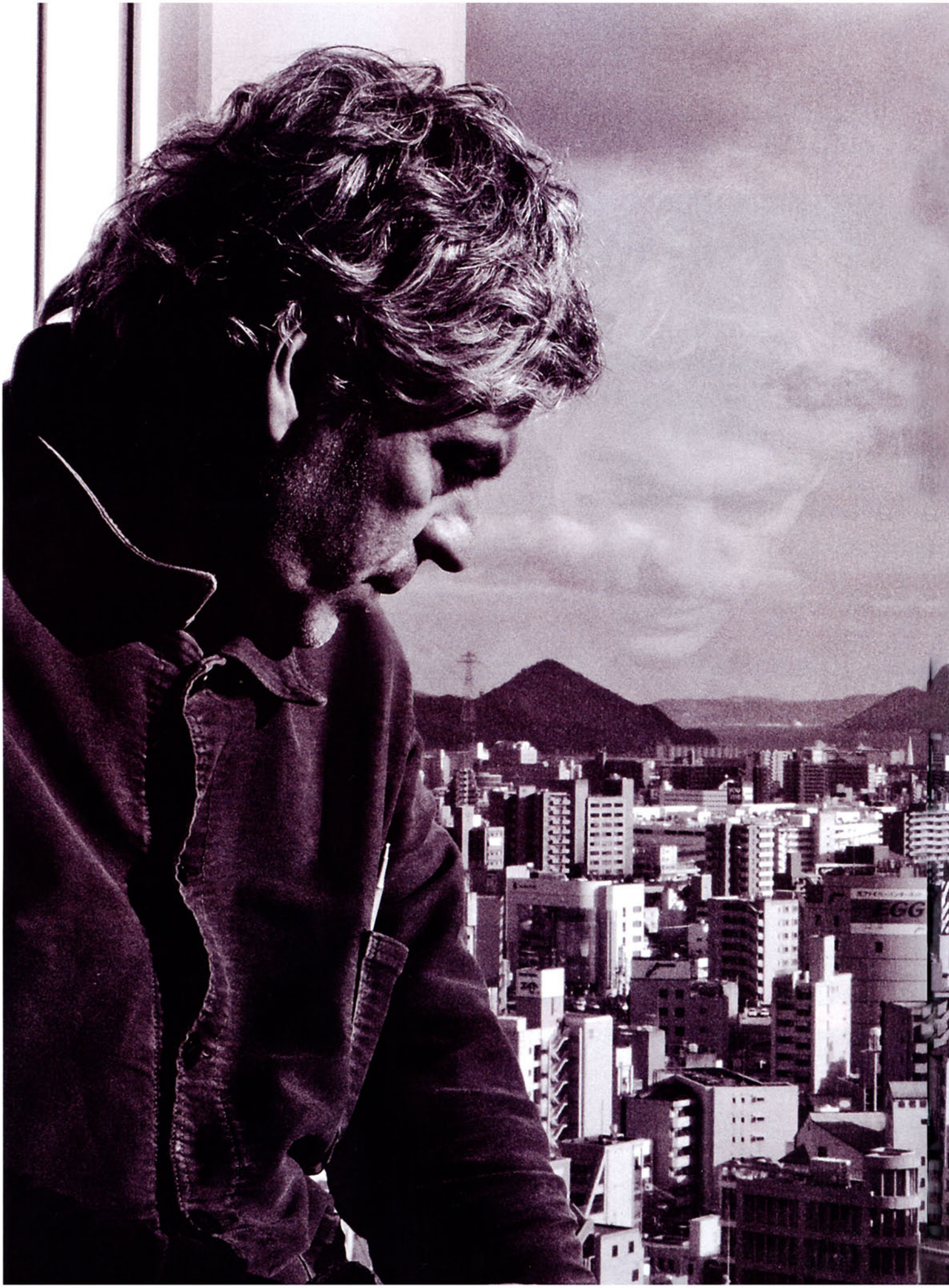

EGG

The films of Pedro Costa have reinvented the relationship between film-maker and subject. **Kieron Corless** *talks to the Portuguese director and, overleaf, Argentinian critic* **Quintín** *charts the development of his unique filming style*

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

PHOTOGRAPH © VALERIE MASADIAN

KEEPING IT REAL
Swapping a full film crew for a handheld digital camera allowed Pedro Costa, left, to get closer to the reality of the ghetto neighbourhood where he makes his films

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

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

On the following pages, Costa discusses his unique working methods and their underlying principles, while Argentinian critic Quintín assesses Costa's significance through the prism of a typically enigmatic Godard quote voiced at the finale of Costa's latest film *Ne change rien.*

Kieron Corless: How did you start in film?

