Bigger than life, or stranger: Pedro Costa’s Vitalina Varela: Part III

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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 first part was published in Issue 100 while Part II was published in Issue 101.

5: A woman alone

Eleven minutes into Vitalina Varela, there is an abrupt shift in location, shot scale, and soundtrack with a cut from two men cleaning the dead man’s house in the quiet of the night to Vitalina Varela’s arrival at Lisbon airport. Amid the roar of engines, she stands alone, silhouetted in the lit door of a passenger jet and dwarfed by the giant plane, while the nose cone of a second aircraft dominates the right of the screen (see figure 1). A set of stairs is driven over to the plane, before the image cuts to a longshot of five Black women in cleaners’ overalls and aprons, walking across the runway towards the camera. The image cuts again to a closeup of the metal stairs, while Vitalina Varela’s bare feet start to descend slowly. Teardrops are falling on her legs and feet. The five cleaning women are now waiting for her, standing still in a kind of formation with the tools of their trade beside them: mop and bucket, broom, vacuum cleaner, rubbish sack. As in a Brechtian tableau, their class position is legible through their posture and elements of mise en scène — the tools and work clothes.
Costa has said that the scene was partly inspired by a memory of his arrival at Nice airport with Ventura, prior to the premiere of *Colossal Youth* at Cannes. When they left the plane, one of the first people they met was a nephew of Ventura’s, who was working as a cleaner at the airport. More importantly, the way the cleaners are shot as a kind of ‘stilled life’ sets aside the illusionist conventions of realism to summarise social relations, in a move reminiscent of the Brechtian concept of *gestus*. Roland Barthes characterises the *gestus* or social gest as a notable “pregnant moment”, “a gesture or set of gestures [...] in which a whole social situation can be read.” He asserts:

> Not every gest is social: there is nothing social in the movements a man makes in order to brush off a fly; but if this same man poorly dressed, is struggling against guard dogs, the gest becomes social. [...] Distanciation [...] is vital to Brecht because he represents a tableau for the spectator to criticize.  

Such a social gest is evident in the tableau of the cleaning women, who are members of the Cape Verdean diaspora working as precarious labour, and so doubly marginalised through both race and class.

Vitalina Varela walks slowly into the shot, her back to the camera, and one of the cleaners embraces her stiffly, whispering that she is too late, her husband was buried three days previously. “Here in Portugal there is nothing for you. His house is not yours. Go back home.” (see figure 2) But Vitalina Varela doesn’t turn back. Instead she walks away from the women and the camera in silence, disappearing into deep shadows in the background. Only at the end of this scene does the title *Vitalina Varela* appear on screen, announcing and identifying both the protagonist and the film that bears her name. She has not spoken a word, and we still have not seen her face.
The formative narrative events of Vitalina Varela are the death of her husband (which precedes the emplotment of the story), and Vitalina Varela's belated arrival in Lisbon, three days after his funeral. This is potentially the stuff of melodrama, and thus of tears, but Costa's presentation confounds the play with knowledge and point of view required to milk emotional impact from the delay. To conform to the template of melodrama, the audience would have to be aligned with Vitalina Varela, while possessing more information than her about the death and / or the funeral, until the moment when she finally acquires the same knowledge and realizes that she is too late. This is the pattern that Franco Moretti identifies in his influential discussion of 'agnition' and emotion in literature. He writes: "the 'moving' sentence modifies the point of view that had directed our reading" and re-establishes a much earlier position of shared knowledge. What makes it produce a 'moving' effect is not the play of points of view in itself, but rather the moment at which it occurs. Agnition is a 'moving' device when it comes too late.\footnote{Vitalina Varela begins in medias res with the return of the priest and mourners from the funeral, followed by Vitalina Varela's arrival at the airport, and so does not deliver the mechanism of suspense and emotional catharsis offered by a 'too late' moment.} However, Vitalina Varela begins in medias res with the return of the priest and mourners from the funeral, followed by Vitalina Varela's arrival at the airport, and so does not deliver the mechanism of suspense and emotional catharsis offered by a 'too late' moment.\footnote{In addition, she has already told the same story in Horse Money, to which I shall return.} In the absence of such a pattern, emotional impact is instead generated through the time viewers share with her as she works through her grief and anger.\footnote{Vitalina Varela's story is the first female-centred film that Costa has made since In Vanda's Room in 2000. He states:}

