

The elevator scene in 'Horse Money': the sound-image

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Abstract

There are all kinds of coincidences and clashes between the past and the present in Horse Money (Pedro Costa's last film) that emerge in a form of glossolalia with voices bringing back memories from everywhere. The scene at the elevator, with Ventura and a 25 April Revolution soldier, transformed into a golden statue, is the acmé of Pedro Costa's construction.

What's going on there? We can recognize some signs. There's a kind of struggle of voices, there. And the voices bring to the film not only what they're saying but also what they're doing as well as distinct periods of time (Pedro Costa said that he has spent two months mixing the sound of the scene). And all this within an everlasting present time created through the length of time and the scarcity of space (we don't get out of the elevator for a prolonged period of time).

It is our intention to describe the film taking consequences from the concept of "sound image" presented in L'image-temps by Gilles Deleuze. In Gilles Deleuze's thought, modern film somehow throws, so to speak, the utterances (all kinds of sound, and words in particular) towards images, thus creating a "sound image". In it, sound doesn't tell or aim to tell the image, nor does the image illustrate or aim to illustrate, or 'show', the sound. There is a separation, a disjunction, or a stratigraphic overlapping — «the more complete examples of seeing-talking disjunction can be found in film».

Keywords: Horse Money, Sound-Image, Recitation, Time Construction, Collective Character

1. Five signs of thought

Before we arrive to the sound compositions of his last film, *Cavalo Dinheiro* [*Horse Money*, 2014], let's begin by presenting briefly five signs of thought that could resume part of the work of the cineaste Pedro Costa.

a) *the intolerable*

This is an important stage in a kind of internal history to the work of Pedro Costa that we can construct, or tell the story: the film *Ossos* [Bones, 1997], his third feature film. It is not just the problem of the social situation to which the film refers. The truth is that the intolerable is also in the cinema itself, in a certain way of existence of the cinema. This is what we have to underline on the first place. What is an intolerable film practice?

There is a passage from a conversation between Pedro Costa and Cyril Neyrat where Pedro Costa describes his crisis and his struggle, in a kind of indignation shout. These are his words, in a longer quotation:

Fatally, where a film is being shot, there is a ghastly world of raids and *simulacra* of responsibility. I wanted to be there with those people, but without that weight [in another manner]. And film did not happen at all in the neighbourhood; no film could have been made here. It's where 'Vanda' gets its strength: at that moment, what I needed was to find a film that was not a film, or at least one unlike 'Ossos'. Godard says you can take out the image from his films and just listen to the soundtrack. Straub says, 'I do not know if Cezanne is a film.' 'I did not know what had to be done except destroy.' And the hitches with the production map and the neighbourhood; for instance, the trucks with film equipment just could not get in. And all the crazy stuff during this circus: our fourteen production assistants who took advantage of the quality dope there and spent their days doing police work as they leaned against the walls. They were there 'just in case', as they are in all shoots for security reasons, as deterrents. So what we brought to the people of the neighbourhood, especially the kids, was not very interesting. And there were also some useful things that perhaps I could not have found elsewhere. Light, for example. The film has a particular light, admired by many directors of photography, very unique in 35mm. My attitude was one of despair, of anger - I remember that at that time I had quite irrational attitudes. We were filming a lot at night in alleyways that were just a metre wide. Now, when you switch on a 10,000-watt projector, it penetrates holes, windows, doors, everywhere. It was like daylight at midnight. Of course, people working on films don't have the same timetables as bricklayers and house cleaners. And on those nights, the light would wake up people who were going to work at four in the morning. I felt the problem and I think they became quite verbal about it. The production assistants tried to filter the light and reduce it but it was not enough. I thought: 'We need to cut out these 10,000 watts because the film should not trouble people so much.' I think it was the right thing to do, though maybe I was also being a coward, because I thought everything I did was a failure. That's the reason for the production boycott, the director of photography boycott, me boycotting myself, because if I told them 'Cut the light', we would probably be unable to shoot. And that's how we found the light of the neighbourhood in *Ossos*. I thought maybe we could finally shoot properly. It began with a lack of light, a kind of penumbra, which was more suitable. It was another sensitivity. And there was less filmmaking. (...) We were inflicting tremendous changes on a neighbourhood that was already being exploited by society as a whole, and did not need any extra exploitation. The police, unemployment, drugs, whites... And now filming? In addition, filming is a little like a military or police thing. It starts as a raid and then disappears, just like the police. (Costa, Neyrat and Rector 2012, 37-38) ¹