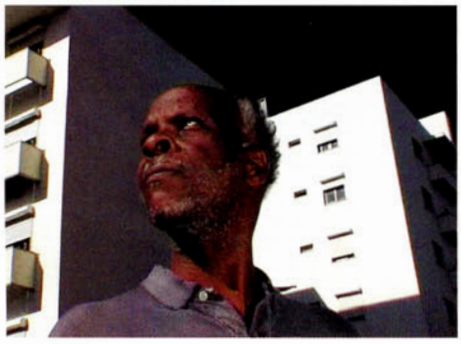
Pedro Costa: After film school in 1981, like everyone I got some small jobs on productions – getting the sandwich for the actor, driving the car. I was young, it was money – actually I earned much more money than I am earning now – and I was a bit afraid, I have to say. I didn't like what I saw. I worked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

KC: What was influencing you at that time?

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

Pedro Costa

FIRST STEPS
After his directing debut 'O Sangue', top, it was Costa's second film 'Casa de Lava', above, that first took him to Cape Verde



BACK TO BASICS
Costa's later films made in the Fontainhas neighbourhood – 'In Vanda's Room', top, and 'Colossal Youth', above – developed a new DIY aesthetic

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

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

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

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

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

PC: I met Vanda [Duarte], her mother, sister and then another guy, and then I just got this idea of a baby being born and the parents not wanting it. They want to sell it, which was a common story, a cliché, in that kind of place, that kind of world,

I learned a lot of things with that film, because at the same time as I was beginning to think I had found something and I had found a world, at least some people that I really like, and that those people were going to be in front of the camera, still I had a problem behind the camera which in that film was a big, big mess.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

KC: Do you rehearse?

PC: Actually I'm doing something that I always dreamed of, doing exactly what Chaplin did when

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he started, which was rehearsing on film. Like in that Brownlow documentary about Chaplin, *Unknown Chaplin*, you can see he worked on film. He never rehearsed or tried anything without filming, without having the camera on, and that helps a lot. It takes solemnity and mystery out of the camera. The camera shouldn't be a mystery.

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

PC: There's something about repetition – of course with some liberty, they are not nailed to the ground – that makes sense, that connects them to life. For [people in Fontainhas] much more than for other classes, their life is repetition – there's nothing that's going to change.

I think the record was 80 takes, but it needed 80 takes. We could do 30, 40, 50... Of course these takes are not made like in other films in one day, they are made in weeks. We could spend almost months doing a scene or just two scenes. There are no bosses or producers coming; we just feel that if it's there, we cannot go any further, then we stop. And it's good for them to have this discipline, to understand they can conquer their fear and insecurity and do it better, and tell it better. They can get to a point where it's more clear and more mysterious at the same time.

KC: How do you manage to survive financially?

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

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

PC: That is what some of my colleagues don't have, the ones that work in the more normal way – they don't have this immediate critique that I have. You can imagine that after *In Vanda's Room*, all the neighbourhood said, "Yeah, it's great, it's very beautiful, but there's a lot of drugs. We are not about drugs and now you should show some other things." It was very serious, it was very Maoist. I defended myself. I said, "Yeah, well it's my thing about you." This kind of thing is very useful to me: it's my fear of not losing touch with this thing that I am associating with cinema, this part of humanity or reality that I think was always there since the beginning – and sometimes it's not there enough even in documentaries you see.

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

LABOUR INTENSIVE Charting the actress Jeanne Balibar's determination to improve her singing, Costa's latest film 'Ne change rien' is an absorbing portrayal of artistic creation and performance as work

THE SECOND STORY

In Pedro Costa's work, the process of film-making is often as fascinating as the 'first' story, or plot. By **Quintín**

Pedro Costa's latest film *Ne change rien* is a documentary about the musical adventures of Jeanne Balibar, in which the French actress sings repeated takes of a succession of songs. As the song that gives the film its title comes to an end, the unmistakable voice of Jean-Luc Godard is heard on the soundtrack saying: *"Ne change rien pour que tout soit différent."* ("Change nothing so that everything stays the same.") It's hard to interpret Godard's mysterious sentences, and this is no exception, but neither is it easy to understand why Costa uses Godard's words here. It may not even be important, but a warning needs to be given that here we have a film-maker who comments on his work continually, as if his films are incomplete without an accompanying reflection.