The film's alignment with, and ultimate allegiance to, Vitalina Varela is made explicit in the following exchange between her and the priest, played by Ventura:

\begin{quote}
- Why are you against me and on their side?
- Am I not a man like them?
- Men favour men!
- Immigrant like the others.
- When you see a woman's face in the coffin, you can't imagine her suffering.
\end{quote}

The film is also a departure from previous titles because it confronts the religious beliefs of its protagonist. As Will Noah notes:
The stark perpendicular of the cross appears again and again – in the telephone poles Costa cuts away to, in the crucifix Vitalina places between candles in a modest shrine – something new in Costa's films, which hadn't previously invoked the visual lexicon of Christianity. Varela's faith gives Costa a new set of images to work with, and lends her suffering a different frame from the one that surrounded Vanda or Ventura in the earlier films. Her pain is both deeper and more directly confronted; her belief gives her a context in which to understand it.2

Costa comments:

This film does come closer to In Vanda's Room in a lot of ways, I think, in trying to surround Vitalina with the sound of a place that she didn't know. She didn't know the neighborhood that I knew. She's new here. So all she hears in the film is new to her. The sound that was in Vanda, the brouhaha of life, and the contradiction of public and private – there's nothing secret, and at the same time nothing is public. The frontier between shame and spectacle is very thin. And that's very interesting.10

Sound design is central, then, to the construction of the setting, and background sounds are collated and aggregated, not simply recorded live. Costa notes:

The sound director walks around the neighborhood and he records things day and night. That's very useful because we end up with a suitcase full of interesting things that we can use in the editing. The soundtracks on my films are a mix of direct sound and everything that surrounds the location. That's more composed, let's say. Sometimes, it's just a detail or a voice, the sound of air or wind. Other times, it's more charged. Two or three conversations, a TV, etc.11

The diegetic space is thus marked by sonic porosity.12 Whether recorded direct or assembled in post-production, distant noises of dogs barking, chickens, televisions, music, shouting, children playing, and the like, are almost ever-present. These off-screen sounds penetrate the screened spaces of rooms, stairs, and sunken alleyways. But they do not pose the question that Rick Altman finds in many uses of off-screen sound, which are conventionally clarified by the subsequent image: “Cinema sound typically asks the question: ‘Where [does this sound come from]?’ […] the image usually responds: ‘Here’”.13 Instead, these sounds, whose sources remain unseen, effectively expand the narrative space by offering constant reminders of the wider locality. In this way, Costa’s sound practice extends what Bazin called the ‘lateral depth of field’ beyond the framed image.14

6: Performance and gesture

Vitalina Varela’s first performance as an actress is in Costa’s previous feature, Horse Money. The film centres on Costa’s regular collaborator Ventura, who plays a fallen priest in Vitalina Varela. For Horse Money, he plays a version of himself, encounters former friends and colleagues, many now dead, and revisits disturbing memories of the Carnation Revolution in 1974. In that film, Vitalina Varela meets Ventura at night, as he slumps in pyjamas in the deserted service entrance of a hospital. After they recognize each other from their shared origins in Cape Verde, the camera cuts to a low angle closeup of Vitalina Varela’s face in the dark, with some lit windows visible in the distance (see Figure 3). For almost three minutes, she delivers a soliloquy in a steady, unhurried and quiet voice that is almost a whisper, looking off camera in a posture that is readily legible as one focused on a vivid memory. The story she tells is of her husband’s death and her failure to arrive in Lisbon in time for his funeral, the events that form the central narrative plank of Vitalina Varela:


Figure 3: Vitalina Varela in Horse Money
it happened on June 23rd, 2013. My sister Isabel showed up with heart-stopping news. I rushed to Assomada to get my visa and passport. I was so confused, so lost. I couldn't recognise my body. I couldn't even recognize myself. My face was all disfigured. I couldn't even take my photo for the passport. I was blind, I was numb. In Praia, I bought an airplane ticket.

