Bigger than life, or stranger: Pedro Costa's Vitalina Varela part 2

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Vitalina Varela (2019) is the seventh feature film by the Portuguese director Pedro Costa. It tells the true story of a woman from Cape Verde who travels to Lisbon to attend the funeral of her estranged husband but arrives too late, and her attempts to cope with her grief and anger at the man who abandoned her decades before. The film won the Golden Leopard for best film at the Locarno film festival, where Vitalina Varela, who plays herself in a version of events that happened six years previously, also won the best actress award. Catherine Breillat, president of the jury at Locarno, has described the film as “a major film in the history of cinema from here on out […] a film that will enter the heritage of world cinema”.

This is the second section of an extended, tripartite article on the film. The previous part was published in issue 100 while Part III will be published in issue 102.

3: Fascination with the other

In interview, Costa has confessed to his fascination with alterity, as he came across it in Fontainhas, and before that in Cape Verde. This compulsion is evident in the film he shot on the islands, Casa de Lava, his second feature. It was after the filming of Casa de Lava that
Costa first gained access to members of the Cape Verdean diaspora living in Fontainhas and other districts of Lisbon, such as Benfica.1 At the end of the shoot, he was given letters and gifts including wine and tobacco by many islanders to take to their relatives who had migrated to Lisbon. “So that’s how I got to the place […] I had this strange password or key to open the films I made after [in Fontainhas]”.2 I will consider the delineation of space in the two Cape Verde sequences in Vitalina Varela below. For now it is worth noting that it is significantly different from the visualisation of the islands in Casa de Lava.

Shot on 35 mm with a full crew and released in 1994, Casa de Lava is a reworking of Jacques Tourneur’s Caribbean-set Voodoo drama I Walked With a Zombie (1943).3 Its elliptical narrative follows Mariana, a Portuguese nurse, (played by Inês de Medeiros) who accompanies Leão (played by Isaach De Bankolé), an immigrant worker in a coma, from Lisbon back to the islands. Nuno Barradas Jorge notes:

The production logistics associated with filming on location in Cape Verde were particularly difficult [...]. All the shooting equipment brought from Europe had to be transported between islands on large rafts, at times during adverse weather conditions. The members of the cast and crew had to adapt to the harsh conditions and the isolation offered by the location. Furthermore, the shooting was beset by constant personal conflicts and numerous incidents on the set.4

Costa has commented:

it was during the shooting of this film that I started questioning myself and having doubts [...] about [...] the way I was doing it, with a big crew, with professional actors, with scripts, etc. [...] in the middle of that shooting I started literally boycotting my own film [...] I got very close to the people in the village where we shot most of the film, and it came closer to some sort of documentary, or something like that, and I was doing camera myself, and if I could do sound I would have done it myself.5

I don’t know what to do with a mountain, or a forest, or the ocean. [...] So, crossing the ocean, going to Cape Verde, with my little script and everything, I thought, ‘Me? With a guitar? I’m in this boat to go shoot a volcano? What an impostor!’ So if you are like I am, you just try to make the best of it: boycott what you are doing and find a way not to shoot the volcano. [...] I’m made for corridors, I’m made for rooms, that’s where my convictions lie. [...] I need walls, I need doors, I need prisons.6

Despite Costa’s protestations here, and in contrast to the static camera used throughout Vitalina Varela and most of Colossal Youth and Horse Money,7 Casa de Lava deploys several significant pans and tracking shots, which are motivated less by narrational purpose than by the spectacularisation of island settings. The film’s opening sequence comprises grainy archival colour footage of the 1951 eruption of the Mount Fogo volcano, which functions as a synecdoche for Cape Verde as the site of primeval threats and adventures.8 Repeated images of the barren volcanic slopes of the interior, including a 27-second travelling shot of Mount Fogo filmed from a moving vehicle, develop this visualisation. Later, in a 50-second tracking shot, the camera parallels Mariana as she walks past decrepit colonial era houses in a small town. This scene, like others of a marketplace, women drying washing, a local band playing, and goats and piglets wandering on the outskirts of the town, is freighted with a quasi-anthropological value, the promise of visual access to a little-known land of the other. The island landscape and its inhabitants are thus
repeatedly spectacularised and exoticised, in a filmic instance of what John Urry has called the “tourist gaze”.2

