The Intervals of Cinema

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serve political ends, but political forms reinvented by refer-
ence to the multiple ways the visual arts invent gazes, arrange
bodies in particular locations and make them transform the
spaces they cross.

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Pedro Costa’s Politics

How should we assess the politics of Pedro Costa’s films? The
answer appears easy enough: his central subject is one also at
the heart of contemporary politics – the fate of the exploited,
of those who have come from the former African colonies to
work on Portuguese construction sites. These people have left
their families, damaged their health and some have lost their
lives on these sites. Before coming they had lived in crowded
suburban shanty-towns until they were driven out into new
dwellings, larger, more modern but not necessarily more
habitable. Added to this kernel in Costa’s films are other
sensitive political themes: in Down to Earth (Casa de Lava)
the Saharaitst repression which sent political opponents to
camps in the same islands off Africa from which Africans
came in search of work in the metropolis, and from Ocos
forward, the life of the Lisbon youth who have also congre-
gated, through drugs and social drift, into the shanty-towns
with the immigrants.

A social situation, however, is not sufficient to make politi-
cal art, no more so than an obvious sympathy for the exploited
and abandoned. It is usually thought that a mode of representa-
tion needs to be added, one which renders the situation
intelligible as the effect of particular causes and shows it to
generate forms of awareness and emotions that modify it. So,
we expect the work’s formal means to obey the general worry
of showing causes to the intellect of the spectator and produc-
ing effects on their emotions. This is where things go wrong.
Pedro Costa's camera never follows the normal trajectory of moving his lens away from the places of misery to the places where those in dominant positions producing this misery live. Neither the economic power that exploits and relegates, nor the administrative and police power that represses or displaces populations, appear in his films. Nor do his characters ever state any political formulation of the situation or express rebellious feeling. Some political filmmakers have made us see, as Francesco Rosi once did, the economic and political machine that relegates the poor and hardest them about. Others, like Jean-Marie Straub, do this, too, the camera off the world's suffering and place before us, in some grayish amphitheatre evocative of ancient grandeur and modern revolutions, with ordinary men and women who face up to history and proudly demand a plan for a just world. We get nothing of the sort in Costa's films: neither the inscription of shantytowns in the landscape of mutating capitalism, nor the setting of a scene appropriate to collective grandeur. It will be said that he testifies to another age: Cape-Verdian immigrants, impoverished poor-whites and marginalized youth no longer comprise anything resembling the proletarian, exploited and conquering, that was once Rosi's theme and is still Straub's.

Their way of life is not so much that of the exploited as of the abandoned. The very police are absent from their universe, as are combatants in the social struggle. The only inhabitants of the town who sometimes visit them are nurses: and even they are sent through tiny cracks rather than directly to bring medical care to the suffering populations. The inhabitants of Fontainhas live their condition in a manner stigmatized in Brechtian times: as a destiny, discussed at most to know whether it is the gods', their own choice or their weakness that has given them this life.

The wish to explain and mobilize thus seems to be missing from Costa's project. And his artistic prejudices themselves seem opposed to the whole tradition of documentary art. One always tries to remind those who have chosen to talk about destination that it is not a piece of art. The autor of In Vanda's Room nevertheless seems to seize every opportunity to dwell on the décor of the shanty-town undergoing demolition. A plastic water bottle, a knife, a glass, a few objects placed randomly on a white wooden table in an apartment squat with a horizontal light skimming the table top – all this provides the opportunity for a fine still-life. And when evening comes to this dwelling without electricity, two small candles on the same table will give a glowing conversation or drug session the texture of seventeenth-century Dutch chiaroscuro. The working of mechanical diggers among crumbling houses is an opportunity to feature sculptural stamps of reinforced concrete or broad slabs of wall in contrasting blue, pink, yellow and green. The room where Vanda coughs so endlessly enchant us with its greenish aquarium colours and circling mosquitoes and midges.