On the night of the flight, I nearly died. A policeman took me to the stairs of the plane. The air hostess took me by the arms and showed me to my seat. I was burning with fever. The girls sat me down and gave me two big pills. They undressed me. I was left in my nightclothes. Miss Filomena, sitting next to me, helped me to the toilet. I couldn't pee. Went back to my seat. Had to pee again, she took me back to the toilet. The pee kept on coming. She had to ask for nappies from the girls.

I arrived in Portugal with a burning fever, soaked, freezing. This was June 30th, 2013. My husband's funeral had been three days earlier.

Vitalina Varela performs this speech in two long takes. (As usual in Costa, the camera is static, although there is one cutaway of 30 seconds to the back of a man's head. His identity remains uncertain: is he a listener in the diegesis, or the spectre of her dead husband? If he is Ventura, he is dressed differently to the former and preceding shots.) Vitalina Varela's story of trauma and somatic distress is told with striking corporeal control, in an unwavering voice, with no tears and no change of facial expression. Her performance style here is not blank or entirely dispassionate, but rather, as often in Costa's work with non-professional actors, it refutes both expressionist and naturalistic modes, in an almost Brechtian fashion. A very similar understated, dignified and rather formal performance style, shot largely in closeup and medium closeup, is evident in Ventura's acting in Horse Money and Colossal Youth, and in both actors' work in Vitalina Varela. Richard Brody writes: "Costa avoids naturalistic tropes and, by filming Varela and the other residents of her late husband's complex with posed gestures, declamatory diction, and deliberate pacing, he reflects their grandeur and their strength—as well as their presence as agents of history".

Almost an hour into Vitalina Varela, Vitalina Varela performs another significant soliloquy that again retrieves dignity from indignity. The scene is a key moment that confronts directly the emotional pain of her abandonment and neglect by her husband. In both form and content, it contrasts with Costa's frequent use of silent closeups of Vitalina Varela's face. Here, she is filmed sitting on the toilet in the decrepit bathroom of her late husband's house in a midshot that captures the peeling walls and aged fittings (see figure 4). In an unbroken take of more than four minutes, she looks up at the ceiling, then off camera as she speaks to the dead man in her quiet but steady whisper with frequent pauses, recalling their time together, the joint endeavor of working on their home in Cape Verde, and his desertion:

This house of yours is a poorly done job. Windows like gutters. I keep hitting my head on these shitty doors. The house we built in Cape Verde is incomparable. […]

I sold a small calf for 100 contos. I bought a truck load of iron, a truck of sand, cement and water. I built all the blocks with my own hands. You laid down the bricks, towed the walls, tiled the floor. People passing by couldn't believe we had done that work all by ourselves in 45 days. […]

One day you ran off to Portugal, you didn't even say goodbye. I went back home, made dinner, waited with food in the pan, then I threw it all away. […]

When I wrote asking for money you didn't reply, you kept silent. […]

After you left, I worked very hard. I took care of all the doors, all the windows. I built the water tank. […] I was working pregnant with a little girl that didn't even have a name. I carried 50 kg cement bags, on my head, every day.

[…] You never saw it. You never entered our house after it was finished, all painted. You kept saying you would come, you would come. And you died. And you never came.

The scene stands as a synecdoche for the whole film, as a process that both re-enacts, but is also constitutive of, Vitalina Varela's mourning, loneliness, anger, and gradual recovery and restoration. This slow performative achievement of solace and dignity, a working through via remembrance, storytelling and acting, is what Costa gestures to when he says: "Her mourning was the shooting, and vice versa […] since in real life she didn't have the chance to take part in the [funeral] ceremonies, she could live the whole ritual in this film." Additionally, he comments:
I like film to be a ceremony when it's being shot, so that when it's going to be seen something of that is kept. So the moment for us to do a take [...] it's always a little bit ceremonial, even if it's the 700th take. Vitalina helped a lot in this way of [...] working.

