ça... Là, tout le monde avait à voir avec ce film dès le début. Pas comme quand un acteur n'est pas vraiment intéressé ou que le deuxième assistant est là pour gagner un peu de fric. Non, il y avait quatre personnes totalement impliquées, et les acteurs étaient même plus qu'impliqués, puisque, même si je les guidais, c'étaient eux qui créaient le scénario, les dialogues, tout. C'était leur histoire à eux. (1)

Il me semble que tout cinéaste devrait fonctionner ainsi : partir d'une idée, d'une conviction comme moteur. Et, de là, arriver à une forme. Et pas l'inverse. Les problèmes sont en effet très concrets. C'est un peu la philosophie de Ventura. Il est maçon et la question, pour lui, est de savoir si un mur est bien ou mal construit. Les plans de cinéma sont un peu comme des pierres : il y a l'ambition qu'à la fin, le film soit comme une maison, entière, habitée, d'où l'on peut sortir et entrer. (5)

### **Les films**

Je n'arrête pas de penser à cette idée, qui me paraît juste en ce qui concerne les films : soit c'est de la poésie soit c'est de la politique. Et moi je veux la politique car on ne peut qu'être politique. Et ce qui importe est de ne surtout pas être dans l'urgence. Il faut supprimer cette notion d'urgence collée au politique car c'est le contraire de l'amour. C'est là que ça commence. La politique, c'est l'amour. L'amour c'est un rapport aux choses qui doit forcément être différent et si je filme un arbre ou un mur simplement, si je l'aime, ce mur, je ferai en sorte de bien le filmer et de bien le cadrer. Où alors je suis dans la publicité des sentiments et je ne veux pas ça. Je ne vais pas souvent au cinéma à cause de cela. Je me dis que ce n'était pas comme ça avant au cinéma. Je dois être un peu réactionnaire, je ne me sens pas dans le présent, la société a changé, tout est différent. Quand j'étais jeune, je voulais faire des films et changer les choses car le cinéma est un art important. Et les films que j'ai vu me disaient cela. C'était très fort, en sortant de la salle de cinéma, je pouvais courir pendant quatre heures. Un film d'aujourd'hui ne me fait plus cet effet. Je me souviens très bien d'avoir vu Pierrot le fou et de vouloir le vivre avec les copains dans notre vie, le film continuait dans la rue. (3)

Quand on fait un film, c'est par amour évidemment, il n'y a rien d'autre. C'est l'amour fou pour quelque chose, pas une idée, je sens pas le cinéma comme ça, tout d'un coup, je vais dans la rue, j'ai une idée, non. Le problème des films aujourd'hui, c'est qu'ils viennent du cinéma. Le désir c'est faire comme quelqu'un ou faire un film, c'est pas filmer quelqu'un, c'est très rare. Moi, je crois que pour faire un film aujourd'hui, il faut passer beaucoup plus de temps qu'avant. Pas beaucoup plus, dans le sens où je n'ai pas une idée christique de ça, genre il faut que cela soit un sacrifice, loin de là, mais il faut vraiment bien voir avant de tourner, un deux trois mois, si on peut. (2)

### **La vidéo**

Je crois que la vidéo réclame du temps, elle sert à en perdre plutôt qu'à en gagner. Je n'utilise pas la DV pour réagir à la réalité, ou pour la capter, au contraire. Je l'utilise dans la perte, pas dans le gain. J'ai maintenant une certaine pratique de cet outil, je commence à avoir confiance

en lui. On croit toujours qu'une caméra DV, c'est fait pour bouger dans tous les sens, pour faire des choses rapides, réactives. Ça ne m'intéresse pas. (4)

La DV est faite pour voir des petites choses, pour filmer le microscopique plus que le général. On ne peut pas vraiment filmer des paysages ou des arbres en vidéo, parce qu'il y a beaucoup trop d'informations et de détails. La DV est faite pour des murs, des visages, une chose et une seule à la fois. Et aussi pour aller très lentement. C'est quelque chose qu'on doit avoir en poche pour filmer tous les jours afin de trouver ce qu'on cherche. Avec la DV, il faut savoir perdre du temps, ne pas croire qu'on va en gagner. Soit tout le contraire de ce qu'on entend à ce sujet. Au fond, je crois qu'il est beaucoup plus risqué de filmer en vidéo. Je me sentais davantage protégé quand je filmais en 35 mm. Protégé par le cinéma, par la richesse de la pellicule. Avec une petite caméra DV, on est presque nu, ce qui peut être assez dangereux. (5)

La vidéo permet certaines choses et pas d'autres. On parle avant les scènes, on parle pendant des jours et des jours. A un moment on tourne, ça fait partie de la même chose, il n'y a plus de clap, le mouvement est le même. C'est très pensé, c'est une façon de créer une mémoire, de faire en sorte que le texte soit tellement dans ces chambres qu'il peut être dit tous les soirs, tous les mois, toutes les années, chaque jour peut-être un peu mieux. On améliore les choses, les acteurs sélectionnent, ils éliminent ce qui est accessoire, la scène devient plus forte. C'était une chambre et cela suffisait. C'est d'ailleurs un peu miraculeux que le film tienne comme cela. Vanda s'est fait grâce au désir que ça allait se faire, qu'il fallait filmer cela. Un désir qui n'était pas uniquement le mien, mais celui de Vanda, celui de sa soeur, celui des autres. (6)

### **Le son**

Moi, j'aime beaucoup beaucoup travailler le son, mais le travailler vraiment, passer des mois et des mois. Moi, je crois que c'est une bonne chose quand tu as un copain qui fait le son, qui est déjà engagé dans cette espèce de film avec des gens, tu n'es même pas une petite équipe. Et tu dis : "Va écouter un peu ce monde. Prends un week-end, complètement tout seul, tu verras c'est bien." Faire un son, c'est parler avec des gens, rentrer dans les maisons, c'est dîner, c'est tout ça. Et c'est une autre façon de filmer, j'en ai fait moi-même beaucoup pour Vanda. J'étais avec mon DAT, et j'ai fait parler des gens, ils parlaient de tout et de rien, dans *Ossos* il y a ça, des moments de conversations, de dîner d'une famille, derrière. Le son installe une espèce de confiance dans la vie, il donne un peu de vie, simplement. Dans le quartier, c'est absolument nécessaire parce que le son du monde, il ne s'arrête jamais. (2)

Le son précise l'image. Et si c'est pas fait comme ça, dans l'effet total, dans la musique, dans l'insistance, écouter écouter, passer quelque chose, mais si c'est fait discrètement, tout ce qui vient de la vie, ça précise ton objectif, ça donne la vie, ça peut créer le silence, ce qui n'est pas simple avec le son direct dans le cas des films, des lieux où je tourne. Et oui, ça je me souviens au montage, comment dire qu'il y a aussi le silence, on voit Vanda à l'image et il faudrait un silence bruyant, et ça il faut le recomposer, le refaire mais c'est surtout ne pas tromper mais si le travail est bien fait, sérieux, à l'image ou au son, ça va. Ce qu'il ne faut pas faire c'est faire comme si on était là. C'est ça que j'aime aussi avec le son, c'est qu'il te place. A un moment, si le son est bien, tu es là ou ailleurs, ça peut venir simplement du fait que tu as mis un son de nuit sur une scène de jour, toi tu le sais, mais le spectateur il sera peut-être parti, il sera perdu. Moi, j'aime beaucoup les films qui gardent les pieds sur terre mais qui ont la tête complètement dans les nuages. Les pieds, c'est un peu le son, la tête, l'imaginaire ou les yeux. Aujourd'hui, ton ingénieur du son va te dire "J'ai un bruit infernal", mais ce bruit, c'est le monde. (2)

### **Ventura**

J'avais croisé Ventura à plusieurs reprises pendant le tournage des autres films. Il était l'un des plus marginaux, un solitaire, un hors-la-loi un peu à part. Il m'a toujours intrigué. J'ai discuté avec lui et appris qu'il a été l'un des premiers à construire une maison dans le quartier. Il est arrivé à Lisbonne seul, sans famille. Peu à peu, la vie de Ventura durant les années 1975-1980, s'est mélangée à l'histoire de ce quartier. Il m'a raconté ses difficultés, ses amours. De là est venue l'idée de prendre Ventura comme figure archétypale de ce passé. Mais j'ai d'abord hésité.