The answer to any accusation of aestheticism would surely be that Costa filmed these places as they were: poor people's houses are normally more grungily decorated than those of the rich, and their cracks colours are more amenable to the eye of a modern art lover than the standardized aesthetic of petty bourgeois taste. As far back as Riha's time, evicted dwellings were seen as offering poets both a fantastic décor and the stringency of a mode of living. Saying that Costa filmed the setting as it was indicates, too, a specific artistic approach: after Ossos he gave up arranging backgrounds to tell stories. He gave up exploiting misery as an object of fiction. He went to these places to see their inhabitants living there, listen to their speech, grasp their secret. The camera with its virtuoso handling of colour and light is incapable from the machine that gives their actions and weaves the time to unfold. Obviously though, such an answer only clears the
The author of the sin of aestheticism at the cost of exacerbating another grievance: what kind of politics would take for its objective the recording of words that seem merely to reflect the world’s misery?

Indiscret aestheticism or inveterate populism: it is easy to enclose the conversations in Vanda’s room or Ventura’s tribulations in that dilemma. But Costa’s method makes this frame explode inside a far more complex portics of exchanges, correspondences and displacements. To grasp this, it is worth examining an episode from Colonial Youth which could sum up, in a handful of ‘pictures’, Costa’s aesthetic and the politics of that aesthetic. We first hear Ventura’s voice, in the shack he shares with his friend Lento, reciting a love letter while the camera fixes on a slab of grey wall pierced by the bright rectangular angle of a window under which four bottles compose another still-life. Harassed by his friend’s voice, Ventura’s recitation slowly fades. In the next shot an abrupt change of décor: the still-life that served as the setting for the recitation is succeeded by another rectangle – horizontal and in the foreground this time – set down on an even darker slab of wall. Its gilded frame seems to pierce with its own light the surrounding darkness, which nevertheless encroaches on its edges. Colours quite similar to those of the bottles trace curves in which we recognize the Holy Family fleeing into Egypt escorted by a cohort of angels. Preceded by the sound of footsteps, a character appears in the next shot: Ventura with his back against the wall between the portrait of Hélène Fourment painted, like Flight into Egypt, by Rubens, and a Portrait of a Man by Van Dyck. All three paintings are celebrated and located: we are inside the walls of the Gulbenkian Foundation. Obviously this building is not in Ventura’s neighbourhood. Nothing in the previous shot announced this visit, nothing in the film suggests Ventura has a particular taste for painting. So this time the director seems to have departed from the paths of his characters. It has transported Ventura into this museum, with the echoing of footsteps on the floor and the dim lighting suggests there are no visitors and it has been taken over by the film for this sequence. The relationship between the paintings and the preceding still-life, between the dilapidated shack and the art gallery, but also perhaps between the love letter and the hanging of the paintings in the gallery thus compose a highly specific poetic displacement – a figure who in the middle of the film discusses the filmmaker’s art and his relationship with him anc. his own character’s body, and consequently of their respective politics.

This relationship between two political modes may at first seem easy to fathom. In a silent shot an art gallery guard, also black, approaches Ventura and measures something in his ear. As Ventura closes the room, the guard takes a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes away his footprints. We get the message: Ventura is an intruder. Later the guard will tell him: this museum is a refuge, far from the clamour of the popular quarters and the supermarket where he had previously been employed to protect its goods from thieves; an ancient and peaceful world that is only disturbed when someone happens to come in from their own world, the world they both inhabit. Ventura had already acknowledged it with his attitude, allowing himself to be led out by the service staircase without protest, but also with his gaze, experiencing some enigmatic point apparently situated well above the paintings. The politics of the episode could be to remind us that the pleasures of art are not for proletarians, nor museums for the workers who have built them. This is made explicit by the dialogue between Ventura and the museum employee in the Foundation gardens, which tells us why Ventura feels at home in this place where he is out of place: it had once been an area of wilderness and marshes swimming with frogs. He and other workers had cleared the undergrowth, levelled and drained the ground.
brought in materials, set up the statue of the founder with his penguin and sown the grass at his feet. It was also where Ventura had fallen from some scaffolding.