I don't tend to use music. [...] Vitalina gets there, and there's no Vivaldi or Bach to help her get the skies up above, there's nothing there. It's a bit more difficult; it's harder to watch. [...] but I wouldn't think of putting any cellos under Vitalina.

It is notable that Costa eschews non-diegetic music throughout the film. He comments:

Vitalina Varela is also a film that is more reliant on soliloquies than dialogues. Apart from Vitalina Varela herself, and Ventura in the role of the priest, the other actors are laconic or entirely silent. And the two leading characters also spend much of their screen time in silence. At such moments, the actors deploy instead the expressivity of a lexicon of physical gestures. Costa's method of rehearsing on film enables him to capture some such gestures and then isolate, refine and reproduce them (such as Vitalina's raising of a hand to her forehead, of which more below). Other movements of the body, whether first observed or only spoken of, are inserted into new contexts, such as Vitalina's bare feet when she steps down on to the tarmac at the airport.

Of course corporeal gestures are not simply self-generated by an individual or actor moving according to their own volition, external or internal stimuli, and the demands of any given situation. They are also codified, learned, imitated, circulated and reproduced via diverse social institutions, including those of family, education, work, culture and religion. It is worth citing here the sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss, who wrote in his seminal 1935 paper "Techniques of the Body" of the need for a "triple viewpoint", encompassing anatomical, psychological and sociological dimensions.

For Mauss:

The child, the adult, imitates actions which have succeeded and which he [sic] has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him. The action is imposed from without, from above, even if it is an exclusively biological action, involving his body. The individual borrows the series of movements which constitute it from the action executed in front of him or with him by others.

How is this insight pertinent to Costa's work? Because it provides a means of unpacking the various somatic repertoires that are drawn upon and reproduced in the film. And in the process, it allows a deeper understanding of the particular interface between histrionic and quotidian elements on screen, to recall Sterritt's terminology.

Several different learned gestures and techniques of the body are evident in Vitalina Varela. These include rituals of mourning and cleaning. Two men wordlessly clean the dead man’s house, mopping the floor, burning his bloody pillow, and lighting incense to fumigate the bedroom; Vitalina ties a black scarf on her head every morning and assembles a homemade shrine to her husband, comprised of paper flowers, two candles, two old photographs and a small crucifix. In the role of the fallen priest with a ramshackle church but no congregation, Ventura enacts a repertoire of incomplete and unsuccessful religious gestures. Wearing a black suit and purple stole, he stands at the pulpit and attempts to take a second funeral service for the dead man with Vitalina Varela as congregation. He leafs through a bible, closes it again, begins a prayer, then slides to the floor.
Other gestures are less clearly codified. In a rare open air scene, Vitalina Varela appears in a two-minute long shot standing on the roof of her husband’s house in a gale, using an old plank to hold down a large canvas which flaps wildly in the wind. As she works silently in the noise of the storm against a backdrop of inky blue clouds racing across the wide evening sky, she has the grace in physical labour of a lone pioneer woman in a western. At the close of the scene she stands with her hand up to her brow, looking off-screen to the left (see figure 5). This unscripted gesture was introduced by Vitalina Varela, and Costa retained it in multiple takes, partly because it reminded him of filmmakers he admired.

![Figure 5: Vitalina Varela on the roof](https://www.sensesofcinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Austin-Part-III-Image-5-Vitalina-Varela-on-the-roof.png)

The shot on top of the house when it’s raining and Vitalina is fixing the roof seems to me perhaps the closest you’ve come to John Ford. That’s because of Vitalina’s hand over her eyes, isn’t it? It was a difficult shot to prepare. It involved some construction in our improvised studio: the wind, etc. But the actual shooting was easier than we all thought it would be; we didn’t need that many takes. It was just because Vitalina had really performed those actions quite a few times in her real life: climbing to the roof on stormy nights, trying to stop the rain from falling in her kitchen or on her bed.