So, when shooting *Bones*, Pedro Costa realises that beautiful images can result from a kind of non-relationship with the world of which they are images; he realises his art — the art of film — has limitations and that a particular mode of production can be very restrictive — or violent, or false. Our point is that he not only ‘captures the intolerable in this world’ but in film too. Pedro Costa feels that ‘something isn’t right’².

b) the strength of the weak

Thus we go from *Bones* (1997) to *No Quarto da Vanda* [*In Vanda’s Room*, 2000], but in different conditions, otherwise. Here, what we want to emphasize is the auto-affirmation of the artist, this «powerful, obscure, condensed will of art», as Deleuze writes (Deleuze 1985, 347) — and the concept that hangs here, the one which Deleuze has in mind, is the concept of “kunstwollen” (Alois Riegl). Whose is this “strength of the weak”? Who has strength being weak? The “strength of the weak” doesn’t belong only to those that are filmed, but belongs to the filmmaker himself.

A weakness that is a force, and that allows the filmmaker to scream: “I am here alone, I am the only filmmaker, no one else comes to make films here, in this neighbourhood...” It is weakness as a superior strength, the ability to live and do out of regular conditions — out of the great chain that excludes everything, or that absorbs everything. “Vulnerability is a form of force”, says the sculptor Rui Chafes³.

c) blood is film

In *O Sangue* [*Blood*, 1989], his first film — at the very beginning of his work —, we have the relationship between film and “the cinema”, but also, and already, we have “the strength of the weak”, this force of who puts oneself at the disposal of everything, of who is sacrificed, which also mimetizes the relationship between the artist and his art. Because art is not a matter of mastery in the sense of domination, but rather an unstable equilibrium, without guarantees.

Blood is film — why? Because, in *Blood*, there is a call of the entire classic cinema, and as well a response from the filmmaker himself. This film can be seen as much as a calling as response to cinema in itself, like saying: “I’m here, I’m able to answer you”. João Bénard da Costa (the former Head of Portuguese Cinematheque) said once, about this film: “one day the cinema was like this.”

d) the letter

We must highlight the seriality and the monumentality of Pedro Costa’s work — the articulation between all of his films, particularly from *Casa de Lava* [*Down to Earth*, 1994].

One of the reasons for the story of *Down to Earth*, one of the elements that give rise to the film, it’s the letter that the French writer Robert Desnos sent to his fiancée from a Nazi concentration camp in 1944 — he died three days after being released. The letter is adapted and re-written in Creole in this film, as if it belongs to one of the characters of the film, and it is not assigned to Robert Desnos.

It is not Pedro Costa’s job to do historical research, but rather react and act on the present with the tools he has and finds: Robert Desnos’s letter is one of such tools — and a force as well. And the Cape Verde depicted in the film it’s also in our present time, it is not something that just belongs to the past.

e) many people

Robert Desnos’s letter (evidently, it is no longer the letter of Robert Desnos) reappears in *Colossal Youth* (2006). Ventura, the person and the character of the film, recites it over and over again. Therefore, the whole composition of the film is marked by this recitation. It’s a letter from “many people”; and it’s a letter of “many times”; it’s a collective letter. The letter is from many people: this is the big question, from the political point of view, but also from the poetic point of view, in that the recitation creates a volume, is thickened and thickens the film, creates a temporal depth, is a constant parading of images and thoughts (sensations), such as a song; and this is also what a character can be: a character is many people, anything collective. In this regard, Pedro Costa says about the people he films:

I do not really believe in the character, what really interests me is the person, Vanda or Ventura. I never thought of a character they could represent, it was they who decided to build themselves up as characters. It’s all the better if they become characters, it means that they step outside themselves and they begin to look for a memory of the people they have known, of their past. For me, in the best cases, a character is many people concentrated in one body. (Costa, Neyrat and Rector 2012, 82)

2. Voices and whisperings

The multiplicity of the voices (in the elevator scene, *Horse Money* (2014), and the documents read (by Valentina, in the same film), prolong and develop with new shades the recitations in the previous films, in particular in *Colossal Youth* (2006).

We are not Ventura, and we do not easily dissolve Ventura’s world into ours. But what is certain is that the world of Ventura belongs to the world from which we are part: perhaps this is the commitment that these images require⁴ — to realize that the world of Ventura belongs to our world, and belongs to our world with its greatness.

Ventura on the screen is an image that results from of a kind of assemblage, one that is obviously beyond the character and beyond himself. Ventura represents himself as well as the character that Pedro Costa constructed, linking old and new characters from the Fontainhas neighbourhood (in *Bones* and *In Vanda’s Room*). Ventura works as a symbol. In *Colossal Youth*, he is gentlemanlike and a social outcast, comparable to Chaplin’s character. He’s a tall, elegant man with almost affected mannerisms. He wears a dark suit and a white shirt, and is always filmed slightly twisted in a low-angle shot that asserts his presence in every scene. Ventura is the yardstick on which images are measured; he indicates the dimension of their space.

As a sleepwalker, Ventura's eyes seem to look into time, into the interior of time. And the film goes from Ventura now, in present time, and Ventura at the time of the 25 April Revolution in Portugal, in 1974 — it goes from one to the other without causal determinations related to the action.

This passage from one time to another as the film unfolds, acquires an independent generative power: for example, it resurrects Lento, the character that accompanies Ventura. He's a character who died electrocuted by deflecting electricity, in the layer of the past, at the time of the 25 April Revolution, but returns in the present time layer, reciting now the same letter that Ventura is repeatedly reciting throughout the film. It is the strength of this composition that elevates Ventura's figure and life to a mythical dimension. It remains and leaves behind vestiges of a sonic and visual kind. Subsequently, cinema becomes the depository of this memory that a *song* attracts and concentrates. With respect to *Colossal Youth*, the film brings back — it restitutes — what people lose when they move to new homes with bare white walls that stop the flow of the figures — "in the houses of the departed there are lots of figures to see" (says Ventura to one of his children) —, putting an end to that specific story and life.

In *Horse Money*, both *Colossal Youth* concentration and fragmentation have increased. There are all kinds of coincidences and clashes between the past and the present in *Horse Money* that emerge in a form of *glossolalia* with voices bringing back memories from everywhere. An example is the scene at the elevator, with Ventura and a 25 April Revolution soldier, who is completely mummified and transformed into a golden statue.

And, by inserting Jacob Riis' images at the very beginning of *Horse Money*, what relations are made tangible? Of course, they are a kind of introduction or a guide to what comes next in the film. But at the same time, they serve as a counterpoint and even a confrontation with Pedro Costa's images — that is to say, if Pedro Costa does something of the kind and presents a social situation by putting his own images in relation to Riis's images, he does something else and in a different way: he creates a kind of time bomb, he displaces the historical power of Riis's images by bringing them to present time. In this way, he makes them share the power of art. *Horse Money* intercedes through Riis' images, re-evaluates them while, at the same time, these images expand *Horse Money* with a breath of the past.

As a filmmaker, Pedro Costa is an architect of time. In *Horse Money*, it is a mythical architecture that intensively sets up the 'today' of now with repeated passages between the lower and upper areas. Time is here rebuilt through space; space is here rebuilt through time — as in Ventura's visit to the ruined factory, when he telephones the secretary and his boss, Master Ernesto, in a time that couldn't be present time. In the elevator scene, voices of several people and of all times — sometimes in a chorus — can be heard; also the voice of Ventura in and off; and also his body as a crossroads of time, as in that tremendous image

of the scars of cuts on his head, which are at a certain moment clearly visible when Ventura bends down. And this is not a time that is linked with confusion or delirium; this is the time constructed by the film, which composes the warp of this mental and historical landscape so this cinema also becomes a sculptural and a funerary art: a tomb of the present so that it should last.