The episode could be seen as an illustration of the Brecht poem asking who built seven-gated Thebes and other architectural splendours. Ventura would represent all those who have sacrificed their health and even their lives building edifices whose prestige and enjoyment are reserved for others. But this simple lesson would not require the museum to be deserted, empty even of those who enjoy the product of Ventura’s labour; it would not require the sequences shot in the museum to be entirely silent; or the camera to linger on the concrete of the service staircases down which the guard leads Ventura; or that the silence of the museum should be followed by a long panning shot through trees where birds sing, or that Ventura should give a chronological account of his history since his arrival in Portugal on 29 August 1972, or that the sequence should end brutally on the designation of the spot where Ventura’s fall occurred. The relationship between Costa’s art and the art in the museum goes beyond a simple demonstration of the exploitation of labour at the service of aesthetic enjoyment, just as the figure of Ventura goes beyond that of a worker robbed of the fruits of his labour. The sequence fits into a more complex tangle of relations of reciprocity and non-reciprocity.

To begin with, the museum is not the setting of artistic riches contrasted with the worker’s destitution. The coloured swatches of Flight into Egypt display no obvious superiority to the framing of the window and the four bottles in the shack where the two workers live. The gilded frame enclosing the painting even appears a more trivial division of space than the window of that dwelling, a way of downgrading its surroundings, of nullifying the vibrations of light in space, the contrasting colours on the walls and the sounds from outside. The museum is the place where art is shot inside a frame without transparency or reciprocity. The place of misery art that excludes the worker who built it, because it excludes first of all what lives on movement and exchange: light, moving forms and colours, as well as labourers from Santiago Island.

Perhaps that is why Ventura’s gaze loses itself somewhere in the direction of the ceiling. One might think he is already thinking of the scaffolding from which he fell. But one might also remember another gaze towards another ceiling, in the new apartment he has visited supervised by another Cape Verdian brother, also convinced Ventura was out of place in the flat he claimed to want for a fictitious family and equally careful to remove the intruder’s traces from that sterile place.

To his sales talk extolling the socio-cultural advantages of the area, Ventura simply extends a majestic left arm towards the ceiling and responds with the pithy comment: ‘It’s full of spiders’. Neither the municipal employee nor the audience can discern any spiders on the ceiling. Perhaps it is Ventura who has (as they say) ‘a spider in the ceiling’. And even assuming that spiders really are crawling on the walls of new tower blocks, they are nothing compared to the leprous eating away at the shanty-town’s walls, like the walls of his ‘girl’ Bebe’s room where he is entertained by the drawings of fantastic figures. Unless the fruit of the white walls in the municipal dwelling that welcomes the proletarian, like the dark walls of the museum that rejects him, is precisely to repress these hazardous forms in which the imagination of the proletarian who has crossed the seas, driven frings from the centre of town and fallen off a scaffolding can equal the artist’s imagination. The art hung on the walls of museums is not simply ungrateful to the museum builder. It is equally mean in reference to the palpable richness of his experience and of the richness that light brings out in the most destitute dwellings.

1 The English equivalent would be ‘nuts in the belly’ (Thrm.).
letter he wants the illiterate Lento to learn by heart. This letter, recited several times, serves as the film's refrain. It speaks of a separation and toil on building sites far from your beloved, but also of an approaching encounter that will enhance two lives for twenty or thirty years, of the dream of giving the beloved a hundred thousand cigarettes, dresses, a car, a little house built of lava and a cheap bunch of flowers, and of the effort of learning new words every day, words of beauty tailored to fit just two souls like a pair of fine silk pajamas.

The letter is written to one person although Ventura has no one to send it to. But it is really his artistic performance, the one he would like Lento to share, because it is the performance of an act of shaming, an act inseparable from the life and experience of the displaced, from their means of making up for an absence and drawing nearer to the beloved being. But as well, it no more belongs to Ventura than it does to this film.