But for me, with this scene you could also think of some of the women in Mizoguchi’s films, if only because John Ford was more manly. But it could also be Russian—it could be Dovzhenko. But of course if you have that, what can you do: you’re surrounded by ghosts again. I’m not saying it’s a shot or an image I remember from Mizoguchi. It’s more a spirit of mothers, widows, running around the landscape in Japan, escaping soldiers, battling, searching for food, repairing, et cetera. But, I guess, more than Ford or Mizoguchi, I’m thinking of a filmmaker who was certainly important for this film: Mikio Naruse. [...] Thinking that it would be a rough shoot, I also anticipated that it could be somewhat documentary. So I didn’t block the ending: I just told Vitalina to go as far as she could, and then we would cut. And as we went along, I saw that she slowly came to this posture, her hand over her front, eyes far out on the horizon.

Vitalina Varela’s stance thus conflates a quotidian gesture made in the re-enactment of a routine task and an (unintended) intertextual citation. In this way it also offers a vivid and succinct instantiation of the coexistence of mimetic and performative modes, the indexical and the intertextual, in Vitalina Varela and Costa’s mature work more broadly.

7: Final scenes

Immediately after the rooftop scene, the image cuts to a young woman sitting up in bed, eyes raised to look off-screen right, while her male partner sleeps. It is not immediately clear who this couple are, or indeed where or when they are, but the shot offers an eyeline match between the young woman and Vitalina Varela on the roof. The creative geography of this match is gradually clarified as the woman gets up and walks out into the dirt yard, tying on a black headscarf like that worn by Vitalina Varela in previous scenes. The rough stone house backs onto the barren grey-brown slopes of Cape Verde. But, in contrast to some of the mobile establishing shots in Casa de Lava, the camera remains static, and the image does not offer the touristic pleasures of the earlier film. Instead it becomes integrated into Vitalina Varela’s narrative, albeit ambiguously, as either a memory, a flashback, or a fantasy. The young woman stands still and silent, looking off-screen to the right, in an asynchronous echo of Vitalina Varela’s rooftop stance, and it becomes evident that the two images may be of the same woman at different times and places in her life.
Following this temporal slippage, the image cuts again to Vitalina Varela silently boiling water in her dead husband's shabby kitchen. She pauses and speaks to the dead man: “Our Father is out of control. He says that spirits only speak Portuguese. And that I have to learn it to speak to you.” She moves to a chair, looks towards a curtained window, and continues with a slight smile: “It is difficult. I am dumb. If I learn, will you respond? Will you finally say all those things you didn’t say in Cape Verde? The day you ran away I felt you were full of hate inside.”

There follow scenes of Vitalina Varela in Lisbon, working on a small garden in the dark, visiting her husband’s grave in a hillside cemetery with the priest (Ventura), and a short daylight shot of three men from the neighbourhood repairing her leaky roof. The final, wordless, image in the film follows a surprising cut from the scene of the men on the roof to the young couple building their house in Cape Verde. A static longshot encompasses the blue cloudless sky, grey mountains in the background, and a lone chicken scratching in front of the house. The young woman carries a cement brick on her head, and takes it upstairs to where the young man is bricklaying. She kneels down and hugs him but he brushes her off, and she walks to the right side of the flat, unfinished roof. In the final image of the film, she raises a hand to her brow and looks off-screen right, in a mirror image of Vitalina Varela on the roof in Lisbon (see figure 6).

This shot and the earlier Cape Verde scene can be readily interpreted as Vitalina Varela’s fantasy of return to a past time and another space, which were the site of a happiness, mutuality, and love now lost. But this far-off moment, imagined from a present more than three decades later, is also marked as impossibly distant. The formal contrast between the tight framing of dark rooms, enclosed spaces, and narrow alleyways in the Lisbon slums and the wide shots and blue skies of Cape Verde reiterates the spatial and temporal distance between the two, a gulf that only fantasy or the subjective nature of memory can cross.