Malade à cause d'un accident de travail, pouvait-il tenir cette discipline de tournage ? J'en ai discuté avec sa femme, ses enfants, et petit à petit, j'ai commencé à croire en lui, et lui en moi. (5)

Quand je parle de Ventura, je le vois comme un abîme. Un abîme entre lui et moi. Il est noir, parle créole, il appartient à une autre classe. J'avais très peur de cela, ça m'a mis dans une position de caméra différente. En même temps, cet abîme nous a rapprochés. On se voyait tous les jours, mais il y avait un abîme qui était à remplir, et qui a nourri le film. Toutes les imprécisions du film, les flash-back, les histoires..., tout cela devait rester comme un abîme. (6)

Chaque fois les tournages sont plus longs, chaque fois on a plus de mémoire et chaque fois on est lourd de plus de morts. On vieillit en tournant. Ce n'est pas un malheur. Ce film a à voir avec ça. Ventura, le héros, a 53 ans et moi 48. Du coup, il y a beaucoup de moi dans le film. Je me demandais si, en 1975, au lieu de jouer de la guitare avec un drapeau anarchiste et trois cons derrière, j'avais croisé Ventura, qui est venu au Portugal pour travailler et gagner un peu de fric, n'aurait-il pas été terrifié par cette idée de révolution. J'ai forcément croisé ce type, et c'est de ça dont le film veut aussi parler. Le film c'est la fiction que je me fais. Moi je voulais vieillir avec ce type, être à côté de lui pendant le film, pendant deux ou trois ans. Vieillir ensemble, au risque de le perdre, mais quand même en apprenant quelque chose. Le film est sans doute tourné vers le passé. Ce lyrisme doit venir de l'âge. Pendant le tournage, tout le monde allait assez mal : le film est devenu très noir et le titre, que l'on avait décidé avant de tourner, est devenu amer. *Juventud em marcha* est un chant. « Marche », comme marche la pensée. « Jeunesse » comme celle, éternelle, de Ventura. Au fond, je le vois comme un jeune marcheur. (7)

### **Le temps**

Le quartier de Fontainhas, au nord-ouest de Lisbonne, où j'ai tourné *Ossos*, n'existe plus. Il était déjà en démolition quand je tournais *Dans la chambre de Vanda*. Les familles ont été relogées beaucoup plus loin, dans un nouveau quartier qu'on voit dans le film, Casal Boba. J'ai pensé que c'était le moment de revenir en arrière, de réaliser une fiction sur les premières baraques et les premiers habitants de ce quartier. (5)

Le quartier étant détruit, je voulais recommencer un autre film, ajouter quelque chose, avec de la fiction. J'ai pensé à la naissance de Fontainhas, aux premiers hommes qui y sont arrivés, entre 1970 et 1972, à ceux qui ont construit les baraques. Je voulais aussi retravailler avec les mêmes personnes, Vanda, les jeunes qui passaient dans sa chambre. Tous avaient changé de vie, la fiction était là. Vanda répète tout le temps qu'elle a fait des conneries, qu'autrefois elle était comme ceci, comme cela. Quand elle dit ça, nous sommes dans la fiction et en même temps non, parce que le film précédent existe. Tous racontent ici quelque chose de leur présent, ils se mettent en scène. (6)

J'ai le sentiment que Vanda se déroule au présent, pour toujours. C'est peut-être lié à ce qui s'y passe autour des personnages, les ruines, les choses qui tombent, les errances circulaires. Rien ne sort de là, c'est un mouvement présent, un mouvement pour moi très concret. Les choses et le film se parlent. La chambre de Vanda n'existe plus, elle n'existe plus qu'en cinéma. Il y a donc un montage qui se fait. Ce n'est pas formulé ainsi entre nous, mais je sens qu'ils le savent. Vanda fait ce montage dans sa tête : j'étais quelqu'un dans un film, j'étais comme cela, maintenant je suis une nouvelle femme, qui veut être mère, mais en suis-je capable ? Il y a ce minimum qu'ils comprennent très bien et que je suis obligé de faire, ce minimum de narration, de « et après ? ». (6)

### **La parole**

Pour *Dans la chambre de Vanda*, je commençais d'abord par écouter. Puis je sélectionnais des moments et des histoires que je trouvais intéressantes. Et je proposais à Vanda de les dire à nouveau. La seconde fois, le ton prenait cette allure plus détachée, plus distante. Vanda elle-même retravaillait les phrases, préférant dire telle chose un peu différemment. Il y avait une élimination, une sélection de la mémoire, une concentration progressive du texte qui n'était possible qu'à la faveur de ces nombreuses prises. Dans *En avant jeunesse*, ceux qui jouent les

« enfants » sont des gens du quartier que j'avais déjà filmés, ou des amis. Chacun a apporté son scénario, beaucoup d'histoires individuelles, toutes un peu problématiques. On parlait d'une idée de scène qui évoluait au fil des répétitions. Tout ça se mettait en place lentement, dans un temps dilaté. C'est pourquoi le temps est un élément fondamental. Mais c'est une liberté qui tient au fait que je filme avec peu de monde, en vidéo, sans grands moyens. (5)

Après *Dans la chambre de Vanda*, avec elle et les jeunes nous nous sommes demandés ce que nous allions faire ensuite. Qu'allait-on raconter ? Ils avaient tous une sorte de petite lettre ou de message à faire passer. On a donc écrit des choses. On s'est mis à table avec une caméra. Ventura était tout le temps là. Vanda racontait : « Je vis parce qu'il y a ma fille, mais comment vais-je être mère ? » On raconte ce qui s'est passé après Vanda. On peut supposer qu'ils sont tous morts, à cause de l'héroïne, de la misère. Chacun a apporté une histoire, je pensais que ce serait plus léger, d'ailleurs, parce qu'en fait ils sont tous en forme, en bonne santé. Ils disent tout le temps : « Il y a eu un passé où j'étais très mal », et comme Ventura est présent, lui qui n'a pas vu ni accompagné ses fils, ils disent : « Ah papa, si vous m'aviez vu, j'étais si mal. » Or nous avons vu Vanda, ce qui signifie en quelque sorte qu'il y a une Vanda qui est morte pour toujours. La Vanda du film est morte. Lors de la scène finale d'*En avant, jeunesse*, elle dit : « Il faut que je passe au cimetière, et le deuil je vais l'enlever parce que je suis en deuil de moi-même. » Ils sont morts au quartier, dans la dernière maison brûlée par amour ou par désespoir. La question était : qu'avez-vous perdu ? Que ressentez-vous aujourd'hui ? Ils disent tous qu'ils ne savent pas, qu'ils étaient mieux avant, plus proches. Ce sont des histoires d'espaces et de voisins, de familles perdues. Dans Vanda, une rue était le couloir d'une maison, un couloir était une rue. Une chambre pouvait presque être une place de village, tout le monde entraînait, il n'y avait pas de clef. (6)

D'une certaine façon, on pourrait presque dire qu'il s'agit d'un film à messages. Je demandais à Ventura, aux autres, ce qu'ils aimeraient dire à tel ou tel moment. Vanda, par exemple, voulait parler de son enfant et du changement que cela a provoqué dans sa vie. Ce sont des lettres qui sont adressées à moi ou au spectateur, des petits messages personnels que chacun fait passer. Cela m'intéressait d'avoir cette parole qui voyage dans un espace très limité, dans une chambre, un couloir, entre deux portes. (5)

Ventura dit une phrase très belle, qui vient du Cap-Vert : « Dans les maisons des morts, il y a toujours beaucoup de choses à voir. » Il emploie en fait un mot portugais qui peut désigner à la fois les morts, les dépossédés, les très pauvres, les fantômes, les zombies. Ventura imagine des choses qui se passent sur ces murs un peu calcinés, noircis par l'humidité. Puis, un peu inconsciemment, le film se termine presque dans une maison blanche qui a perdu cette couleur parce qu'elle a été calcinée. On imagine que c'est un feu, et là tout est noir, il y a des figures qui apparaissent. Le nouveau quartier est beaucoup plus violent que l'ancien, il n'y a pas d'histoire, pas de vie, les habitants de l'ancien quartier ne savent pas vivre là. Il y a là plus de mystère, de lumière indirecte, d'ombres, de vie cinématographique. Dans le nouveau quartier, c'est différent. Nous nous posions tous les mêmes questions. Moi : « Comment vais-je vivre dans ce film avec ces murs là ? » Eux : « Comment va-t-on vivre là ? » (6) *Dans la chambre de Vanda* est édité en dvd par les *Editions Capricci*, accompagné du livre "Conversation avec Pedro Costa" de Cyril Neyrat, septembre 2008.

## Notes

- \* 1. Entretien avec Pedro Costa réalisé à Paris le 16 janvier 2008 par Raphaël Lefèvre. *Critikat*
2. Entretien avec Pedro Costa réalisé le 13 Mars 2001. Sur le site du film *Paria* de Nicolas Klotz : *Asile de nuit*
3. Propos de Pedro Costa recueillis par Nadia Meflah en Septembre 2001. *Objectif Cinéma*
4. Propos de Pedro Costa recueillis par Jean-Philippe Tessé en novembre 2006. *Chronicart*
5. Propos de Pedro Costa recueillis par Jean-Sébastien Chauvin pour le dossier de presse du film *En avant, jeunesse*
6. Propos de Pedro Costa recueillis par Emmanuel Burdeau et Thierry Lounas en Janvier 2007. *Cahiers du cinéma*
7. Propos de Pedro Costa recueillis par Philippe Azoury et Olivier Séguret en Février 2008. *Libération*

## Crossing the threshold

The films of Pedro Costa have reinvented the relationship between film-maker and subject. Kieron Corless talks to the Portuguese director.