Costa is a committed cinephile and a great admirer of certain classic directors – from Ford to Tourneur, Lang to Hawks, Lubitsch to Walsh, Ozu to Bresson. Keeping this tradition alive today requires relentless explanations, in contrast to the old masters' practice of disregarding film criticism and refusing to talk about their work. Indeed, Costa's film-making is guarded by a group of critics who are not only willing to defend it (as is the practice nowadays with more or less 'highbrow' film-makers), but also serve as the vehicle for the director's account of his own work.

Costa's cinema is as much to be read as it is to be watched. I'm not saying that it cannot be enjoyed without critical mediation, nor that his films are hermetic, populated with symbols to be interpreted or secret codes to be revealed; rather that his work also proposes a discussion with the film-maker's concepts. It is not about reinventing cinema, but rather about renewing the way we appreciate it. And this is one big change.

In this sense, the French DVD edition of *In Vanda's Room* (2000) – the core of Costa's filmography – is fascinating. The box includes a 175-page book with paintings, photographs and images from other films, as well as a transcription of a long conversation in which the director talks about each of the different aspects of the film: from the camerawork and the sound to directing the actors and choosing the colour scheme. But above all, he talks about the film's unusual genesis in terms of its production (of which more below).

In another recent work dedicated to Costa, the special supplement of *Cahiers du cinéma España*, the critic Gonzalo de Lucas writes the following: "A film is the relation between two stories. The first one is the film's plot: the succession of narrative facts more or less dramatic and literary. The second one is the film's process: the experiences woven between the film-maker and the people he films, or those with whom he films. Bad film-makers and bad film critics only think or see the first story... But learning to watch film requires recognition of the signs of that other story, which is constituted by the experience arising from a work: more secret and more private, and almost always more tense and contradictory." There's no doubt that the aforementioned book brings the viewer closer to that essential second story. This DVD edition is part of the future for a certain kind of cinema, perhaps ➡

Costa's cinema is as much to be read as to be watched. It's about renewing the way we appreciate cinema

CHANGE OF GEAR
Top: 'Ne change rien'. Left: 'Ossos', the pivotal first film in Costa's Fontainhas trilogy. Below: 'Où gît votre sourire enfoui?', Costa's view of Straub (right) and Huillet at work

the only one possible. Even though the whole mechanism of the film industry seems unalterable, with its cyclical financing-producing-opening-reviewing rituals, new procedures are needed in order to enable certain films to fight for a place within the system.

But new practices generate new inconveniences. Although it may seem paradoxical, a film-maker who determines on supplying critics with information in such a way – providing access to that 'second story' which critics usually strive to deduce or evaluate – seems to make criticism superfluous, as it is confronted with the necessity to choose between an *a priori* rejection or a repetition of what the film-maker has already said himself. In the case of Costa, whose work is organised around such a specific axis, and where each of his films involves little variation with respect to the others – in Godard's sense of not changing anything so that everything turns out different in the end – at least some engagement is required with the information that the director so generously provides. This is the reason why what's said about Costa tends to trudge along commonplace paths, enunciating sentences worn out with usage.

Copernican revolution

Pedro Costa was born in Lisbon in 1959 and worked as an assistant on various films during the 1980s before directing his first feature *O Sangue* in 1989. In his second feature, *Casa de Lava* (1994), he started looking for what wouldn't emerge at least until his fifth, *Colossal Youth* (2006). (During this time he also made two feature-length documentaries in French, *Où gît votre sourire enfoui?* (*Where Lies Your Hidden Smile?*, 2001), about the relationship between directing partners Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet as they edit a film together, and the previously mentioned *Ne change rien.*) In those four features from *Casa de Lava* to *Colossal Youth*, Costa polished his narrative technique, removing certain conventional elements until he established a subject-matter, mode of production and method of working with actors that were all radically innovative. The four films have as their focus the lives of the inhabitants of the Cape Verde Islands, a former Portuguese colony, and in particular the destiny of the Caboverdians who emigrated to work in Lisbon and ended up living in poverty and a state of social exclusion.