Figure 1: Inês de Medeiros and Isaach De Bankolé in Casa de Lava

However, alongside this exoticisation, the film offers a countervailing critique of the Portuguese colonial and postcolonial presence on the islands. This is registered most clearly via footage of the graves of political prisoners formerly incarcerated at Tarrafal concentration camp. As Jorge states:

the archipelago became a symbolic representation of the ambiguities of colonial rule; while serving as an example of colonial unity under Portuguese rule, it was also the site of the Tarrafal prison camp. This camp [was] used first for the imprisonment of the fiercest elements of opposition to the Portuguese fascist regime and later, during the 1960s, for political prisoners involved with the African independence movement supporters fighting Portuguese colonial rule.10

Thus the politics of Casa de Lava are contradictory, both anti-colonial and exoticist, shaped to a large degree by Costa’s self-declared “aesthetic fascination” with Cape Verde.11

When it came to filming in Fontainhas, Costa carried this appetite for alterity with him. In his own words:

I was jumping into a cliché, but a very cruel one and very painful one. It was like I was going to India, or the south of your country [USA], or south America or something, so there was, I confess, a lot of fascination, and I was immediately, as in Cabo Verde […] I was immediately pleased with most of the things I saw and heard and smelled, even if the smells were sometimes not very [nice], and the sounds a bit too loud […] but there was a fascination, let’s say an aesthetic fascination.12

Jorge writes of Fontainhas:

This unplanned residential area was constructed clandestinely by successive waves of migrant workers coming from Portugal’s interior regions and its former colonies. Until its
phased demolition in the late 1990s housed a substantial number of African immigrants. Fontainhas was only made visible through reports by Portuguese news media, which portrayed it as a place associated with informal economies such as drug trafficking and with violent crime.

Costa’s own account echoes Frantz Fanon’s famous description of “the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation” as “a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other […] a hungry town, starved of bread.”

Fontainhas was not completely outside of Lisbon, but let’s say it was on the border of Lisbon. It was a big shantytown, very dark, organized in architecture, space and colour like an African or even Arab medina – the old town. There was a very secret way in and way out. They even had guards. It was really like a fortress, a castle. I had no reason to go there before and really no one would walk in there unless they wanted to buy or sell something – often drugs.

Costa shot two very different films in Fontainhas. The first, Ossos, was shot on 35 mm with a full crew and a mix of professional actors and locals, such as the (white) sisters Vanda and Zita Duarte, working from a script by Costa about a suicidal teenager who gives birth to a baby she can’t care for. The second, In Vanda’s Room, was shot on digital video by Costa, usually working alone, over almost two years, with content derived from the everyday life of Vanda and Zita (including their addiction to smoking heroin), and that of their friends and neighbours, as the slum was slowly demolished around them.

In the move from Ossos to In Vanda’s Room, Costa shifted from an extractive model of production which took images of Fontainhas as “a coded convention of authenticity” to buttress his own script, towards a much more flexible, responsive, and thus “spontaneous encounter with alterity”. Jorge notes of Ossos: “[it] was shot during a period of approximately six weeks, a timescale that did not allow building any substantial personal and professional links with the local residents.” Costa states:

you have to stop this game, this faking […] you cannot fake in that world. […] in the future I couldn’t impose any more my tricks, my lights […] it’s in many ways a sort of last film.

I wouldn’t say [Ossos] was done with the people […] I brought the cinema there, I had the trucks and the lights, the assistants and the producer, and it didn’t work. I tried, I like the film, but from what I remember […] there’s nothing there [in front of the camera], everything good is here, here, or here [off camera], moving this [cinematic] machine to this ray of sun is impossible. […] Vanda, she hated the film, she was a sort of [Robert] Mitchum during the film .. ‘this is pathetic’. […] I thought for a while that I had this problem, I thought it was artistic, but it was production, it was as simple as, how am I going to function, pay the money, get the money, who is getting what, so I started this film [In Vanda’s Room] alone, alone, with a video camera.