**Kieron Corless**, Sight & Sound, October 2009

THE FILMS of the 50-year-old Portuguese director Pedro Costa have been captivating audiences on the festival circuit for nearly 20 years, but with the exception of a one-cinema release for his *Colossal Youth* (see S&S May and June 2008) none has so far been distributed in Britain. Now, with a complete Costa retrospective at Tate Modern in late September and several DVD releases pending through Second Run and Eureka/Masters of Cinema, British cinephiles can finally acquaint themselves with his singular talent, which first expressed itself in visually striking early works such as *O Sangue* (1989) and *Casa de Lava* (1994). However, it was the so-called Fontainhas trilogy – *Ossos* (1997), *In Vanda's Room* (*No Quarto da Vanda*, 2000) and *Colossal Youth* (*Juventude em Marcha*, 2006) – which really made the world sit up and take notice; the latter two in particular are widely regarded as key films of the last 20 years.

Costa's discovery of Fontainhas, a ghetto neighbourhood on the outskirts of Lisbon that's home to impoverished immigrants from Portugal's former colony the Cape Verde Islands, led to his increasing disillusionment with industrial film-making and his switch to small-scale digital work. Costa's subsequent films made with non-professional actors essentially playing versions of their own often bleak lives were underpinned by his striving for a truly collaborative and more rigorous film-making practice – 'a cinema made with justice', as he styles it, drawing for its inspiration on the likes of John Ford, Chaplin, Ozu and Straub-Huillet. (Straub, in particular, he calls his "master".)

### **KC: How did you start in film?**

**PC:** After film school in 1981, like everyone I got some small jobs on productions – getting the sandwich for the actor, driving the car. I was young, it was money – actually I earned much more money than I am earning now – and I was a bit afraid, I have to say. I didn't like what I saw. I worked for six or seven years as assistant. Every film I worked on I saw the same thing: a lot of tragedies and massacres, producers against directors, crews that weren't interested in the film, directors panicking. So I kept wondering, Is this the life I want to have? But this was a moment when state funding started here and Portuguese films were a bit fashionable. There were a lot of film-makers coming here – Wenders, Ruiz, Tanner etc, and the producer Paulo Branco was very active. So there was a lot of energy, let's say, and I got some money to do a first film, *O Sangue*.

### **KC: What was influencing you at that time?**

**PC:** The English band Wire and Godard and Straub were my heroes. And they all seemed exactly the same thing for me. Not at all difficult or intellectual. Very simple, very practical, talking about day-to-day life, and very sensual – the most sensual films and the most sensual music. But it could also be Ozu; some felt he was traditional or reactionary, but for me he was the most advanced, progressive, the fastest of film-makers. I felt contemporary to these things, and less to the films that were made during and after the Portuguese revolution, documentaries that were made here and everywhere at that time, left-wing things saying "Cinema is a weapon" and all this bullshit.

### **KC: You're mainly associated with the loose trilogy you made in Fontainhas – 'Ossos', 'In Vanda's Room', 'Colossal Youth'. How did you come to that neighbourhood?**

**PC:** I made my second film in Cape Verde, called *Casa de Lava*. I wanted to do this story

which actually was a remake of [Jacques Tourneur's 1943] *I Walked with a Zombie*, or it was supposed to be, with zombies and dogs and strange people. And then when we made it, of course it was not at all a remake, but a very difficult thing to do because we had to bring everything, even our own electricity and trucks. It was a mini-*Apocalypse Now* for us, but what was good for me was I felt a possible way of doing things, of being closer to some people, real people. In fact in the last days I got close to the people in the village where we shot. On the last day when we were leaving, they gave me a big plastic bag full of letters and tobacco and rice and coffee for their relatives who were here in Lisbon, in Fontainhas. I knew where the place was – it was a real ghetto and really dangerous. I spoke some creole and so when I found the people there, I was immediately accepted because I brought messages. And then they kept inviting me, "You must come to dinner tomorrow, you must come Saturday to this party," and I began staying.

**KC: Why did you keep going back? What attracted you?**

**PC:** I have to admit that my first attraction was almost sensual, plastic – the colours, the skin colours, the way they talked. It was a lot of music, hearing sounds. I thought this could be a nice world for me to try to film. Even the place seemed like a small studio: all the houses and the street – it was like a set.

**KC: How did 'Ossos' come about – it seems like the transitional film in your career?**

**PC:** I met Vanda [Duarte], her mother, sister and then another guy, and then I just got this idea of a baby being born and the parents not wanting it. They want to sell it, which was a common story, a cliché, in that kind of place, that kind of world, I learned a lot of things with that film, because at the same time as I was beginning to think I had found something and I had found a world, at least some people that I really like, and that those people were going to be in front of the camera, still I had a problem behind the camera which in that film was a big, big mess.

**KC: So out of this experience you started thinking of a new approach?**

**PC:** I was in fact already thinking about the next film, a correct approach and way of working in that place – about the organisation and about how you keep film in its place so it's not a violating thing, a police thing. There's a lot of things that I cannot do in that place. I cannot say, "Silence" – it's absurd. It means "Don't talk. Stop the music" – and that's what I like! So it's step by step, and it took me a long time.

**KC: How important was Vanda Duarte in taking you to this new place?**

**PC:** In *Ossos* she was the one who resisted all the time. Everything you read about Mitchum, when he was, "Yeah, yeah I'll do it" – and then he did something else. Same with Vanda. She was never on the spot for the light, never. When I said "Good morning," she would say "Good night." She hated the cables, the guys, the trucks – she said this was completely fake. So she gave me the reason.

By the end of the shoot I was completely exhausted, and she said, "Come back and try to do it in another way. Come to my room and stay a bit and think." So there was this kind of invitation to do something with her in her room, which for me was a dream because a room, a girl, a camera – well, for a heterosexual film-maker it can be very tempting. So I thought about that and just went there, bought this camera, put it in my backpack and began coming. No project, just this room and this girl.

**KC: So this was the start of the process that eventually led to 'In Vanda's Room'?**

**PC:** In fact two months after I was there she came to her room with stuff and said, "Are you still thinking about something?" I said, "Yeah, we're doing it." It was so small, she didn't realise there was something happening. That was good because nobody was paying attention. They knew it was another film, but it was not about glamour, it was more concrete – there was just one guy. I tried to show them that it is also very hard and I had to be there every day, for myself, for discipline.

**KC: Could you describe in a bit more detail how you work with the digital camera?**

**PC:** When I am making a shot with a very small video camera it is exactly like making the shots I did before. The work is done with exactly the same gentleness and care and precision. You have to be much more careful, actually – you should take it slower. These cameras seem to have a sticker saying, "Move me or do what you want" – but you should not move it. You should take your time, do it slow, think. For me it is like a microscope – it's much more risky than shooting in 35.

**KC: Can you say something about how you work on a day-to-day basis?**

**PC:** It's about having a common idea and making it happen. Some very fragile and simple tools – a camera, a mic – and some props, very simple things from the neighbourhood. They dress how they dress. But it's from eight to seven, or nine to ten in the evening, every day. *Colossal Youth* was made from Monday to Saturday, then Sunday rest, for one-and-a-half years, with some pauses. We have the freedom of not shooting when we don't feel like it. We have the freedom, if Ventura [the lead actor in *Colossal Youth*] is not well or Vanda, we do not force them to work of course, and that creates a very good spirit because they actually become more committed. That's a good part of this method. The film takes its own pace. It's much more in your body, in the body of your actors; it becomes daily, it becomes work.

**KC: Do you rehearse?**

**PC:** Actually I'm doing something that I always dreamed of, doing exactly what Chaplin did when he started, which was rehearsing on film. Like in that Brownlow documentary about Chaplin, *Unknown Chaplin*, you can see he worked on film. He never rehearsed or tried anything without filming, without having the camera on, and that helps a lot. It takes solemnity and mystery out of the camera. The camera shouldn't be a mystery.

**KC: You're famous for doing a large number of takes. What are the advantages of that method?**

**PC:** There's something about repetition – of course with some liberty, they are not nailed to the ground – that makes sense, that connects them to life. For [people in Fontainhas] much more than for other classes, their life is repetition – there's nothing that's going to change. I think the record was 80 takes, but it needed 80 takes. We could do 30, 40, 50... Of course these takes are not made like in other films in one day, they are made in weeks. We could spend almost months doing a scene or just two scenes. There are no bosses or producers coming; we just feel that if it's there, we cannot go any further, then we stop. And it's good for them to have this discipline, to understand they can conquer their fear and insecurity and do it better, and tell it better. They can get to a point where it's more clear and more mysterious at the same time.

**KC: How do you manage to survive financially?**

**PC:** It's very simple making a budget – it's having the money just to live every month, me and three or four friends. One for the sound, one to help me with the camera, another to assist me, and the actors of course. We try always to have this balance or harmony, all being paid more or less the same. That helps a lot. And in this kind of place it's very important. It tells them film isn't something special. I want to teach them that cinema is not a luxury, it's not just made for very rich and glamorous people – it can be made with less money, it can be made with justice. It's more about that than the artistic work for me. And that's very good, because they now understand that. At the same time it's very, very hard – it's real work. But it's something that has a relation still to the real world, and that was something I didn't find in the films I assisted on, even some films I made with crews.

**KC: How have the people in Fontainhas responded to the films you made in the community?**

**PC:** That is what some of my colleagues don't have, the ones that work in the more normal way – they don't have this immediate critique that I have. You can imagine that after *In Vanda's Room*, all the neighbourhood said, "Yeah, it's great, it's very beautiful, but there's a lot of

drugs. We are not about drugs and now you should show some other things." It was very serious, it was very Maoist. I defended myself. I said, "Yeah, well it's my thing about you." This kind of thing is very useful to me: it's my fear of not losing touch with this thing that I am associating with cinema, this part of humanity or reality that I think was always there since the beginning – and sometimes it's not there enough even in documentaries you see.

