

A Review of *Horse Money*
[*Cavalo Dinheiro*], directed by
Pedro Costa (Portugal, 2014).

Ivan Cerecina
University of Sydney

Even among the diverse field of entries at the 2015 Melbourne International Film Festival, *Horse Money* remained a unique proposition. Although director Pedro Costa has made no secret of his key influences over the years, *Horse Money* strikes one as a film that shows the director working through a very personal set of aesthetic and philosophical preoccupations.¹ While those who have followed Costa's filmography in recent years will note the many continuities between *Horse Money* and the Portuguese director's previous films (both in terms of casting and the broad subjects his films tackle), *Horse Money* also signals a few key departures from the director's previous work, testifying to the evolving nature of his artistic vision.

Given *Horse Money*'s inventiveness, it is worth reflecting on Costa's career in order to better understand what is distinctive about this new work and the fresh challenges it poses to viewers familiar with the director's oeuvre. Over the years, Costa's craft has developed into its current, singular form through several incremental shifts in approach,

with each new film seeming to expand on a discovery made in the last. These discoveries have been technological—as when Costa embraced the switch from analogue to digital film in the early 2000s—as well as related to questions of aesthetics, attitude, and the approach subject matter. Often, as in *In Vanda's Room* (2000), Costa's technological and aesthetic approaches have been closely interrelated; there, we saw the convergence of a more intimate attitude towards representing others that was made possible by the artisanal, low-budget production model of early digital filmmaking.²

It was before the 2000s, however, that Costa confirmed his cinephile credentials in his first two features, *O Sangue* (1989) and *Casa de Lava* (1995). Both films exhibited the director's indebtedness to directors Jacques Tourneur, Nicholas Ray, and Robert Bresson.³ Costa's next three narrative features saw him carve out a unique cinematic voice through his stark depiction of Fontainhas, a poor neighbourhood in Lisbon—and the place from which Costa plucked a handful of residents to star in his productions. Among other things, Costa's so-called Fontainhas trilogy presents a fascinating array of approaches to representing similar subjects and situations: *Ossos (Bones)* (1997) is a bare-bones, though comparatively conventional, social drama; *No Quarto da Vanda (In Vanda's Room)* is a hyperrealist, low-budget blend of documentary and fiction; while *Juventude em Marcha (Colossal Youth)* (2006) takes the primacy of the performer and the long take aesthetic of *Vanda* to more poetic ends in its sketch of dislocated peoples. These narrative features, along with Costa's documentaries—on filmmakers Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, and on French singer Jeanne Balibar—show that, along with cinematic realism, “portraiture”—as Jonathan Rosenbaum has called it—is key to the director's work.⁴

From his Fontainhas films and onward, Costa has paid keen attention to his leading men and women—both to the way that they speak, and the way they move. The intensity of Costa's portrayals of his protagonists find few equals in contemporary cinema; as spectators, we are placed in extremely intimate proximity to Costa's characters. *Horse Money* is primarily a portrait of Ventura, who is also the lead in

Colossal Youth, Costa's previous narrative feature; although Vitalina Virela, a real-life relative of Ventura, is no less important a presence in the film's first half. Through the reflections of these characters on their pasts, *Horse Money* builds a dense, often opaque narrative about Portugal's colonial history and its effects on the diaspora living in the country's ex-colonies.⁵ But even if some characters are familiar, Costa's approach to narrative in *Horse Money* reaches a level of abstraction that is new in his work. Narrative ellipses feature in almost all of Costa's fiction films, particularly in *Colossal Youth*; however, in *Horse Money*, ellipses become so prevalent as to almost entirely muddy up the linkages connecting one scene to the next. It is tempting, then, to treat the film as a series of discrete sequences in which Ventura appears as a unifying factor; our protagonist drifts through the film, encountering people and memories from his past, in a fashion that appears to have little to do with the tides of cause and effect. The film's visual organisation mimics the looseness of its narrative, blurring the principles that classically structure space and temporality. Characters find themselves in half-built or half-dilapidated institutional spaces—remnants of hospitals, prisons, and factories—whose functional qualities have been stripped away by decay. Establishing shots are rare, with characters often framed in an exquisite, enveloping darkness that shows just a hint of the abandoned rooms and corridors around them.

Throughout *Horse Money*, time is warped: the film slips between past and present with none of the markers we associate with these shifts.⁶ Yet it is above all Ventura's dialogue and actions that contribute to the film's vertiginous atemporality. At several moments in the film, Ventura seems to slip into reverie, claiming that he is seventeen years old and explaining to his boss that he is ready to work. In another scene, he wanders through an abandoned factory, picks up a clearly disconnected phone, and tries to resolve a payment dispute with his boss. Vitalina, by contrast, reads out her birth certificate with a feverish intensity. That each of these memories refers to a very concrete, even banal moment in the past (bureaucracy is a surprisingly prevalent theme that connects each of them) makes their

inclusion in the film, in the form of repeated snippets of dialogue, all the more surprising.