Nevertheless, as Jorge points out, In Vanda’s Room “while shot using an artisanal framework still, nonetheless participates in normative mechanisms of European art cinema”. These include some established modes of finance, notably systems of co-production. By also emphasizing the extensive and lengthy use of post-production to upgrade the imagery and soundscape of In Vanda’s Room, Jorge “reveals a filmmaking which increasingly relies on
back-end technological procedures”. He concludes: “These different technical and financial aspects in Costa’s digital filmmaking tend to be obfuscated by a narrative of production around his films.” This narrative of a collaborative, quotidian, longitudinal and almost heroic production process, embedded in some of the most deprived communities of Lisbon, is central to both Costa’s self-presentation in the media, and to his political importance as a non-conformist auteur. For instance:

*I may be wrong, but even if I could pay a reasonable salary, almost no technician or professional actor would accept to work like we do. Almost no one wants to do one film, and one film only, for nine or twelve months, unless it’s Little Buddha, in Nepal, or some apocalypse in French Guiana, or with Sean Penn, with helicopters and stuff. Film crews want variety, they thrive on jumping on planes and boats, they long for the romance of film, for the adventure of the shooting. You know, cinema still generates a lot of this mystification. I’ve lost it a long time ago, I’m immune to the seduction and fascination that still makes 90% of young people to want to make films.*

A major source of Costa’s significance is his abiding concern with the intersecting politics of race and class, which is made manifest in the form and content of his films, as well as in the means of their production. Most of his collaborators are members of the Cape Verdean diaspora, immigrants from a former colony now eking out a living on the edges of what was the imperial metropolis. Doubly marginalized and exploited, in terms of both race and class, they are members of an underclass or sub-proletariat that is only intermittently employed, “a stratum beneath those who may only have their labour power to sell, but do at least succeed in selling it”. Systems of power and violence have impacted on their minds and bodies.

Early on in *Horse Money*, five fellow immigrants visit Ventura as he lies in a hospital bed. One of the men recites a litany of literal and metaphorical hurt, from construction site accidents to police brutality to addiction and madness:

*Our life will still be hard. We’ll keep on falling from the third floor. We’ll keep on being sliced by the machines. Our head and lungs will keep on hurting the same. We’ll be burned. We’ll go crazy. It’s all that mould in the walls of our houses. We’ve always lived and died this way. This is our sickness.*

The hidden (that is, conventionally ignored) injuries of race and class are also evident in *Vitalina Varela*. During one of several night-time conversations with her dead husband, Vitalina Varela tells him: “We could have stayed in Cape Verde. We didn’t have much, but it was ours. We worked the land together. Here, there is only bitterness. Here, we are nobody.” A friend of her late husband, also a manual labourer, tells her: “We broke our arms and legs. We used to work in this Portuguese cold. So cold we couldn’t unzip our pants to take a piss.” In attending to these stories of the multiply dispossessed, whose ancestors were enslaved and immiserated, and who have been forced by necessity to seek precarious employment at the heart of the old colonial power, Costa disrupts what the Iranian scholar Hamid Dabashi has called the “auto-normativity of ‘Europe’”, whose colonality persists even after the age of empire, “not just economically, but also culturally, epistemically, morally, imaginatively”. Dabashi writes:

*Although the racialized condition of colonality was quite unique and must be understood as such, colonialism as an economic force was integral to the global operation of capital, and thus one must not over-fetishize it at the cost of misreading the pernicious operation of capital.*
The merciless imperatives of capital are exposed as prime determinants of the precarity of Vitalina Varela and, more generally, the impoverished communities of Cova da Moura, and (in Costa’s earlier films) Casal da Boba and Fontainhas. This indictment is relatively indirect, but no less significant for that. Costa states: “I’m doing films among a very disoriented community: once they were peasants, then they were immigrants and they were brutally exploited.”