This figuration of a “perfect” memory of a lost love that is irretrievable but still treasured (perhaps not despite, but because of decades of neglect), can also be understood as the culmination of the emotional shock of the “too late” dynamic unleashed at Vitalina Varela’s arrival in the airport scene. It signals the irreversibility of the past, and hence the impossibility of the wish that things had been different. Moreover, if the young woman (played by Vitalina Varela’s own daughter) really is Vitalina at a prior moment in her life, the Cape Verdean scenes contain the seed of a now-known and hence inevitable future of abandonment, disappointment, and loss. To borrow from Roland Barthes, “this will be and this has been”: she will be left and she has been left.

Nevertheless, the gradual movement of the film and its heroine out of the darkness of closed rooms and into the open air under a wide sky has already begun. In the present tense of the diegetic now, with Vitalina Varela’s night time visits to the garden, her daylight trip to the windy cemetery, her attempts to repair the roof, and then the scene of three men mending the same roof. This slow emergence from containment is also figured by her shift from wearing the black clothes of mourning to a petrol blue robe towards the end of the film (see figure 7).
Costa suggests:

we could have left Vitalina closed in the [Lisbon] house for ever, but after all this year and a half, two years of work I thought she deserved this [final] shot. [...] For a long time I thought the film would end with those “sad men” helping Vitalina to rebuild the roof of her husband's house. But when we shot the wind in the roof, watching her watching something, somewhere, I imagined a girl on a roof in Cape Verde. I thought it could be a sort of counter-shot, with matching wind, of a young girl watching Vitalina from across the ocean. Like if there was a sort of call from afar and from the past. So I guess I also began feeling that we couldn't let Vitalina to remain closed in that house for ever. [...] In a way, the whole film prepares for that moment when she'll decide to step out of the house into the sunlight.

Despite Costa's assertion, in the last scene of the film, we do not see Vitalina Varela enter the sunlight in Lisbon. We have already seen a closeup of her bare feet stepping out of her front door (metal, painted blue, now aged and much scratched), and logically she must have been outside if the image of the men on top of her roof approximates a point of view shot. But the final image is of the much younger woman (probably also Vitalina) working on her own house in the startling sunlight of Cape Verde. It seems that Vitalina Varela is both there and here, then and now. She is shaped by the past, but not defeated by it. She stands and looks out across time twice, in the twinned images of her rooftop stance, from the past moment in Cape Verde, and from the present moment in Lisbon. This doubling offers up an icon of persistence and resilience; of pain, loss and suffering, certainly, but also of endurance, dignity and survival – that is, of monumentality.

8: Conclusion

You work in this world, you work with the world, and you have the same tools, they are not magical, and you are not a magician, I'm not, but the world can give you magic.

The film Vitalina Varela does not attempt to capture the “complete” woman whose name it carries. Instead, it shows her presenting a version of herself, a performance that is only realised in and through the film itself. In this way Vitalina Varela is also a reminder of cinema's essential capacity to work across dualities. It invites its audiences to see, hear, and be moved by, both the woman on screen and the indivisible artifice that constitutes and frames her for us. Like much of Costa's mature work, it constructs a testament of survivance; of loss, perseverance, dignity and creativity that is both political and beautiful, indeed political in part because it is beautiful. It is simultaneously an oral history and a mythology, and thus a celebration of the precarious, quotidian achievement of what Brecht called “the greatest art of all: Lebenskunst, the art of getting through life.”
Figure 8: Pedro Costa, Ventura and Vitalina Varela

Endnotes


3. Costa comments on the difficulty of gaining access to the airport: “It’s as if these places and scales are not allowed to a certain class of films, to modest productions. Let’s not forget that cinema is one of the businesses that segregates the most. It’s always a matter of scale, isn’t it? The bigger, the better. We finally got permission to shoot a few hours, one night, on a plane parked next to a hangar.” Costa in Daniel Kasman, “Cinema Must Be a Ritual: Pedro Costa Discusses ‘Vitalina Varela’”, 19 February 2020, Mubi Notebook Interview, https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/20200219 Pedro-Costa-Discusses-Vitalina-Varela. See also Costa in conversation with Delgado: “That’s how I won this fight with the airport. I told them, ‘you keep this (for) Tom Cruise. (…) You don’t give us the big thing to the small people, to the documentary guys’. (...) (Later) I called all the electricians I knew. (...) We came with a truck with big lights, (like) Tom Cruise, and Vitalina is Tom Cruise!”