And Pedro Costa, with his filmed statues, seems to be telling us precisely that those people (Ventura and Vitalina) are living monuments, statues in motion in the film. Here again, this carving includes the work with sound: the documents read and heard in the film also have to do with this sculptural art (this procedure prolongs the recitations of the previous film); they are statements, they are the registration of the basic facts of one's life, the pedestal of one's life: Vitalina's birth certificate, Vitalina's husband's death certificate, Vitalina's marriage certificate. These certificates are typically written in an anonymous and bureaucratic style, but they are also remarkable in that they refer objectively to a life — like that simple teardrop that at one moment runs down Vitalina's cheek almost at the end of the reading of her birth certificate, and seems to solidify — this tear is like lava — like the lava of the volcano's eruption in Cape Verde at the beginning of *Down to Earth* (1994)⁵. And also we have to say that the immediate power of the image in *Horse Money* comes from its beauty. It's a force that comes from the distorted and tactile quality of space, from this "non-organic life of things" (Deleuze), a kind of non-psychological Expressionism, which the image creates and reveals. And, of course, from *tenebrism* — black as "the colour that surrounds us" (Bénard da Costa 2009, 27) and other colours, like red luminescence; also the strong contrast with light, where black and white become true colours; or a located over-exposure (white as a colour once more, or even a window in cinema. Maybe a window that turns back towards the interior — an opaque window, like windows in *Horse Money*; in addition to signs of the haptic quality of the image (skin, hands), there are the haptic qualities of sound (Vitalina whispering). And from Vitalina's whisperings, we get to the voices that will occupy every inch of space, in the elevator scene — and then, at the end, we come to a word that only a lamentation and a song can lift.

We must highlight here another of Pedro Costa's cries of indignation, now during the interview with Mark Peranson:

"...the film plays itself in an everlasting present. At least this elevator is a machine that says: 'you leave now!' and 'you are a prisoner of your present'. And 'you will die in the present'. 'You will die now, you will suffer now...'" (Peranson, 2014)

The aesthetics of intercession is based on this belief — and here, in the artist's belief in the relationship between the elevator and our world, that makes the world exist. And so this belief becomes a kind of foundation of an aesthetics of intercession — we begin to understand what Rosellini meant and Deleuze expressed in his own way:

The less human the world is, the more it is the artist's duty to believe and to produce belief in a relation between man and the world, because the world is made by men. (Deleuze 1985, 222)

Obviously, the aesthetics of intercession it is not an aesthetics of a work of art, which would always be more or less prescriptive; it's perhaps more an aesthetics of the artist who wants to make a work of art with the world that he films.

What kind of elevator is the one in *Horse Money*? We have Ventura and the soldier of the 25 April Revolution. "The united people will win defeated", Ventura screams ironically, instead of Revolution slogan "The united people will never be defeated" (Costa 2017). We are before a dead-end present time in this elevator, which one has to feel as such — as a dead-end. No doubt, it is necessary to believe in the present time of this world in order for this extreme suffocation to be felt. Let's say that we have here two characters (Ventura and the soldier) that are unable to respond automatically to the present. It is not easy to think about this and we cannot but be astonished at the painstaking work of the filmmaker, beautiful and sublime at the same time. We are, above all, powerless and even more so if we make this present time our own present time — if we turn this present into our present.

We must believe — on the first place, we must believe that the filmmaker is not kidding; we become very aware that he is undoubtedly in as great or even greater difficulty than we are given that he did the work. We have to realise that he can do a work like this not because he believes in an idea about the person but because he believes in that person, in the world of that person, and in the belonging of 'that' world to our world.