*A retrospective of Pedro Costa's films screened at Tate Modern from 25 September to 4 October. 'O Sangue' is released on DVD on 21 September, followed by 'Casa de Lava', 'In Vanda's Room' and 'Colossal Youth' in early 2010.*

#### Documento 5.

## Serenity

Director Miguel Gomes explains how Pedro Costa found a home to film as his own with the inhabitants of Fontainhas on the margins of Lisbon

### Miguel Gomes

Sight & Sound, October 2009

AT ONE POINT in Pedro Costa's *In Vanda's Room*, there's a scene that plays like a Jacques Tati gag. Pango, one of the addicts the film follows, is in the house he's just squatted. He finds an abandoned drawer, which he places horizontally on the floor, with its bottom end facing up. He takes a drag on his cigarette, and sees an improvised bench. He doesn't like it. He lifts the drawer again, and this time he places it vertically, with the open end facing towards him. He sets off to find a piece of wood, and forces it into the middle of the drawer. He's just made a wardrobe.

This is a mere detail in a film in which domestic chores are omnipresent and even compete with the rituals of drug consumption, both activities being part of the daily routine always taking place inside the house. In any case, Pango's gesture is useful, both for himself and for Costa. While the bulldozers outside are reducing the streets and houses of Lisbon's Fontainhas neighbourhood to dust, both character and film-maker reuse what they can from the debris and abandoned materials. They don't bring them in from the outside – they are already there. Since he started filming in digital, Costa has referred to his new production model as something revitalising, freeing him both from the weight of cinema and from everything that comes between the camera and what is being filmed.

What I think differentiates *In Vanda's Room* from the three films of Costa's that preceded it is the presence of a radically new serenity in his cinema. For me, this serenity is above all the result of the discovery of a community: a place, the people that live there, the network of relationships that exists between them. The greatness of *In Vanda's Room* has to do with the growing sense that we are witnessing the reconstruction, both concrete and abstract, of this community's experiences. (Reconstruction and not re-creation, because we all know that even though a drawer can be made into a wardrobe, it will always remain a drawer.) This is the film in which the film-maker is reconciled with the possibility of a society. Not 'Society' – but a society on the margins.

On the margins is precisely where the protagonists of Costa's first three features – *O Sangue*, *Casa de Lava* and *Ossos* – exist; and each of those films – although in very different ways – is organised around the confrontation between characters and society. But when, making his fourth film, Costa entered Fontainhas and turned Vanda's room (whose interior walls are more permeable to the noises coming from the streets than to the history of cinema) into a box that

resonates with the life of the neighbourhood, he completely reformulated the key elements of his work.

Up until *In Vanda's Room*, Costa always needed to fabricate an ostentatious dramatic pathos in order to create his Romantic imagery. The near-gothic *O Sangue*, born from the darkest night, enfolds its characters in a cocoon of myth, which is emphasised by the mise en scène, cinematography and editing. In *Casa de Lava*, Costa discovered a place – Ilha do Fogo in Cape Verde – that already contained these wild and romantic notions; this film constitutes his first approximation to an autonomous material reality, that is simply there and exists before and after the making of the film. With *Ossos*, Costa discovered Vanda Duarte, the future focus of *In Vanda's Room*, and with her and various others he made a horror film in which bodies emanate and incarnate the dramatic contours of his cinema. Costa is a vampire and his actors are zombies, and that profane dimension is what makes *Ossos* such a disturbing work.

For his next film, *In Vanda's Room*, Costa – surprise! – infiltrated Fontainhas and ceased filming marginalised characters, since it was the neighbourhood itself that was marginal to the city. The actors didn't require the intervention of a film-maker to expose the dramatic quality of everyday life in their neighbourhood – it was already there, so no need to import it. In retrospect it becomes clear that, in film after film, Costa was trying to materialise his ghosts. Here, finally, those ghosts had bodies, a space to inhabit, and rituals. And it was from this new reality that Costa's serenity was born. It was from this moment on that Costa could invoke Ozu, another director who filmed domestic rituals obsessively.

In his documentary *Où gît votre sourire s'enfoui*, which could be renamed 'In the Straubs' Room', Costa follows this same procedure, although this time with cinema itself. Here, in the dialogue between film-makers Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, and on the moviola where they are editing their 1999 film *Sicilia!*, cinema materialises and becomes a physical reality. Costa registers this patiently, and balances it with a domestic portrait of the film-makers' marriage, surprisingly light and alive.

Contrary to what's often been said, I don't believe Costa's next Fontainhas film, *Colossal Youth*, is a continuation of *In Vanda's Room*, but rather a new approach to the films that preceded *Vanda*, supported by what he conquered along the way. Using a structure and framing which are once again more 'visible', Costa returns here to the mythical associations of his previous works, but now with the serenity of someone who's in a place he knows is (also) his.

*Translated by Mar Diestro-Dópido. Reprinted by kind permission of Cahiers de Cinéma España*

#### Documento 6.

## The Politics of Pedro Costa

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HOW ARE WE to think the politics of Pedro Costa's films? The answer appears simple at first. His films are about a situation seemingly at the heart of the political issues of today: the fate of the exploited, of people who have come from afar, from former colonies in Africa, to work on Portuguese construction sites; people who have lost their families, their health, sometimes even their lives, on those sites, and who yesterday were dumped in suburban slums and subsequently moved to new homes—better lit, more modern, not necessarily more livable. A number of other sensitive themes are joined to this fundamental situation. In *Casa de Lava*, for example, there is the repression of the Salazar government, which sends its opponents off to camps situated on the very spot from where African immigrants leave in search of work in the city. And, starting with *Ossos*, there is the life of young people from Lisbon who, due to drugs and deteriorating

social conditions, have found themselves in the same slums and under the same living conditions.

Still, neither a social situation nor a visible display of sympathy for the exploited and the neglected are enough to make art political. We usually expect there to be a mode of representation which renders the situation of exploitation intelligible as the effect of specific causes and, further, which shows that situation to be the source of the forms of consciousness and affects that modify it. We want the formal operations to be organized around the goal of shedding light on the causes and the chain of effects. Here, though, is where things become difficult. Pedro Costa's camera never once takes the usual path from the places of misery to the places where those in power produce or manage it. We don't see in his films the economic power which exploits and relegates, or the power of administrations and the police, which represses or displaces populations. We never hear any of his characters speaking about the political stakes of the situation, or of rebelling against it. Filmmakers before Pedro Costa, like Francesco Rosi, show the machinery that regulates and displaces the poor. Others, like Jean-Marie Straub, take the opposite approach.

They distance their cameras from 'the misery of the world' in order to show, in an open-air amphitheatre designed to evoke ancient grandeur and modern struggles for liberation, the men and women of the people who confront history and proudly proclaim the project of a just world. We don't see any of this in Pedro Costa. He does not inscribe the slums into the landscape of capitalism in mutation, nor does he design his sets to make them commensurate with collective grandeur.

Some might say that this is not a deliberate choice, but simply the reality of a social mutation: the immigrants from Cape Verde, the poor whites, and the marginalized youth of his films bear no resemblance at all to the proletariat, exploited and militant, which was Rosi's horizon yesterday, and remains Straub's today. Their mode of life is not that of the exploited, but that of a marginalized group left to fend for itself. The police is absent from their universe, as are people fighting in the name of social justice. The only people from the city center who ever come to visit them are nurses, who lose themselves in these outskirts more from an intimate crack than from the need to bring relief to suffering populations.

The inhabitants of Fontainhas live their lot in the way that was so stigmatized during the time of Brecht: as their destiny. If they discuss it at all, it is to wonder whether heaven, their own choice, or their weakness is responsible for their lot. What are we to think of the way Pedro Costa places his camera in these spaces? It's common to warn people who have chosen to talk about misery to remember that misery is not an object for art. Pedro Costa, however, seems to do the very opposite. He never misses an opportunity to transform the living spaces of these miserable people into objects of art. A plastic water bottle, a knife, a glass, a few objects left on a deal table in a squatted apartment: there you have, under a light that strokes the set, the occasion for a beautiful still life. As night descends on this space without electricity, two small candles placed on the same table lend to the miserable conversations or to the needle sessions the allure of a chiaroscuro from the Dutch Golden Age.

The motion of excavators is a chance to show, along with the crumbling buildings, sculptural bases made of concrete and large walls with contrasting colors—blue, pink, yellow, or green. The room where Vanda coughs so hard as to tear apart her chest delights us with its aquarium green walls, against which we see the flight of mosquitoes and gnats. The accusation of aestheticism can be met by saying that Pedro Costa has filmed the places just as they are. The homes of the poor are on the whole gaudier than the homes of the rich, their raw colors more pleasant to the eye of the art lover than the standardised aestheticism of petit bourgeois home decorations. In Rilke's day already, exiled poets saw gutted buildings simultaneously as fantastic sets and as the stratigraphy of a way of living. But the fact that Pedro Costa has filmed these places 'as they are' means something else, something that touches on the politics of art.