He also stresses the work required of audiences to engage with it:

> it’s seeing the conflict where it is [...] what do you see in a Straub film when he shows a mountain? Make an effort, see the conflict, see the struggle, see the battle, see the crime [...] in Trop Tôt / Trop Tard [1981], you have to find the criminal, that’s the point. So every film, even my films, go back to that, find the criminal.

Aesthetics play a crucial role in both Costa’s critique of the exploitation of the Cape Verdean diaspora, and his celebration of their perseverance. This process is interrogated further in the next section.

4: The tower and the slum

As noted in part one, reviews of Vitalina Varela have often compared its ‘painterly’ compositions (including formal arrangements and blocking, and chiaroscuro lighting with deep blacks and patches of light), to canonical European artists including Vermeer, Caravaggio and Rembrandt. Repeatedly during the film, Vitalina Varela is illuminated by, and / or placed near, a source of incandescence in a largely dark setting (see figures 2 and 3). Costa has explained the technology involved:

> The first step was to determine what kind of lighting equipment we would use, something we could afford for at least one year... [Cinematographer] Leonardo Simões proposed this parallel light beam system which is just about one source of light that is redirected through mirrors and reflectors of variable densities. It was a very good choice: economic, small, no heavy big stuff around. And a much nicer light than the usual LED floods.
Figure 2: Vitalina Varela
In an interview conducted after Costa had started work on the film, he spoke of the difficulties posed by Fontainhas’ demolition: “I shot a film [In Vanda’s Room] and my sets, my wardrobe, my actors, my studio were destroyed – Fontainhas. I’m saying for me, which is very selfish and pretentious, but for those people, it’s gone! Now it’s a set of highways. […] I’m just waiting to see what’s left for us. And we will make films with what’s left.” This act of making do, of shooting with the material and human remnants of the slum community, shaped the production of Vitalina Varela. An improvised studio was assembled in an abandoned cinema in the suburbs of Lisbon, and the shoot was divided between Vitalina Varela’s house, the streets nearby, and this studio:

Everything that’s more concentrated, windows or doors, it’s studio. We grabbed doors, we grabbed windows, we tried to imagine light that could match. And then there are some streets in this neighbourhood where Vitalina lives, which is a much more white, let’s say conventional neighbourhood. In one of the centres of that neighbourhood, there are four or five streets that are a little bit like Fontainhas was […] And you have two or three alleys, kind of a construction that resembles a Medina. […]

Vitalina’s house became a little studio. But it’s very small: it’s me, her, camera, and that’s it, nobody else. Everyone outside, in the heat in summer, it’s difficult. But it’s her house, so it’s practical, and in a way she probably needed that too. When she’s looking, she’s looking at her mirror, her wall, her window. But we turned it into a studio, more or less. We left everything there, lights, tripods, so she lived in a kind of studio for months and months, poor woman.”
Chris Fujiwara has called the film “an attempt to design a visual world in real space, a more extreme, more complex, more conscious attempt than what we’ve seen before in Pedro Costa’s work.” Post-production was also important in realising the final look of this visual world, as Costa has acknowledged:

I give big credit to Gonçalo Ferreira, the grader whom I work with. He has become fundamental because in digital, the spectrum of grading possibilities, or color correction, is much wider. [...] This time we shot in 4K, so you can do almost anything [...] We keep concentrated on color, on contrast, on density. For instance, our shadows are much blacker than in most films.

A key to making sense of the politics of this pictorial aesthetic is found in one of Costa’s earlier digital video films, Colossal Youth from 2006. The sequence, shot in the Gulbenkian Museum, provides a crucial political justification for Costa’s yoking together of social realism and pictorialism in Colossal Youth, Vitalina Varela and other films. Frantz Fanon’s seminal analysis of the expropriation of material resources and massive transfer of wealth from colonised nations to Europe during the age of empire is realised metonymically in Colossal Youth, when Ventura recalls his youth working on construction sites in Lisbon, including that of the Gulbenkian Museum. This is home to one of the largest private collections of art in the world, amassed by the oil magnate Calouste Gulbenkian. Sitting on a bench in the museum grounds, Ventura recounts flying to Lisbon with his cousin in 1972, then starting work on the construction of the Borges Brothers Bank, and later at the Gulbenkian.