Horse Money's apparent fixation on memory and the texture of the past seems to confirm the way in which Ventura and Vitalina, more than any other characters in Costa's work, figure as conduits for the experiences of others. Without taking away from Costa's intense focus on characters and what makes them singular, *Horse Money* gives heightened emphasis to the way in which individual subjectivity interacts with the collective experience of memory.⁷ Connecting the past and the present, the film's striking opening hints at this connection; it features a montage of black-and-white photographs by Danish photographer Jacob Riis of early twentieth-century New York tenement buildings and their occupants. This opening scene represents a singular moment in the director's work in that it uses archival material to render a connection to history through someone else's representational vision.⁸

What is important, here, is that these photographs come from a time and place that is completely separate to that of the film; although one could easily draw parallels between the abject precarity of the migrants in New York's poor housing conditions and the conditions portrayed in *Horse Money* (and in the Fontainhas cycle more generally). A similar effect is created when, at the film's halfway point, the narrative breaks away from its focus on Ventura and Vitalina to present a series of shots of the neighbourhood's residents. Backed by the film's only piece of non-diegetic music, the sequence offers a moment to reflect not only on the main characters' hushed incantations but on a series of portraits depicting *other* migrants in the protagonists' immediate vicinity. As with the photographs that appear in the film's opening montage, these sequences remove us from the immediacy of the protagonists' lives and circumstances for just long enough to allow us to resituate their story within a broader context.

The much talked-about 15-minute elevator sequence just before the film's close brings many of Costa's preoccupations about personal and cultural memory into even clearer relief. In this sequence, Ventura stands next to a soldier from the days of the Portuguese

Carnation Revolution. Dressed in full camouflage and with his face painted, the soldier stands as still as a statue. What follows is a kind of abstract dialogue that circles around Ventura's traumatic memories and the military struggles of Portugal's past, with the unmoving soldier provoking Ventura and forcing him to recall repressed memories. Sonically, this scene is probably one of the most interesting in all of Costa's work; it creates a rhythmic, call-and-response interplay that is intermittently interrupted by a blasting organ chord straight out of Messiaen. Moreover, the sequence is genuinely frightening, providing a visceral, affect-laden encapsulation of the film's fixation on trauma and history.

Horse Money demands a lot of its viewer: it asks them to take intellectual leaps and forge emotional connections despite its deliberately loose and open-ended structure. Whether one finds Costa's opaque abstractions rewarding or inscrutable seems above all to depend on whether one finds the film compelling enough to commit them to the task. However, those who are taken by enigmatic narrative structures, or slippery, mysterious narratives, will probably find that this film, more than any other in Costa's oeuvre, rewards repeated viewing.

Notes

1. These influences include, among others, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, John Ford, and Jacques Tourneur. Nevertheless, Louis Comolli suggests that Costa's Fontainhas trilogy breaks away with these directors' "classical cinematic dramaturgy." See Jean Louis Comolli "Frames and Bodies—Notes on Three Films by Pedro Costa: *Ossos*, *No Quarto da Vanda*, *Juventude em Marcha*," *Afierall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 24 (2010): 70.

2. On this shift in production methods from *Ossos* (1997) to *In Vanda's Room* (2000), see Cyril Neyrat, "Pedro Costa's Fontainhas Trilogy: Rooms for the Living and the Dead," *The Criterion Collection*, 31 March, 2010, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1425-pedro-costa-s-fontainhas-trilogy-rooms-for-the-living-and-the-dead>.

3. *Casa de Lava* (1995), for instance, is Costa's loose reworking of Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943).

4. By "cinematic realism," I refer to the basic precepts of realism that have remained constant in Costa's work: the long take, a respect for space, and the importance of the actor in the composition of the shot. On Costa's mode of "portraiture," see Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Films of the Future [on Pedro Costa]," 15 November, 2007, [jonathanrosenbaum.com](http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com), <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2007/11/cinema-of-the-future/>.

5. Costa has stated in multiple interviews that Ventura and Vitalina's anecdotes about their lives represented the film's starting point. See, for example, Neil Bahadur, "Interview: Pedro Costa," *filmcomment*, 21 July, 2015, <http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-pedro-costa/>.

6. In an interview published in *Cinema Scope*, Costa points out his debt to Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Not Reconciled* (1965), a film that takes a similarly malleable approach to temporality in its adaptation of Heinrich Boll's text. See Mark Peranson, "L'avventura: Pedro Costa on *Horse Money*," *Cinema Scope* 60 (2014): 6–13.

7. In a perceptive review of *Horse Money*, Michael Sicinski describes Ventura as a "cultural palimpsest"—a fitting formulation for his and Vitalina's role in the film. See Michael Sicinski, "Horse Money," *Letterboxd*, December 30, 2014, <http://letterboxd.com/msicism/film/horse-money/>.

8. In *Colossal Youth*, there is a similar moment when Ventura listens to a recording of Cape Verdean music; although, rather than being completely outside of it, this scene forms a part of the film's narrative.