6. Vitalina Varela discloses very little about the life of Joaquim, the dead man. Costa has said: “This guy was a nasty guy. The guy who plays his friend in the film told me that in the last months Joaquim was really probably one of the biggest dealers of the neighbourhood, and then he got diabetes or heart disease, or whatever…there was blood in the house, diarrhoea on the floor, he was kaput…” Pedro Costa in Haden Gest and Mark Peranson, “I see a darkness: Pedro Costa on Vitalina Varela”, CinemascopE 80, https://inema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/see-a-darkness-pedro-costa-on-vitalina-varela/ (https://icina-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/see-a-darkness-pedro-costa-on-vitalina-varela/).  

7. While a sense of duration (and often, but not exclusively, the use of static camera and long takes) is essential to Costa’s work, he is at pains to distance himself from the recent trend in slow cinema, which he characterises as “arromph shots”. He stresses instead the importance of labour, locality, materiality, and a connection to film history. “You never saw a bricklayer contemplating his stone for half an hour and saying ‘wow’... (...) the contemplation of some void, could be a mountain, could be a street corner, could be in Hong Kong or Paris (...)” I just say you should see Ozu or should see John Ford, because they’re much, much longer. Three seconds in John Ford is 3,000 years. (...) That’s the work. It’s Proust’s, it’s Kafka, it lasts for a century to tell just one second. That’s very hard work in film. And the camera has to be in the right place, of course, to allow this time to be time.” Pedro Costa, In Finding the Criminal, (2010, dir. Craig Kelly). See also Costa, personal interview with Nuno Barradas Jorge, Lisbon, 22 February 2013, cited in Nuno Barradas Jorge, Refocus: The Films of Pedro Costa: Producing and Consuming Contemporary Art Cinema, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 83: “(Slowness) reflects the formal preoccupations of filmmakers like Tarkovsky or Angelopoulos (...) those are preoccupations that I don’t have, and will never have (...) Slow cinema was the nightmare I had to endure during film school.”  

8. Costa in Daniel Kasman, “Cinema Must Be a Ritual”,  


10. Costa in Jordan Cronk, “House of the Spirits” Film Comment (January-February 2020), https://www.filmcomment.com/article/house-of-the-spirits-pedro-costa-interview-vitalina-varela/ (https://www.filmcomment.com/article/house-of-the-spirits-pedro-costa-interview-vitalina-varela/). “Cova da Moura, where we shot, like every African neighbourhood, is a very resonant, noisy place. For every scene with dialogue or any shot with a monologue we had to wait for some silence and we usually had to begin shooting not before 10 or 11 at night, when the neighbors were going to bed.” Costa in Kasman, “Cinema Must Be a Ritual”.  

11. Costa in Tafoya, “The Camera Becomes a Friend”. See also Costa in Kasman, “Cinema Must Be a Ritual”: “When we’re not shooting, our sound director would be recording sounds in the neighborhood. It’s a great way to get rich, diverse ambient sounds for our sound editing, and at the same time, it’s a nice way for him to get to know the neighborhood better, to know the people, to enter their homes.”  

12. On a similar use of overlapping sounds in In Vanda’s Room, see David McDougall, “Two or Three Things I Know About Fontainhas: No Quarto da Vanda”, http://chainedtothecinematheque.blogspot.com/2007/10/two-or-three-things-know-about.html (http://chainedtothecinematheque.blogspot.com/2007/10/two-or-three-things-know-about.html). “One interesting architectural component of the neighborhood was the mixing of public and private space. (...) The fluid lines between inside and outside are especially present in Costa’s sound design.”  