This was all brushwood here. Me and Correia the mason cleared it all away with the eucalyptus. Me and Correia the mason laid down sewage pipes. Me and António the tiler laid the stone and tiles. There were clouds of frogs here. Thousands of them. Once, we set up the statues of Mr Gulbenkian and the penguin. At their feet, the ground was muddy. We planted grass to pretty it up. We watered it. They say Mr Gulbenkian has lots of oil, and lots of heirs.

In one of his most famous statements, Fanon wrote:

In concrete terms Europe has been bloated out of all proportions by the gold and raw materials from such colonial countries as Latin America, China, and Africa. Today Europe’s tower of opulence faces these continents, for centuries the point of departure of their shipments of diamonds, oil, silk and cotton, timber, and exotic produce to this very same Europe. Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The riches which are choking it are those plundered from the underdeveloped peoples.

Building on Fanon, Hamid Dabashi has argued that, through their imputed “backwardness” and “barbarism”, the colonised nations have also contributed to the symbolic elevation and centrality of Europe as “a self-centering metaphor […] cast as the measure, the destination, and the destiny of our humanity”. Dabashi elaborates:

this towering metaphor of time and space, of sense and sensibility [...] has imagined itself the center of the universe, and by defiance or acknowledgment the world at large has reciprocated and acquiesced [...] the Third World has been definitive and instrumental in manufacturing the very idea, the metaphoric normativity, of “Europe,” and with it the myth of “the West.” [...] We have been the metaphoric raw material with which Europe imagined itself.
Costa’s mature work explores just the kind of material and metaphorical indivisibility of Europe and its others that Fanon and Dabashi have identified. Most obviously, he attends to the stories and experiences of hitherto marginalised people from the Cape Verdean diaspora, the descendants of slaves and colonial subjects, who have lived and worked in the former imperial capital. But the aesthetics of these later films are as political as their narratives. By appropriating the luminosity and grandeur of canonical European painters for these stories of builders, cleaners, and the unemployed, the images created by Costa and cinematographer Leonardo Simões acknowledge that the tower and the slum are co-constituted; each is produced by its other. In this way the films assert the labour, pain and dignity of African immigrants who have built, both literally and metaphorically, Europe’s “tower of opulence”.

In *Colossal Youth*, Ventura’s own appearance in the deserted galleries of the museum that he helped to build is preceded by a 30-second static closeup of Rubens’ *Flight Into Egypt* (1613-14). He stands among other paintings by European masters dating from the first era of imperial expansion, quietly taking snuff, until a security guard, also Black, whispers in his ear, presumably asking him to leave. Once Ventura has departed the room, the guard (Nhurro) takes a handkerchief from his pocket, and in a gesture freighted with the politics of classed and raced exclusion, swiftly wipes the floor where the old man had stood. As the guard walks out of shot, the camera cleaves to the imperious gaze of a white gentleman dressed in black, posing in front of a classical pillar. This is Van Dyck’s *Portrait of a Man*, (1620-21), hung, like *Flight Into Egypt*, in a heavy gilt frame. Regarding the scene, Jacques Rancière writes:

> the museum is not the place of artistic wealth opposed to the penury of the worker [embodied by Ventura]. [...] The [Rubens] painting’s golden frame strikes us a stingier delimitation of space than the window of [Ventura’s] house, as a way of cancelling out everything that surrounds it, and of rendering uninteresting all that is outside of it. [...] The museum is a place where art is locked up within this frame that yields neither transparency nor reciprocity.
Rancière locates in Costa’s films a “politics of art” that avoids both “aestheticizing formalism and populist deference”. Instead he finds a cinema of both “splendour” and “fate”, that is, of a demotic and accessible aesthetic beauty, sited in the everyday. This coincides with the strength to acknowledge social injustice and pain, but obliquely, and not simply in order “to make viewers aware and inspire them to mobilise their energies”. Rancière concludes:

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 splendour of a reflection of light, but also that of being able to speak in way that is commensurate with one’s fate. [...] 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, and 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 form 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 splendour 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?