Casa de Lava centres on a mystery: that of a native Caboverdian who falls into a coma in Lisbon and is repatriated to his homeland accompanied by Mariana, a nurse who (it is later revealed) is in fact his lover, and is trying to save him from life in the city. A big admirer of Jacques Tourneur, the director of *Cat People* (1942) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), whose mysterious characters display a second nature of which they are not entirely conscious, Costa gives us a film about zombies, but also a film about the great sexual passions and intrigues involving Mariana, which she herself will never fully understand. Mariana does however know about the Caboverdians' tragedy: how their attraction to the false promise of jobs in Lisbon will separate them from their roots and lead to alcohol and misery – disas-

ters to which drugs and deportation will be added after a few years. Costa includes these social problems, but refuses to make an edifying film, or to condescend to his characters. Instead, he chooses a generic approach – a mixture of horror and melodrama – and a way of looking that privileges geography and the body, relegating psychology and social conflict to the background.

In *Casa de Lava* and his next film *Ossos* (1997), however, Costa's narrative structure is still conventional. Even though both films invite the spectator to admire the precision of the framing and the complexity of faces over the plot, the latter is built on the characters' contradictory behaviour, their conflicting, shifting desires. In both these films, exposition and denouement (albeit an ambiguous one) are woven into the underlying conflict between the marginalised and society, the latter represented by intruders into the former's world. In *Ossos* another nurse – Eduarda – appears, acting unwillingly as the link between and catalyst of a chain of calamities.

After filming *Casa de Lava*, Costa discovered the neighbourhood of Fontainhas in Lisbon, and was entrusted by people from the island to take letters and gifts to their families there. Fontainhas is much less attractive than the open spaces of Cape Verde's Ilha do Fogo. In his next film *Ossos*, set in Fontainhas, a secret world opens up, populated once again by stunned, desperate characters on the verge of death, many of them played by people in the neighbourhood, improvising actors whose suffering is not far from what they experience in their real lives. At the centre of the film is a baby who constantly changes hands, providing the excuse to develop the narrative in several directions. Filmed in masterly fashion, if a little bit academically, *Ossos* manages to make its miserable locations attractive. The characters' desolation is contrasted a bit too obviously with the plastic beauty of the compositions; and thus the usually superior film-maker's gaze on the less favoured classes is inverted, with the film becoming a slightly banal moral tale about the impotence of those who want to get closer to life's victims.

The contradiction of Costa's characters is that of the film-maker himself. He was determined to film in Fontainhas, with its inhabitants, but always from a distance, from behind the protection of the film-maker's equipment: not just the blinding lights, but the network of hierarchies – technicians, assistants, parasites – all completely alien to life in this neighbourhood. The last shot of *Ossos* shows a door closing on the camera, as if the verdict were that for this industrial method of film-making, Fontainhas and its secrets are inaccessible.

Faced with this situation, it seems logical that the 'second story' de Lucas refers to in his *Cahiers* article is reflected in the confrontation between these two worlds. This 'second story' can neither prevent the films from taking a slight false turn when, unable to escape this confrontation of which he is a prisoner, the film-maker tries to use film's institutional resources to mediate between his own social class and that of his characters. This is why Costa's declarations in his interviews – in which he describes the Copernican revolution represented by his next film *In Vanda's Room* – are so interesting. Even though *Ossos* was successful at festivals and applauded by critics, when producer Paulo Branco suggested he make a new film under similar conditions, Costa refused and decided instead to shoot his next film in Fontainhas, but outside the professional system, without the interfering presence of a large film crew. This was how one of the most remarkable films in recent film history was born: from an experimental shoot that became an extraordinary experience for the participants, as well as for the viewer.

Opening doors

For two years, Costa went to Fontainhas on his own every day with an amateur digital camera that he himself operated. He didn't have a shooting plan and he also took care of the sound most of the time, occasionally helped by the actors, who held the microphone once they were out of the frame. There was no budget, nor any money for the editing or the sound mix, and money for the blow-up would not be found until much later.