After *Ossos*, he stopped designing sets to tell stories. That is to say, he gave up exploiting misery as an object of fiction. He placed himself in these spaces to observe their inhabitants living their lives, to hear what they say, capture their secret. The virtuosity with which the camera plays with colors and lights, and the machine which gives the actions and words of the inhabitants the time to be acted out, are one and the same. But if this answer absolves the director of the sin of aestheticism, it immediately raises another suspicion, another accusation: what politics is this, which makes it its task to record, for months and months, the gestures and words which reflect the misery of that world?

This is an accusation which confines the conversations in Vanda's room and Ventura's drifting to a simple dilemma: either an indiscreet aestheticism indifferent to the situation of the individuals involved, or a populism that gets trapped by that same situation. This, though, is to inscribe the work of the director in a very petty topography of high and low, near and far, inside and outside. It is to situate his way of working in an all too simple play of oppositions between the wealth of colors and the misery of the individuals, between activity and passivity, between what is given and what is seized. Pedro Costa's method explodes precisely this system of oppositions and this topography. It favors instead a more complex poetics of exchanges, correspondences, and displacements. To see it at work, it might be good to pause a second over an episode from *Colossal Youth (Juventude em marcha)* that can, in a few 'tableaux,' sum up the aesthetics of Pedro Costa, and the politics of that aesthetics.

The episode places us, first, in the 'normal' setting of Ventura's existence: that of an immigrant worker who shares a run-down place with a fellow Cape Verdean. As it starts, we hear Ventura's voice reciting a love letter while the camera-eye frames a grey corner of the wall which is pierced by the white rectangle of a window; the four glass bottles on the window sill compose another still life. Urged by the voice of his friend Lento, Ventura's reading slowly fades out. The next shot introduces a quite brutal change of setting: the still life that served as the set for Ventura's reading is succeeded by yet another colored rectangle taken from a still darker section of wall: a painting whose frame seems to pierce with its own light the surrounding darkness which threatens to encroach on its edges. Colors quite similar to the colors of the bottles outline arabesques in which we can recognize the Sacred Family fleeing to Egypt with a sizeable cohort of angels. The sound of footsteps announce the character who appears in the next shot: Ventura, who is leaning with his back against the wall, flanked by a portrait of Hélène Fourment by Rubens, the painter of the Flight to Egypt of the previous shot, and by Van Dyck's Portrait of a Man.

These three well-known works are specifically situated: we are seeing the walls of the Gulbenkian Foundation, a building that is obviously not in Ventura's neighborhood. Nothing in the preceding shot announced this visit, and there is nothing in the film to suggest that Ventura has a taste for painting. The director has brutally transported Ventura to this museum, which we suppose by the echoing footsteps and the night light to be empty of visitors, closed off for the shooting of this scene.

The relationship between the three paintings and the filmic 'still life' that immediately precedes them, together with that between the decaying home and the museum, and perhaps even that between the love letter and the paintings no right to enjoy. But this simple lesson does not justify the museum being deserted, empty even of those people who do benefit from the work of the Venturas of this world. It does not justify the facworld, and also the workers who've come from the islands of Cape Verde. That might be why Ventura's gaze loses itself somewhere in the ceiling.

We might think he is envisioning the scaffolding he fell constructed around a double return: the return to Ventura's reading of the letter, and a flashback to the accident. We see Ventura, his head now in a bandage, returning to a wooden shack with a The relationship between the three

paintings and the filmic 'still life' that immediately precedes them, together with that between the decaying home and the museum, and perhaps even that between the love letter and the paintings on the walls, composes a very specific poetic displacement, a metaphor that speaks in the film about the art of the filmmaker: of its relationship to the art in museums, and of the relationship that one art and the other forges with the body of its characters. A metaphor which speaks, in short, about their politics.

The politics here might seem quite easy to grasp at first. A silent shot shows us a museum guard who is himself black walk up to Ventura and whisper something in his ear. As Ventura walks out of the room, the guard pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes clean the traces of Ventura's feet. We understand: Ventura is an intruder. The guard tells him later: this museum, he says, is a refuge, far from the din of poor neighborhoods and from the supermarkets whose merchandise he used to have to protect from widespread shoplifting. Here, though, is an old and peaceful world that is disturbed only by the chance visit of someone from their world. Ventura himself had already manifested that, both with his attitude—he offered no resistance to being escorted out of the gallery, and eventually out of the museum through the service stairs—and with his gaze, which scrutinized some enigmatic point situated, it seemed, well above the paintings.

The politics of the episode would be to remind us that the pleasures of art are not for the proletariat and, more precisely still, that museums are closed off to the workers who build them. This becomes explicit in the gardens of the Foundation, in the conversation between Ventura and the museum employee during which we learn why Ventura fits into this displaced setting. There used to be nothing here at all but a marsh, bushes and frogs. It was Ventura, together with other workers, who cleaned up the area, laid down the terrace, built the plumbing system, carried the construction materials, erected the statue of the place's founder, and planted the grass at its feet. It was here, too, that he fell from the scaffolding.

The episode, in sum, would be an illustration of the poem in which Brecht asks who built Thebes, with its seven gates and other architectural splendors. Ventura would represent all those people who have constructed buildings, at great danger to their health and lives, which they themselves have no right to enjoy. But this simple lesson does not justify the museum being deserted, empty even of those people who do benefit from the work of the Venturas of this world. It does not justify the fact that the scenes shot inside the museum should be so silent; or that the camera should linger on the concrete steps of the service stairs down which the guard escorts Ventura; or that the silence inside the museum should be followed by a long panoramic shot, punctuated by bird cries, of the surrounding trees; or that Ventura should tell his story, from the exact day of his arrival in Portugal, on 29 August 1972; or that the scene should brutally end with him indicating the spot where he fell. Ventura here is something completely different from the immigrant worker who represents the condition of immigrant workers.

The greenery of the scene, the way Ventura towers over the guard, the solemn tone of his voice as he seems to recite a text that inhabits him—all of this is very far from every narrative of misery. Ventura in this scene is a chronicler of his own life, an actor who renders visible the singular grandeur of that life, the grandeur of a collective adventure for which the museum seems incapable of supplying an equivalent. The relationship of Pedro Costa's art to the art displayed on the walls of the museum exceeds the simple demonstration of the exploitation of workers for the sake of the pleasures of the aesthete, much as Ventura's figure exceeds that of the worker robbed of the fruit of his labor. If we hope to understand this scene, we have to tie the relationships of reciprocity and non-reciprocity into a much more complex knot.

To begin with, the museum is not the place of artistic wealth opposed to the penury of the worker. The colored arabesques of the Flight to Egypt show no straightforward superiority over the shot of the window with four bottles in the poor lodgings of the two workers. The painting's golden frame strikes us as a stingier delimitation of space than the window of the house, as a

way of canceling out everything that surrounds it and of rendering uninteresting all that is outside of it—the vibrations of light in the space, the contrasting colors of the walls, the sounds from outside. The museum is a place where art is locked up within this frame that yields neither transparency nor reciprocity. It is the space of a stingy art. If the museum excludes the worker who built it, it is because it excludes all that lives from displacements and exchanges: light, forms, and colors in their movement, the sound of the world, and also the workers who've come from the islands of Cape Verde.

That might be why Ventura's gaze loses itself somewhere in the ceiling. We might think he is envisioning the scaffolding he fell from. But we might also think of another lost gaze fixed on an angle of another ceiling, the ceiling in the new apartment he is shown by a fellow from Cape Verde who in many ways resembles the museum employee. He is, in any case, just as convinced that Ventura is not in his element in this apartment, which Ventura had requested for his fictive family, and also just as eager to wipe clean the traces of Ventura's intrusion on this sterile place. In answer to the spiel about the socio-cultural advantages of the neighborhood, Ventura had majestically extended his arms towards the ceiling and uttered a lapidary sentence: 'It's full of spider webs.' The social-housing employee cannot verify the presence of these spider webs on the ceiling anymore than we can. It could be Ventura who has, as the saying goes, 'spider webs in the attic.' And anyway, even if insects do crawl up and down the walls of this housing project, they are nothing when compared to the decaying walls of his friend Lento's or of Bete's place, where 'father' and 'daughter' amuse themselves seeing, as good disciples of Leonardo da Vinci, the formation of all sorts of fantastic figures.

The problem with the white walls that welcome the worker to the housing project is the same as the problem of the dark walls of the museum which reject him: they keep at bay the chance figures in which the imagination of the worker who crossed the seas, chased frogs from the city center, and slipped and fell from the scaffolding can be on a par with that of the artist. The art on the walls of the museum is not simply a sign of the ingratitude towards the person who built the museum. It is as stingy towards the sensible wealth of his experience as to the light that shines on even the most miserable homes.

We've already heard this in Ventura's narrative about his departure from Cape Verde on 29 August 1972, his arrival in Portugal, the transformation of a swamp into an art foundation, and the fall. By placing Ventura in such a setting, Pedro Costa has given him a Straub-like tone, the epic tone of the discoverers of a new world. The problem is not really to open the museum to the workers who built it, but to make an art commensurate with the experience of these travelers, an art that has emerged from them, and which they themselves can enjoy. That is what we learn from the episode which follows Ventura's brutal fall. It is an episode constructed around a double return: the return to Ventura's reading of the letter, and a flashback to the accident. We see Ventura, his head now in a bandage, returning to a wooden shack with a dilapidated roof. He sits hunched over at a table, imperiously insists that Lento come play cards, and continues reading the love letter he wants to teach to Lento, who can't read. This letter, which is recited many times, is like a refrain for the film.