Regarding Valentina (both the person and the character, again), the documents she reads are like the pedestals of a lifetime, like we suggest already. The "speech act" — the sound, the voice of Valentina — acquires autonomy, it does not depend on the visual image, and becomes a "sound image" — according to the concept of Deleuze, it is the very act by which the *spoken* becomes autonomous. And, here, the "sound image" has the solidity of a stone, or it turns into stone the (visual) image to which is attached. As Deleuze says, considering the effect of this autonomy of the spoken word:

The visual image becomes *archaeological, stratigraphic, tectonic*. Not that we are taken back to prehistory (there is an archaeology of the present), but to the deserted layers of our time which bury our phantoms; to the lacunar layers which we juxtaposed according to variable orientations and connections. (Deleuze 1985, 317)

The image is related not only to a surface, but also, through the surface, to that which is underneath. It is the idea of the shot as a tomb, whose strength derives from what is "buried", or from what doesn't show up. And here the visual image is — or the deserted layers, or the lacunar layers are — of a face.

What is this? Yes, it is someone who exists. And

because *Vitalina has life*, film creates a powerful life with that. The whisper event in the film is not only for reasons of closeness to the viewer-listener, as if it were a secret, a whisper spread with fear — it is rather a breath that comes from a long distance, and that is spread by the earth, it is rather the voices, these mute cries of the dead, or our cries — "The air is full of our cries. (*He listens*.) But habit is a great deadener." (Vladimir, in *Waiting for Godot*, closed to the end of the play.)

For Valentina, a poem:
"Harlem" (Langston Hughes)

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Endnotes

¹ Costa, Pedro, Neyrat, Cyril, Rectos, Andy 2012. *Um Melro Dourado, Um Ramo de Flores, Uma Colher de Prata. Conversa com Pedro Costa*. Midas Filmes | Orfeu Negro, Lisboa: pp.37-38. In the aesthetics of Gilles Deleuze, the intolerable is also linked to the artistic creation in its relation to the world. Like he says, in *L'image-temps*: "For it is not in the name of a better or truer world that thought captures the intolerable in this world, but, on the contrary, it is because this world is intolerable that it can no longer think a world or think itself. The intolerable is no longer a serious injustice, but the permanent state of a daily banality. (...) Which, then, is the subtle way out? To believe, not in a different world, but in a link between man and the world, in love or life, to believe in this as in the impossible, the unthinkable, which none the less cannot but be thought: 'something possible, otherwise I will suffocate'." (Deleuze 1985, 221 - words from the translation by Hugh Tomlinson and Roberta Galeta, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*. The Athlon Press, London, 1989, pp.169-170.)

² And for him, this is the primary function of cinema — *to make us feel that something isn't right* — that's a formulation developed in "A closed door that leaves us guessing", transcription of a seminar given at Sendai, Japan (Ogawa, Tsuchida 2005).

³ Chafes, Rui 2015. *Sob a Pele – conversas com Sara Antónia Matos*. Atelier-Museu Júlio Pomar, Lisboa: p.67. "Fragility is our way of opening to the truth of the world. Wounds are a gift. It is from them that the work arises, because it is from them that the artist feeds." (Words of Paulo Pires do Vale, in a text for the exhibition "A minha fraqueza é muito forte" [*My weakness is very strong*, 2011], by Rui Chafes.)

⁴ This idea of an image that implies compromise (from the viewer, from the filmmaker) comes to us from Maria Filomena Molder's reflexions on the relationship between art (and the artist) and world, which lies on a construction generated in the come and go between "to describe the world as it is" and "to describe the world like one's wishes and fears" — when she speaks about a word to which is inherent the searching and the compromise. (Molder, Maria Filomena 2005. *O Absoluto que Pertence à Terra*. Vendaval, Lisboa, — the chapter "O brilho do irracional na arte: descrever o mundo como se deseja e teme.")

⁵ “We did three takes, and she cried each take”, says Pedro Costa about the scene (Peranson, 2014)

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