In Vanda's Room is about everyday life in the neighbourhood, and in particular the little universe of Vanda Duarte, whose natural acting talent had earned her an important role in *Ossos*. A great deal of the film takes place in her room; overwhelmingly, for almost three hours we see the protagonists consuming drugs. Their life unfolds: women, especially Vanda and her sister Zita, chain-smoke heroin, and men in various bedsits inject it.

If doors closed at the end of *Ossos*, here they are wide open, allowing the camera to pass through the intricate labyrinth of connected houses. Costa is a specialist in doors, which have a constant presence in his filmography. They can serve a tragic purpose, as with the shot of the lock on the door that serves as a metonym for a murder in *Ossos*. Or they can be a dramatic device, as for instance in *Où gît votre sourire enfoui?*, where Jean-Marie Straub spends his life passing back and forth through the door of the editing room, as his partner Danièle Huillet controls the situation from the moviola. Doors and openings are part of the formal and symbolic structure of Costa's films. When doors start opening, from *In Vanda's Room* onwards, they help the film-maker achieve his aim: to democratise the shooting of his films in two complementary senses. On the one hand, he reduces the distance between the person filming and what's being filmed. On the other hand, there's no distinction between amateur and professional actors: his camera looks in the same way at Danièle Huillet, Vanda Duarte or Jeanne Balibar, registering the annoyance of each of these women, or granting *Colossal Youth*'s Ventura a Fordian grandeur.

With *In Vanda's Room*, the 'second story' stops interfering with the first one and becomes, instead, a source of legitimacy. Costa doesn't have to complicate the stories anymore, or exaggerate the mannerism of his shots; nor does he have to feel guilty in the presence of this culture clash. It is simply there – he doesn't need a character to represent it. His dexterity at filming is put to the test in other ways, and the results are notable. On the one hand, this precarious way of filming doesn't hinder – if anything it favours – the moving, plastic beauty of the shots and the colossal presence of the actors. Without the background information, *In Vanda's Room* may seem disconcerting – it is a film in which people consume drugs unremittingly. But the film is not only as far removed as possible from sensationalism, but also passes beyond that critical cliché whereby 'the director judges his characters'. This is something else. In the first place, *Vanda* is not a documentary; each scene was rehearsed, repeated dozens of times, although using texts and situations that originate from the characters themselves. It is not a film *about* Vanda and her neighbours, but rather a film *with* Vanda and all the rest.

Eliminating the use of complex equipment gave Costa the freedom of unlimited shooting time, allowing him to access the privacy of the neighbourhood and create from within a collective work that gives an account of a secret world, inaccessible to cinema up until now, and close to disappearing from history. Indeed, Costa arrived in Fontainhas when the state had already started demolishing its houses, offering its inhabitants accommodation in a soulless block of apartments. *Colossal Youth* tells us about the consequences of this removal, closing the circle that opened with *Casa de Lava*, and conveys the ultimate feeling of being uprooted that Caboverdian workers residing in Lisbon experience. A letter, in which one of the emigrants writes about the search for work and prosperity, serves as a bridge between the two films. Like *West of the Tracks* (2002) by his contemporary Wang Bing – with whom he shares a quality of discretion during filming – Costa also provides testimony of the end of a culture linked to manual work.

But then everything has changed: cinema, the world, the film-maker himself. Costa's departure from certain industrial habits in order to take refuge in a sophisticated form of handicraft seems to contradict the Godardian riddle. In what sense – if there is one – does nothing change in order for everything to be different? What prevails is the labour, the daily routine, the obsessive repetition of certain habits, until infinitesimal modifications end up giving shape to the work.

Costa's devotion to Straub and Huillet is not accidental. His fantastic precision derives equally from respect for the purity of his material, and from the freedom conferred by poverty and the absolute refusal of concessions. Never to change a thing, never to take a short cut, but to carry on and on until there is nothing else to do – this is the method that Costa invokes, via Godard. It is what he registers in Balibar's impatient dedication to her singing, in Vanda's stubborn mistrust, in Straub and Huillet's obsessive discussions. It is what Costa symbolically longs for from the Hollywood studios, where cinema was once like a factory where people of enormous talent would go to work very early in the morning every day of the week. The dedication, the patience and the community work are what do not change, but they're also what make the difference. More than a film-maker's caprice, this is an alchemist's recipe.

Translated by Mar Diestro-Dópido