It talks about a separation and about working on construction sites far from one's beloved. It also speaks about the soon-to-be reunion which will grace two lives for twenty or thirty years, about the dream of offering the beloved a hundred thousand cigarettes, clothes, a car, a little house made of lava, and a three-penny bouquet; it talks about the effort to learn a new word every day— words whose beauty is tailor-made to envelope these two beings like a pajamas of fine silk. This letter is written for one person only, for Ventura has no one to send it to. It is, strictly speaking, its own artistic performance, the performance Ventura wants to share [partager] with Lento, because it is the performance of an art of sharing [partage], of an art that does not split itself off from life, from the experience of displaced people or their means of mitigating absence and of coming closer to their loved one. The letter, however, and by the same token, belongs neither to the film nor to Ventura: it comes from elsewhere. Albeit more

discreetly, it already scanned the 'fictional' film of which *Colossal Youth* is the echo and the reverse:

*Casa de Lava*, the story of a nurse who goes to Cape Verde in the company of Leão, a worker who, like Ventura, has also injured his head, but on a different construction site. The letter first appeared in the papers of Edith, an exile from the big city who went to Cape Verde to be near her lover, sent by Salazar's regime to the Tarrafal concentration camp. She stayed there after his death and was adopted, in her confusion, by the black community, which lived off of her pension, and thanked her with serenades. It had seemed, then, that the love letter had been written by the sentenced man. But at the hospital, at Leão's bedside, Mariana gave the letter to Tina, Leão's younger sister, to read, as it was written in Creole.

Tina appropriates the letter, which becomes for the viewer not a letter sent from the death camp by the deported man, but by Leão from a construction site in Portugal. But when Mariana asks Leão about it, as he finally emerges from his coma, his answer is peremptory: how could he have written the loveletter, if he doesn't know how to write? All of a sudden, the letter seems not to have been written by, or addressed to, anyone in particular. It now seems like a letter written by a public scribe adept at putting into form the feelings of love, as well as the administrative requests, of the illiterate. Its message of love loses itself in the grand, impersonal transaction which links Edith to the dead militant, to the wounded black worker, to the kitchen of the erstwhile camp cook, and to the music of Leão's father and brother, whose bread and music Mariana has shared, but who would not go visit Leão at the hospital. They continued, nevertheless, working on refurbishing his house, the house which he would not enter but on two legs, all the while making arrangements so that they, too, could go and work on construction sites in Portugal.

The letter that Pedro Costa gives Ventura to read belongs to this wide circulation: between here and elsewhere, committed city folk and exiled workers, the literate and the illiterate, the wise and the confused. But in extending its addressees, the letter doubles back to its origin and another circulation is grafted onto the trajectory of the immigrants.

Pedro Costa wrote the letter by mixing two sources: a letter by an immigrant worker, and a letter written by a 'true' author, Robert Desnos, who wrote his letter sixty years earlier from camp Flöha in Saxony, a way-stop on the road to Terezin, and death. This means that Leão's fictional destiny and Ventura's real one are brought together in a circuit which links the ordinary exile of workers to the death camps. It also means that the art of the poor, of the public scribe, and of great poets are captured together in the same fabric: an art of life and of sharing [partage], an art of travel and of communication made for those for whom to live is to travel—to sell their work force to build houses and museums for other people, in the process bring with them their experience, their music, their way of living and loving, of reading on walls and of listening to the song of humans and birds.

There is no aestheticizing formalism or populist deference in the attention Pedro Costa pays to every beautiful form offered by the homes of the poor, and the patience with which he listens to the oftentimes trivial and repetitive words uttered in Vanda's room, and in the new apartment where we see Vanda after she has kicked her habit, put on some weight, and become a mother. The attention and the patience are inscribed, instead, in a different politics of art.

This politics is a stranger to that politics which works by bringing to the screen the state of the world to make viewers aware of the structures of domination in place and inspire them to mobilize their energies. It finds its models in the love letter by Ventura/Desnos and in the music of Leão's family, for their art is one in which the form is not split off from the construction of a social relation or from the realization of a capacity that belongs to everyone. We shouldn't confuse this with that old dream of the avant-garde in which artistic forms would be dissolved in the relations of the new world. The politics here, rather, is about thinking the proximity

between art and all those other forms which can convey the affirmation of a sharing [partage] or shareable [partageable] capacity.

The stress on the greens of *Vanda's room* cannot be separated from the attempts—by Vanda, Zita, Pedro or Nurro—to examine their lives and take control of it. The luminous still life composed with a plastic bottle and a few found objects on the white wooden table of a squat is in harmony with the stubbornness with which the redhead uses his knife to clean, the protests of his friends notwithstanding, the stain from the table destined for the teeth of the excavator.

Pedro Costa does not film the 'misery of the world.' He films its wealth, the wealth that anyone at all can become master of: that of catching the splendor of a reflection of light, but also that of being able to speak in a way that is commensurate with one's fate. And, lastly, the politics here is about being able to return what can be extracted of sensible wealth—the power of speech, or of vision—from the life and decorations of these precarious existences back to them, about making it available to them, like a song they can enjoy, like a love letter whose words and sentences they can borrow for their own love lives.

Isn't that, after all, what we can expect from the cinema, the popular art of the twentieth century, the art that allowed the greatest number of people—people who would not walk into a museum—to be thrilled by the splendor of the effect of a ray of light shining on an ordinary setting, by the poetry of clinking glasses or of a conversation on the counter of any old diner?

Confronted with people who align him with great 'formalists' like Bresson, Dreyer or Tarkovsky, Pedro Costa sometimes claims a whole different lineage: Walsh and Tourneur, as well as more modest and anonymous directors of *B* films who crafted well-formatted stories on a tight budget for the profit of Hollywood studios, and who didn't for all that fail to get the audiences of neighborhood cinemas to enjoy the equal splendor of a mountain, a horse, or a rocking chair—equal because of the absence of any hierarchy of visual values between people, landscape, or objects (1). At the heart of a system of production entirely subservient to the profit of its studio heads, cinema showed itself to be an art of equality.

The problem, as we unfortunately know, is that capitalism is not what it used to be, and if Hollywood is still thriving, neighborhood cinemas are not, having been replaced by multiplexes that give each sociologically-determined audience a type of art designed and formatted to suit it. Pedro Costa's films, like every work that eludes this formatting process, are immediately labeled as film-festival material, something reserved for the exclusive enjoyment of a film-buff elite and tendentiously pushed to the province of museums and art lovers.

For that, of course, Pedro Costa blames the state of the world, meaning the naked domination of the power of money, which classes as 'films for film-buffs' the work of directors who try to bring to everyone the wealth of sensorial experience found in the humblest of lives. The system makes a sad monk of the director who wants to make his cinema shareable [partageable] like the music of the violin player from Cape Verde and like the letter written jointly by the poet and the illiterate worker.

It is true that today, the domination by the wealthy tends to constitute a world in which equality must disappear even from the organization of the sensible landscape. All the wealth in this landscape has to appear as separated, as attributed to, and privately enjoyed by, one category of owners. The system gives the humble the pocket change of its wealth, of its world, which it formats for them, but which is separated from the sensorial wealth of their own experience. This is the television in *Vanda's room*. Still, this particular deal of the cards is not the only reason behind the break in reciprocity and the separation between the film and its world.

The experience of the poor is not just that of displacements and exchanges, of borrowing, stealing, and giving back. It is also the experience of the crack which interrupts the fairness of

exchanges and the circulation of experiences. In *Casa de Lava*, it is difficult to tell if Leão's silence as he lies on the hospital bed is the manifestation of a traumatic coma or the desire not to return to the common world. So, too, with Edith's 'madness,' her 'forgetfulness' of the Portuguese language and her confinement to booze and Creole. The death of the militant in the camp of the Salazar regime and the wound of the immigrant who works on construction sites in Portugal establish—at the heart of the circulation of bodies, medical care, words, and music—the dimension of that which cannot be exchanged, of the irreparable. In *Ossos*, there is Tina's silence, her loss as to what to do with the child in her arms other than take the child with her to their deaths.

*Colossal Youth* is split between two logics, two regimes of the exchange of words and experiences. On one side, the camera is placed in Vanda's new room, which is sterile white and filled by a double-bed of the type one finds at discount stores. There, a mellower and plumper Vanda talks about her new life, about her detox, the child, the deserving husband, about her treatment and health issues. On the other, the camera follows the often silent Ventura, who now and then utters an imperious command or lapidary sentence, and who sometimes loses himself in his narrative or in the reciting of his letter. It portrays him as a strange animal, too large or too shy for the set, whose eyes sometimes shine like those of a wild animal, and whose head is more often bent down than held up: the distracted gaze of a sick man.