It had already punctuated, more discreetly, the 'fictional' film of which Colonial Youth is the echo or opposite: Casa de Lava, the story of the nurse who goes to Cape Verde to accompany Leão, a labourer whose head has been injured, like Ventura's, on another building site.

The letter first appeared among the papers of Edith, exiled from metropolitan Europe after going to Santiago to be near the lover sent to Tarrafal concentration camp by the Salazar regime, and who, staying on after his death, was adopted by her bewilderment and loss by the black community she supported with her pension, and which thanked her in serenades. So the love letter seemed to have been written by the imprisoned lover. But in the hospital, at Leão’s bedside, Mariana gave it to his young sister Tina to read, for it was written in Creole. However, when questioned after coming out of his coma, his peremptory reply was: how could he have written a love letter, being unable to read or write? At a stroke, the letter was no longer written by or addressed to anyone in
particularly, it appeared to be the work of one of those public scribes, equally adept in formulating amorous emotions or administrative requests for illiterate clients. Its message of love was lost in the great impersonal transaction that bound Edith to the dead militant and to the injured worker, but also to the cooking of the former camp cook or the music of Leon’s father and brother, whose bread and music had also been shared by Mariana, who would not visit Leon in hospital but refurbished his house – the house he was only going to enter on his own two feet – while preparing to depart themselves for the building sites in Portugal.

It is from that great circulation between here and elsewhere, between deported metropolitan militants and workers driven to exile, between literate and illiterate, sane and mad, that the letter is taken from to be entrusted to Ventura here. But in extending its destiny the letter makes its origin known, and another circulation is grafted onto the emigrants’ journey. The letter was written by Costa from two sources combined: an immigrant worker’s letter but also the letter of a ‘real’ writer, Robert Desnos, written sixty years earlier from another camp, at Filha in Sixtomy, on the way to Theresienstadt and death. Thus Leon’s fictional destiny and Ventura’s real one are enclosed in the circuit that links the ordinary exile of workers to the death camps. But the art of the poor – the art of public scribes – and that of great poets are entangled in the same tissue: an art of life and sharing, an art of travel and communication for the use of those whose lives are to travel, to sell their ability to work and build other people’s houses and museums, but also to transport their experience, their music, their way of living and loving, to read what is on the walls or listen to the songs of birds and men.

The attention given to all the forms of beauty that can be discerned in poor people’s dwellings, or listening to their often monotonous and repetitive speech, in Vanda’s room or in the new apartment where we find her later, cleen from drugs, physically heavier and a mother, do not arise therefore from aestheticizing formalism or populist deference. They are woven into a politics of art. This politics is not the one that made a show of the state of the world to expose structures of domination and mobilize energies to change them. Its models are given by the Venturas/Desnos love letter or the music of Leon’s parents: it is an art which form is linked to construction of a social relation and which employs an ability that belongs to everyone. This is not that old avant-garde dream, the dissolution of art forms in the relations of the new world. It is about marking the proximity of art to all forms asserting a capacity for sharing or a sharable capacity. The highlighting of green tones in Vanda’s room accompanies the attempts being made by Vanda, Zita, Pedro or Nuno to examine their lives and thus repossess them. The luminous still-life, composed of a plastic bottle and a few recycled objects on the white wooden table in a squat is in harmony with the redhead's stubbornness in ignoring his friends’ protests and scraping stains off this table soon to be smashed to pieces by the dagger. But the palpitating riches, the power of speech and vision, extracted from the conduct and décor of precarious lives must be given back to them, or placed at their disposal, like a music they might enjoy or a love letter whose terms they might borrow for their own affairs of the heart.