13. Rick Altman, “Afterword: a Baker’s Dozen Terms for Sound Analysis,” in Altman ed., Sound Theory, Sound Practice (Routledge, 1992), p. 252. However, Costa does employ this device, which Altman terms the “sound hermeneutic”, in a late scene when Vitalina Varela is disturbed in bed by noises from above and opens her front door to find three men repairing her roof.  


17. Maria Delgado calls Vitalina Varela’s monologues here and elsewhere “a one-way dialogue”. “She’s talking to a man who can no longer answer her back”, Costa in conversation with Maria Delgado.  


19. Costa in conversation with Maria Delgado.  


21. Costa notes that Vitalina Varela often told him: “Cape Verde is much better, the animals, the sun, I like to work in the field, the land, my feet on the ground.” Costa in Gest and Peranson, “I see a darkness”.  

22. Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body”, Economy and Society, 2, 1, 1973, pp. 70-88, p. 73. He compares techniques of swimming, running, walking, marching, and digging, all of which are socially and/or generationally and/or gender- specific.  


24. Other physical repertoires are displayed in Costa’s other films, such as techniques of drug preparation and use in In Vanda’s Room.  

25. Costa comments: “as we were discussing the project I mentioned to (Ventura) that his character would be a priest, and he said, ‘Whoa, whoa, whoa. I don’t like priests!’ He hates priests. I told him this would be a different kind of priest.” Cronk, “House of the Spirits”.  

26. The scene was actually shot in the production’s makeshift studio. Costa and his crew used green screen to insert footage of an open sky behind the actor. “We tried rear projection, and it didn’t work that well because it was too dark to have the sky move and I wanted the sky to move. But that was a big space, and we got a lot of wind because we had an airplane engine. That’s what they use apparently. A guy came with a truck, it’s powerful,” Costa in conversation with Maria Delgado.  

27. Of course this comparison is shaped by my own viewing repertoire, and is far from the only one that could be made.  

28. Costa in Jordan Cronk, “House of the Spirits”. See also Kasman, “Cinema Must Be a Ritual”.  

29. Costa’s cinema phile here encompasses poses of the body as well as the camera that captures them, and thus parallels Mauss’ incipient understanding of cinema as a significant repertoire of gestures, popularised and reproduced across time and space. Mauss recalls a “revelation” that came to him when he was hospitalised in New York: “I wondered where previously I had seen girls walking as my nurses walked. I had the time to think about it. At last I realised that it was at the cinema. Returning to France, I noticed how common this gait was, especially in Paris; the girls were French and
they too were walking this way. In fact, American walking fashions had begun to arrive over here, thanks to the cinema. This was an idea I could
generalise. The positions of the arms and hands while walking form a social idiosyncracy, they are not simply a product of some purely individual,

30. Costa has said of the first rooftop scene: “I never asked (Vitalina) why she did that or what was she seeing. But it was because of this shot that I
decided to go to Cape Verde to shoot the ending of the film. Who knows, maybe Vitalina is seeing herself, on top of another roof, across the ocean.”
Costa in Cronk, “House of the Spirits”. 

31. At this moment, Vitalina Varela parallels the fantasy of return to the homeland that haunts diasporic films such as the documentary I for India (2005),
and even the defeated (white) protagonists retreat to a remembered or impossible past in fiction as diverse as Tarkovsky’s Solaris (1972) and several
Hollywood genre films such as Westworld (1973), Welcome To Blood City (1977), and Upgrade (2008). 

32. Barthes is writing about a photograph of Lewis Payne waiting to be hanged in 1865. Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, trans.

33. Costa in Kasman, “Cinema Must Be a Ritual”. Costa adds: “the plane tickets were not that expensive. We went to Cape Verde and we stayed in
Vitalina’s parents’ house, we shot in the actual house that Vitalina and Joaquim were building, the boy working on the roof in the last shot is Vitalina’s
son, we slept in the house where Vitalina was born. You can’t go much further back.” 

34. Costa in Finding the Criminal. 

p.111. 

### About the Author

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Thomas Austin is Reader in Media and Film at the University of Sussex, UK. His latest book is *Cinema of Crisis: Film and Contemporary Europe*, co-edited
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