The point with Ventura is not to gather the evidence of a hard life, even if it is in order to figure out who cinema can share [partager] this life with, and to whom it can give it back as his or her life. The point is rather to confront what cannot be shared [l'impartageable], the cracks that have separated a person from himself. Ventura is not an 'immigrant worker,' a poor man entitled to be treated with dignity and to share in the pleasures afforded by the world he has helped build. He is a sort of sublime drifter, a character from tragedy, someone who interrupts communication and exchange on his own.

There seems to be a divorce between two regimes of expression in the passage from the dilapidated walls, the colorful sets, and the loud colors of the slums to the new furniture and the white walls which no longer echo the words of those in the room. Even if Vanda is willing to play the role of one of Ventura's 'daughters,' even if Ventura sits at her table and chats in her room, and occasionally even does some baby-sitting, the crack in Ventura casts the shadow of this enormous and broken body, this enormous body which has been displaced into the story of Vanda's new life, on her narrative at the same time that it lends vanity to it. We can describe this intimate divorce using terms taken from an old quarrel, one summed up more than two centuries ago by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the Preface to *The New Heloise*. These family letters, are they real or fictive, the objector asks the man of letters. If they are real, then they are portraits, and we expect portraits to be faithful to the model. This makes them not very interesting to people who are not members of the family. 'Imaginary paintings,' on the other hand, interest the public, provided they resemble, not a particular individual, but the human being.

Pedro Costa says things differently: the patience of the camera, which every day mechanically films the words, gestures, and footsteps of the characters—not in order to make films, but as an exercise in approximating the secret of the other—must bring a third character to life on the screen.

A character who is not the director, nor Vanda, nor Ventura, a character who is, and is not, a stranger to our lives (2). But the emergence of this impersonal also gets caught up in the disjunction in its turn: it is hard for this third character to avoid becoming either Vanda's portrait, and as such enclosed in the family of social identifications, or Ventura's painting, the painting of the crack and the enigma which renders family portraits and narratives futile. A native of the island says as much to Mariana, the well-intentioned nurse: your skull is not fractured. The crack splits experience into those that can be shared [partageable], and those

which cannot [impartageable]. The screen where the third characters should appear is stretched between these two experiences, between two risks: the risk of platitude, in the life narratives, and of infinite flight, in the confrontation with the crack.

Cinema cannot be the equivalent of the love letter or of the music of the poor. It can no longer be the art which gives the poor the sensible wealth of their world. It must split itself off, it must agree to be the surface upon which the experience of people relegated to the margins of economic circulations and social trajectories try to be ciphered in new figures.

This new surface must be hospitable to the division which separates portrait and painting, chronicle and tragedy, reciprocity and rift. An art must be made in the place of another. Pedro Costa's greatness is that he simultaneously accepts and rejects this alteration, that his cinema is simultaneously a cinema of the possible and of the impossible.

## Notes

1. See Pedro Costa and Rui Chaves, *Fora! Out!* (Porto: Fundação de Serralves, 2007) 119.
2. *Fora! Out!*, p.115.

## Documento 7.

# Adventure: An Essay on Pedro Costa

## Shigehiko Hasumi

*This text first appeared in the catalogue of the Pedro Costa retrospective, Sendai Mediatheque, 2005. Thanks to Naoto Ogawa.*

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## A Tracking Shot

A YOUNG MAN walks with broad steps down a sidewalk. From one of his hands hangs something in a black plastic bag. Some distance away, the camera closely follows from the side his solitary stride. While the man remains in the centre of the frame, the sound that reverberates behind the images as they flow steadily to the right is not his footsteps but the roar of the cars' engines that cross the screen now and then in the opposite direction. As shown clearly by the low but lively noise of the street, the camera is now exposed to the outside air. With a human form seen only here and there, the sidewalk is uncrowded. Perhaps it is still early morning.

The rays of light falling on the street are indeed still dull, and the figure of the man does not stand out strongly from the background as he walks along, the walls of dingy houses on his left. Clearly this is not unfamiliar territory for him; he is moving straight ahead through a well-known landscape. He glances neither right nor left, and no one looks back in surprise at his intense manner of walking. The doors of the houses painted crimson and blue, and the window shutters and the graffiti on the walls, provide visual accents to the long wordless tracking shot.

Anyone who has seen this much of *Ossos* (*Bones*, 1997), the third film by Pedro Costa, knows well who this ponytailed man is. He is a poor unemployed youth who has just unexpectedly become a father, and he still has the air of a child. But the viewer does not understand immediately the meaning of his intense pace, because, as in many other cases, Pedro Costa's editing satisfyingly avoids explanations of the preceding and following context. The viewer is drawn without an intermediary into the long tracking shot passing before the eye and tries not to miss a moment. In fact, all of Pedro Costa's shots have a vertical power that breaks the viewer free from the story's linear cause and effect. The pleasure of exposure to that liberation has, ever

since F W Murnau, been a privilege allowed only to film.

As the moving camera stays aligned with the walking man, a breathtaking suspense builds. This suspense is not anticipation that an unknown situation may arise; rather, it forms around the question of how long the certainty that nothing is likely to happen can be maintained. The viewer worries how long this scene will continue and has no choice but to keep staring at the screen so as not to be abandoned by the flow of the film.

In his solitary stride, the man appears both to be fleeing from something and to be hurrying somewhere. At one point, his pace seems to falter slightly. But his jeans-clad legs continue their broad, unhesitating motions. Only the movements of his arms show any change: without halting his step, he lifts the black bag that he has been dangling from one hand and suddenly holds it to his chest with both arms.

At this point, we suddenly comprehend what is wrapped up in the plastic bag. Embraced in the arms of the walking man is a small living thing. The manner in which his two arms hold the bag shows that the bag's contents are not inanimate but alive. It must be a baby. The long-haired man who has just become a father has abducted his nursing baby from its mother and is now rushing away with it. Although we cannot accept immediately whatever it was that has led him to do this, we are forced to the awareness that, just as Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (1960) is a film about a car thief, Costa's *Ossos* is a film about a baby thief.

### **Adventure**

I will not go into detail about how the story develops thereafter. It is enough that we are drawn into that long tracking shot that begins so suddenly and that we are shaken by its immense directorial power. Watching any of Pedro Costa's films grabs hold of our gaze and forces us to personally experience the motion of the film. At times his scenes sting our eyes with their piercing pain, and at times they wrap our eyes in ineffable tenderness. What is amazing for the viewer who witnesses the tracking shot in *Ossos* is how the motion that is first felt as pain is then, at the instant the young man embraces the black plastic bag, miraculously transformed into tenderness.

At that moment, the viewer must confront two issues. The first is the function and meaning of tracking shots in the works of this director, and the second is the role of the tracking shot in this particular film. At the beginning of *Ossos* is a series of fixed close-ups of the faces of men and women whose identity it is difficult to know at first and whose interrelations are hard to discern. But with the tracking shot the viewer is drawn into and disturbed by the horizontal motion of the camera. The story that has been taking place in narrow alleys and cramped rooms is suddenly flung out into the open air and exposed to natural light. What is the meaning of the change in texture introduced by this tracking shot?

What is clear is that ever since his early film *O Sangue* (*The Blood*, 1989), Pedro Costa's camera has been moving less with each film, until *No Quarto da Vanda* (*In Vanda's Room*, 2000), which consists almost entirely of fixed shots. Although the only long tracking shot in *Ossos* is the one of the young man walking, we of course recall that a similar long tracking shot appeared in Costa's previous film, *Casa de Lava* (*Down to Earth*, 1995). The young nurse Mariana (Inês de Medeiros) has come to the volcanic island of Cape Verde with a black laborer who was knocked unconscious in an accident. When she leaves the hospital for the first time and sets out alone for the centre of the island, the long tracking shot of her walking anticipates the similar scene in *Ossos*.

Wearing only a shortish red dress, the young woman in *Casa de Lava* suddenly starts stepping lightly along the foreign road. The long tracking shot of her unexpected walk, taken from the side, makes us pleasantly forget what the previous shot has been. As she moves ahead silently while looking at the dirty walls of the islanders' homes on her left, the camera flows to the right, keeping the nurse in the centre of the frame and never changing the shooting angle. Unlike the youth in *Ossos*, she carries nothing in her arms, which swing fluidly around her petite body, and her occasional glances to the left and right harmonise pleasantly with her motions as she tries to

create a new relationship with this unfamiliar land. I do not need to point out that this long tracking shot is amazingly similar to the one in *Ossos*. As she steps lightly through the intersections and keeps walking with no sign of stopping, her stride declares the pleasure of absorbing this unfamiliar world with her entire body and moves the scene far beyond the facile cinematic tool of exoticism.

In contrast to the shot of the young man walking with his arms around the black plastic bag, the long tracking shot in *Casa de Lava* is tender from the start. The young woman does not regard her unexpectedly intimate encounter with a foreign land even as an adventure. As the camera follows her from the side, the natural blending of her unhesitating forward motion into the surrounding atmosphere and sunlight is captured on film, and what deserves to be called an adventure is the extremely pure tension that fills the movie. Such is the power of Pedro Costa's tracking shots. Like Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli, Terra di Dio* (1950), *Casa de Lava* is an adventure film in the best sense of the word.