Surely this is what we can expect from cinema – the people’s art of the twentieth century, the art that made it possible for the greatest number, for those who did not get into museums, to delight in the splendor of a light effect on an everyday decor, the poetry in the clink of a glass or banal exchange in a bar. Is this not what we can expect? To those who put Costa in the same group as the great ‘formalist’ lineage of Bresson, Dryer and Tarkovsky, the filmmaker claims to belong to a very different one: Ford, Walsh, Tourneur.
and other more modest, nameless auteurs of low budget B-movies, fabricators of stories formatted for the profit of Hollywood companies that nevertheless made local cinema audiences delight in the equal splendour of a mountain, horse or rocking chair, without any visual hierarchy between events, landscapes, animals or objects. In this way cinema emerged from the depths of a production system focused on making a profit for its owners as an egalitarian art. The problem, as we know, is that even capitalism is not what it once was: while Hollywood continues to flourish, local and smaller cinemas no longer exist as they are progressively replaced by multiplexes supplying each sociologically defined audience with the type of art formatted for it, and like other works that escape this formatting, Costa's films are labelled from the outset as festival movies, reserved for the exclusive enjoyment of a cinephile elite and pushed into the zone of museums and art lovers. For that, of course, Costa blames the state of the world, the naked domination of financial power, which pigeonholes all those who want to share the wealth of their sensory experience in the huddled lives as auteurs of films only 'for cinephiles'. It is the system that transforms a man into a mad monk because he wants cinema to be a shared experience like the music of the Cape Verdean violinaist or the single letter addressed to poet and the illiterate.

It is not certain however that this explanation is good enough. It is certainly true that financial domination is tending to shape a world where equality has to disappear from the very organization of the palpable world: every aspect of wealth has to appear separately, attributed to a category of individual owners or appreciation. To the humble the system sends the small change of its wealth, of its world, formatted for them, separated from the sensory riches of their own experience. But this scattering of the game is not the only rationale for destroying reciprocity and separating the film from its world. The experience of the poor is not only of journeys and exchanges, loans, thefts and restrictions. It also includes the flaw or failure that interrupts the justice of exchanges and the circulation of experiences. In Casa de Leva that flaw was Leao's madness, his 'forgetting' the Portuguese to find refuge in drink and the Creole language. The militant's death in the Salazarist camp and the immigrant's injury on a Portuguese building site planted deep in the circulation of bodies, concerns, words and muses a dimension of the ineradicable, the irreparable. In Ósoro there was Tina's madness, her inability to know what to do with the infant in her arms, other than take it with her to death. Colonial South is, as it were, split between two logics, two regimes of exchange for the world and for experience. On one hand, the camera is installed in Vanda's new room, as sterile, whitewashed chamber, furnished with a supermarket-style double bed. In it a wiser, thickened Vanda describes her new life, getting off drugs, her child, her deserving husband, her health worries. On the other hand, it follows Ventura, often silent, sometimes speaking in impertinent orders or pithy sentences, at other times lost in his account or recitation of the letter. It tracks him like a strange animal, too big or too fierce for the surroundings, gaze sometimes fixed with a wild animal glow, more often with head bent forward or turned skyward: the gaze of one abstracted, a mental patient. With Ventura it is not a question of gathering evidence of a difficult life, or even of wondering how to share it; it is a question of confronting the unbearable, the fissures that have separated an individual from himself: Ventura is not an 'immigrant worker', a humble...
man who ought to be given his dignity and allowed to enjoy the world he has helped to create. He is a sort of sublime errant, a figure of tragedy whose very existence interrupts communication and exchange.

With the passage from the leprous walls and garishly coloured patchwork of the shanty-town to the white walls of new blocks, those walls that no longer echo the words, a divorce seems to have taken place between two regimes of expression. Even though Vanda is ready to play one of Ventura’s ‘daughters’, even though he sits at her table, omits he becomes her, the flow in Ventura comes to cast the shadow of that big broken body over the chronicle of Vanda’s repaired life and tinge its narrative with vamity. The divorce could be stated in the terms of an old argument, summarized more than two centuries ago in the Preface to La Nouvelle Héloïse. Were these family letters real or fictional, the objector asked the author. If they are real, they are portraits. Portraits are only required to be faithful to the subject, but they interest few outside the family. Imaginary pictures on the other hand are interesting to the public, but for that they have to resemble not an individual but the human being. Costa does things differently: from the patience of the camera that every day mechanically films words, movements and footsteps, no longer to ‘make film’ but as an exercise in approaching the secret of the other, there should be born on the screen a third figure, a figure who is not the auteur nor Vanda nor Ventura, a character who is and is not foreign to our lives. But this sudden appearance of the impersonal is estranged in disjunction in its turn; it is difficult for the ‘third character’ to avoid the choice between being a portrait of Vanda, enclosed in the family circle of social identifications, and being the picture of Ventura, the picture of the flaw and