From In Vanda’s Room onwards, Costa develops an aesthetic that is both demotic and beautiful. It responds to the poverty and precarity of the inhabitants of the Lisbon slums but, in the process of discovering, amplifying and relaying the dignity and worth of these lives,
his imagery mobilises resources of composition, posture, lighting and colour, that might otherwise be sequestered within the museum walls.

It is this combination of political and aesthetic attention paid to the everyday existence of the dispossessed that renders them “bigger than life”, that is, greater than the norms of dominant society would allow.

Endnotes

1. Around 200,000 people of Cape Verdean origin lived in Lisbon in the 1990s, of which approximately 3,000 were living in Fontainhas prior to its demolition.


5. Costa in conversation with Hillis.


7. Jorge notes of Colossal Youth “in the 110 shots which compose the two and a half hours of the film, only five scenes use any camera movement”. Jorge, The Films of Pedro Costa, p. 77.


11. Costa in conversation with Aaron Hillis.

12. Ibid.


18. Costa in conversation with Gorin.


21. Jorge, p. 68. Jorge also situates Costa’s work within the particular context of the Portuguese film industry: “With reduced exhibition and artistic recognition at home, Portuguese filmmakers are dependent on the international circulation offered by the film festival circuits and the cultural legitimation that comes with it.” Jorge, p. 56.


26. Dabashi, Europe and its Shadows, p. 20. See also Achille Mbembe, On the Postcolony (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 31: “Colonial arbitrariness (in the exercise of power) notoriously sought to integrate the political with the social and the ethical, while closely subordinating all three to the requirements of production and output.”

27. Costa in Cronk, “House of the Spirits”.

28. Costa in Finding the Criminal.


30. Costa in Kasman. See also Costa in conversation with Delgado.


32. Costa in Gest and Peranson, “I see a darkness”.


34. Costa in Kasman.

35. “Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian (1869 –1955) was a businessman and philanthropist of British nationality and Armenian origin. He played a major role in making the petroleum reserves of the Middle East available to Western development and is credited with being the first person to exploit Iraqi oil. Gulbenkian travelled extensively and lived in a number of cities including Istanbul, London, Paris and Lisbon. Throughout his life, Gulbenkian was involved with many philanthropic activities including the establishment of schools, hospitals, and churches. The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, a private foundation based in Portugal, was created in 1956 by his bequest and continues to promote arts, charity, education, and science throughout the world. It is now among the largest foundations in Europe. By the end of his life he had become one of the world’s wealthiest people and his art acquisitions one of the greatest private collections.”

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calouste_Gulbenkian


38. Ibid., pp. 9,14. On the symbolic function of Africa in the system of “Western solipsism” see also Mbembe, On the Postcolony, especially, pp. 2-4, 9-12.

40. Ibid., p. 30.

41. Ibid., p. 31.

42. Ibid., pp. 31-3.

43. Costa’s work has also challenged this exclusion in another way, by gradually gaining access to the museum and gallery circuit, and so circulating these stories in institutional settings that would have previously disregarded them. The classed and raced dimensions of such spaces and their assumed audiences are thrown into relief by the evident gulf between them and the poverty and precarity of Costa’s preferred locations of Fontainhas, Casal da Boba and Cova da Moura. One of the funding sources for *Vitalina Varela* was the Gulbenkian Foundation, which offered “a small grant”. See Costa in Kasman, “Cinema Must Be a Ritual”. On Costa’s exhibitions in museums and galleries, see Jorge, *The Films of Pedro Costa*, pp. 90-109.