### **Fiction and Documentary**

*Casa de Lava* also begins with close-ups: the expressionless faces of women who live on the island. It is unclear what their eyes are seeing or what their blank faces are trying to say, for Pedro Costa rarely uses shots that connect the eyes, which are the origin of sight, to the objects captured by their gaze.

These fixed shots of human faces, images that are gratuitous in the narrative sense, are suddenly interrupted by a moving camera shot, this time an aerial view taken from a camera looking down on volcanic rock. This shot is followed by a distant tracking shot of two helicopter pilots carrying the unconscious patient on a stretcher and the young nurse walking with the clear container of intravenous fluid held up high. The brown sand blown up by the unseen blades of the helicopter and the desolate volcanic landscape stretching off into the background highlight the foreignness of the setting. The pilots tell the nurse that it is her responsibility to take the stretcher to the hospital, and the camera reverses direction for another tracking shot of the nurse as she chases after them. After arguing with the nurse, the pilots go away, leaving the stretcher where it is.

As the young woman stands on this unfamiliar land with the unconscious black patient lying on the stretcher, her profile shows an innocence unsuitable for a person who is to take care of a patient who is clearly sturdier than she is. Compared with the calm caregiver in white portrayed by Isabel Ruth in *Ossos*, Inês de Medeiros is clearly helpless as she stands next to her patient. Nevertheless, she must get him to the island's clinic by herself. This apparent imbalance is what drives her actions into a risky adventure on the volcanic island of Cape Verde.

The next shot in *Casa de Lava*, the viewer recalls, shows the young nurse embracing a living thing just as the young man does in *Ossos*. After vibrating shots of the volcanic mountains taken from a moving vehicle, a backing shot is inserted of a dog running up along a gravel road, telling us again of the risky adventure that has begun for the young nurse.

As she rattles along in the back of the truck with the unconscious patient resting against her chest and his transparent intravenous container held as high as she can reach, her blank expression suggests neither bewilderment nor a strong sense of devotion to duty. Her gestures reveal only an intense commitment to the present moment; despite her desperation, she shows no irritation, and her figure lit by the setting sun as she endures the uncomfortable shaking in the truck is incredibly beautiful. The filming here includes no consideration of the aesthetic, but in this silent shot there is born a solitary, taciturn beauty of a person endeavoring to endure a situation wisely when offered no other choice. As she embraces the head of the unconscious stranger, behind her stretches arid scenery that must be foreign to her. But she never allows her gaze to shift.

In the back of the truck, exposed and defenseless against the outside air, the only thing heard is the dull sound of the engine. It is late afternoon, and the sinking sun shines on the intravenous container as the nurse consciously tries to keep from lowering it. She has no time to look at the

rays of the dull afternoon sun shining through the transparent container as she is carried wordlessly to the island's clinic. While this shaking fixed shot in the back of the truck is not as long as the tracking shot along the sidewalk in *Ossos*, it is powerful enough to liberate the viewer from the cause and effect of the narrative. Though not understanding the origin of this power that inserts itself vertically into the movie, we can only mutter 'splendid' at the sweet pain inflicted by the film's alignment with the present moment as it progresses across the screen.

### **The Present Moment Made Absolute**

Costa's sequence of shots does not attempt to tell when or how the young nurse went from standing in that desolate alien landscape next to the sick man on the stretcher with the intravenous container hanging from a nearby tree branch to riding in the back of the truck. But the viewer acknowledges the young nurse being shaken along in the truck as it drives down the road covered with volcanic gravel and unhesitatingly accepts as the only possible reality the image of her cradling the unconscious patient against her chest.

What is happening is different from the classical aesthetic of omission practiced so expertly in the films of Fritz Lang and Alfred Hitchcock. Here, the present moment is made visually absolute. While not abandoning the time flow of the film, this 'absolutification' of the present moment is a bare, unadorned directorial technique that creates a raw filmic continuity for fiction, which otherwise would be subordinated to narrative flow and human psychology. Only rarely in film is the ultimate state of fiction thus so simply integrated with the ultimate state of documentary.

This visual absolutification of the present frees the shot from cause-and-effect narrative. By the time of *No Quarto da Vanda*, it would form the core of Pedro Costa's films. But even in his earlier works, as in the scene on the moving truck bed and the walk into town in *Casa de Lava* and the long tracking shot in *Ossos*, it had already been attempted in partial form.

In Pedro Costa's editing, the story's context is rarely explained through sequences of shots, so the moment when the baby is grabbed away by his father is never shown on the screen. What we end up seeing is only the uncomfortable re-encounter, after some time has passed, between the father and the mother, and the miserable figure of the woman as she looks wordlessly at the man deep asleep next to the baby.

We do see, of course, shots of the childish mother as she returns home with her newborn baby in her arms, carefully shuts the windows, and drags the gas tank from the kitchen to the sofa where the baby is sleeping. But Pedro Costa projects these gestures performed by the woman into the future and avoids presenting the sequence as suspense over whether the mother has decided to use the gas to kill herself and her baby. Then the tracking shot suddenly begins, a long, powerful shot that is fully self-sufficient and that liberates the viewer from what comes before and after.

As I have already said, this long tracking shot is imbued with marvellous tension. While enduring that tension, the viewer attains an understanding of it by noticing a small gesture performed during the shot. When the man suddenly embraces with both arms the black plastic bag that he has been dangling casually from one hand, his act of having stolen the baby explodes silently upon the screen. While upset by the theft itself, the viewer is also pained by the memory that at the beginning of the shot the man let the bag nearly scrape against the ground as he walked.

Would someone really throw a newborn baby into a plastic bag like a bunch of vegetables and then stride down the sidewalk with the bag dangling from his hand? This is the question that all of us ask when we belatedly realise the seriousness of the situation. At the same time, we are relieved that the young father has felt it necessary to bring the tiny creature to his chest. As if ignoring that change, however, the long tracking shot continues.

Once again, one is deeply moved by the incredible power that this young director – Costa was only thirty-eight when he filmed *Ossos* – was able to put on the screen. One cannot help gasping

in shock at the directorial boldness of Costa's introduction into the long continuous shot of a tiny, momentary change – from dangling the plastic bag to embracing it—that reveals everything, and at the visual precision that such boldness demands.

I do not know whether Costa intended this long tracking shot to make the viewer realise that the plastic bag contains a newborn infant. But it seems certain that Costa carefully instructed the actor playing the father to make that motion. I also wonder idly about what was going on behind that directed action, such as whether the black plastic bag really did contain a baby.

It is not necessary to know the answer to that question, of course, to understand *Ossos*. But when, through this long tracking shot, we experience vicariously the palpable, forlorn feeling of holding that unidentified tiny life to our chests, that virtual sensation enlivens our view of the film at the uncertain boundary between fiction and documentary.

### **Embracing**

One ambitious element of Costa's direction in *Ossos* is undoubtedly the way he had the unfatherlike young man embrace the baby and then captured that helpless gesture on camera. Costa's ambition here, of course, is completely independent of our memories of banal comedies in which unmarried men fumble awkwardly as they try to take care of nursing babies. Rather, this element might better be said to show how tempting it is to point the camera at a man hesitatingly embracing an infant, as John Wayne does in John Ford's *Three Godfathers* (1949).

The only director since Ford who has had an unfatherlike man walk a long way with a newborn infant in his arms is Pedro Costa. Although I point out this fact, I have no intention of declaring triumphantly that Ford's Western is recalled in *Ossos*. But just as crossing the desert with a baby in his arms was a rare adventure for the Western star John Wayne, equally rare adventures for film are the young father's embracing of the black plastic bag in the poor neighborhood of *Ossos* and the young nurse's embracing of the head of her patient, who is clearly much sturdier than she is, as she rattles along in the back of the truck on the volcanic gravel road in *Casa de Lava*. The adventure here, of course, is not in the depiction of a situation that has already been imagined to be adventurous but in the capturing on film of an unknown experience that occurs during the moment of filming.

Perhaps for Pedro Costa the act of holding something to one's chest is itself an adventure. To recall a familiar image, when the black plastic bag containing the baby is suddenly embraced in *Ossos*, it resembles the shoddy wooden box holding vegetables that Vanda (Vanda Duarte) carries now and then at her side in *No Quarto da Vanda*. The times when she carries that box along shadowy alleys and to the doors of houses so dark it is difficult to make out the residents are precisely the times when Vanda has left her room. For Pedro Costa, the act of carrying something in the arms may be an excuse for exposing a person to the outdoors. Just like Vanda trying to sell lettuce and salad greens as she carries the box through the alleys, the young father in *Ossos* is trying to get money for the embraced baby exposed to the gaze of passersby. The tired Vanda sets her box of unsold vegetables down, squats next to a wall, and smokes a cigarette; similarly, the father in *Ossos* sits on the pavement, leans against the wall, and takes a deep drag on his cigarette as he awkwardly gives milk to the infant.

I do not mean to suggest that the vegetable seller in *No Quarto da Vanda* is repeating the gesture of the young father in *Ossos*. The similarity between these two gestures is undeniable, but it would be difficult to say that merely pointing out that similarity will determine our understanding of these two works. But it is certainly true that the incredible liveliness of Pedro Costa's direction appears when a man or woman holds something in or under his or her arms.

Does that gesture suggest an invisible family? Or does it show the embracing of a love that transcends carnality? To find out, we must look forward to the director's next work.