the enigma that impart a touch of humanity to family portraits and family chronicles. An enigmatic sequence in Colonial Youth carries this tension to an extreme: in it we find Lento, a typical immigrant, an illiterate incapable of learning the love letter, abruptly plunged into tragedy in a burned-out apartment where his wife and children have died. This is the first mention we have seen of Lento’s wife or children, and an earlier shot had shown Lento himself existing at the foot of a power-line pole he had climbed in an attempt to correct Ventura’s attack directly to the grid. The Lento we are now seeing and hearing is an inhabitant of the kingdom of the dead who has come back among the living. He is no longer either a documentary subject followed about in his everyday activity nor a fictional character, but a pure form born out of the very annulment of that contrast which splinters humanity into different species. His opaque body has become the surface on which his life, Ventura’s life and that of all who share their condition appears for what it is, a life of the living dead. On this basis it is possible for him to embody the neighbourhood family man who actually did suffer such a drama while the film was being shot. Lento is now a tragic character able to receive the letter he had never managed to receive. Ventura and Lento speak directly to camera without looking at each other in a tone of tragic pathos and the hand they extend is both the outstretched hand that binds the living to the dead and the wave of actors saluting the audience.

There are these moments when a face that was becoming recognizably familiar splits, when invention is admitted as such to testify to a reality that evades recognition or conciliation. One of the Tarabal natives had already said it to the well-meaning nurse Muriel: she herself did not have a cracked skull. The fissure divides experience into shatterable and unshatterable. The screen on which the third character should appear is pulled between these two experiences, pulled...
between the narration of lives, at the risk of platitude, and confronting the future, at the risk of endless flight. Cinema cannot be the equivalent of the love letter or the music of the poor. It can no longer be the art that simply gives back to the humble the palpable riches of their world. It should consent to bring merely the surface on which the experience of those relegated to the margins of economic circuits and social pathways seeks to be captured in new forms. That surface should welcome the split between portrait and painting, chronicle and tragedy, reciprocity and tissue. One art should take shape in place of another. Costa’s greatness lies in accepting and rejecting this alternation at the same time, making in the same single movement a cinema of the possible and the impossible.

An earlier version of the Preface was delivered, in Bruno Bonsante’s Italian translation, at the ceremony for the Maurizio Grade prize awarded by the Ciccio Chaplin and held in Reggio di Calabria, January 2004. The French text was published under the title “Le Écrans du cinéma” in Truffic, no. 50, Summer 2004.

“Cinematic Vertigo” was first presented in the Lido Philo series at the Venice Film Festival in September 2007 at the invitation of Stefano Bonaga. The text was rewritten for the English version presented at the Jacques Rancière seminar held at Rothamsted University in May 2008 at the invitation of Paul Bowmans and Richard Stamp.

The first version of “Mouchette and the Paradoxes of the Language of Images” was published under the title “After Literature” in the collective work Le Septième art edited by Jacques Aumont, Paris: Léo Scheer, 2003. The text was rewritten for the seminar in February 2010 at the University of Calabria organized by Roberto De Cretaro.

An earlier version of “Ars gratae artis” was published in Truffic, no. 53, Spring 2005.

“The Philosopher’s Body” was delivered at the seminar “Éducation intégrale: les télévisions de Rossellini”, held at the Louvre museum in Paris in June 2001 under the direction of Alain Bergala.

“Finale Conversation” was delivered at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in June 2010 at the invitation of Marianne Alphand and Roger Rottoman.