

# Community and expropriation: alterity paths in Pedro Costa's cinema<sup>a</sup>

## *A comunidade na expropriação: modos de alteridade no cinema de Pedro Costa*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper discuss the modes of alterity evidenced by the structural elements of *Ossos* (1997), *No quarto da Vanda* (2000) and *Juventude em marcha* (2006), directed by Pedro Costa. In describing and analyzing the film forms chosen to construct bridges between the bodies, valuing the constant exposure to the other, we try to present how the cinema of Costa constitutes a community intrinsic to the expropriation. The article chooses a comparative bias between Costa's films and those of filmmakers who influenced him, such as John Ford and Yasujiro Ozu, in addition to the brief reference to works by Van Gogh and Courbet, artists who share visual motives and, we believe, a common social sensitivity to the director.

**Keywords:** Community, human figure, cinema, Pedro Costa

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### RESUMO

O artigo discute os modos de alteridade evidenciados pelos elementos estruturais de *Ossos* (1997), *No quarto da Vanda* (2000) e *Juventude em marcha* (2006), de Pedro Costa. Ao descrever e analisar as formas filmicas escolhidas para construir vias de acesso entre os corpos em cena, valorizando a constante exposição ao outro, busca-se apresentar como o cinema do realizador português constitui uma comunidade intrínseca à expropriação. O artigo opta por um viés comparatista entre os filmes de Costa e os de cineastas que o influenciaram, como John Ford e Yasujiro Ozu; para além da breve consulta a obras de Van Gogh e Gustave Courbet, artistas que compartilham motivos visuais e, acreditamos, uma sensibilidade social comum com o diretor.

**Palavras-chave:** Comunidade, figura humana, cinema, Pedro Costa

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<sup>1</sup> André Guimarães Brasil (2016), for example, has reflected on the community in films in *Video nas Aldeias*, based on the notions of cosmopolitics and the “cinema community” – the latter coined by César Guimarães (2015).

<sup>2</sup> We have mentioned at least two doctoral theses that analyze Costa’s cinema from this perspective, that of Olivier Cheval (2016) and that of Daniel Ribeiro Duarte (2018). The latter defends a community built, among other ways, by the relationship between the director and the residents of Fontainhas.

<sup>3</sup> On Ford and Ozu as references for his cinema, see, for example, Costa (2007). Concerning Van Gogh and Courbet, at least as far as we know, the director makes no direct reference. The choice to include them in a comparative analysis is not intended to preserve the influence of painters on the filmmaker. Moreover, the objective is to resort to a formal proximity in order to identify semantic correspondences in the political way of figuring alterity. In this way, using comparison as a tool for mutual illumination of the works from both artists and the director.

<sup>4</sup> In the trilogy, there is a change between the first film and the last two. While *Bones* (1997) is based on a script and unfolds through a découpage that prioritizes the narrative based on the characters’ dramatic action, *In Vanda’s Room* (2000) and *Colossal Youth* (2006) resort to strategies that enhance “The reality effect” (Barthes, 1968), or perhaps the “risk of the real” (Comolli, 2008); that is, the approach to a given historical-social reality from what escapes the ordering of conventional narrative structures. These are choices that correspond

THE COMMUNITY WAS and has been a topic frequently visited by politically engaged filmmakers, either because of the resistance shown in face of what tantalizes it or because of the fragility that sometimes constitutes it. Regardless of the reasons that guide film production, one aspect seems to resurface: the refusal of certain works to trace a peremptory ontology, a precise definition of what a community is, preferring to question its nature, to scrutinize the limits that compose it, to unfold its forms of survival through scenarios at all times contrary to its existence. This hypothetical cross-section may be present in a line, certainly imaginary, that would bring together proposals as distant as those of John Ford, Peter Watkins, Jorge Sanjinés, the Dardenne brothers, Pedro Costa, Nicolas Klotz, directors of the Video in the Villages project<sup>1</sup>, among many others. As a part of their productions, and without renouncing their respective historicity, a question seems fundamental: after all, what is a community when it comes to cinema?

The reflection we propose here does not claim to answer such question assertively, nor to recover the testimonies of the aforementioned filmmakers. The objective is, indeed, to analyze stylistic procedures that underpin the ethical proposal or, at least, the sketch of a community supported by expropriation, specifically in the cinema of the Portuguese Pedro Costa. Although his work has acquired canonical aspects in a certain type of cinema and academic cycles, inspiring constant reflections on the theme of the community<sup>2</sup>, we believe that little attention was paid to certain ways of figuring alterity, essential for the formation of community ties in the Fontainhas trilogy: *Bones* (1997), *In Vanda’s Room* (2000) and *Colossal Youth* (2006). The purpose of this article is to dwell on such modes and discuss them from the repetition of structural elements inside these works: the composition of the image organized in pairs of characters, the ritual of sitting at the table, the passing figures and, finally, the signs of expropriation. Along with this, the analysis will be supported by a comparative tone, comparing Costa with influential filmmakers for his work, such as John Ford and Yasujiro Ozu; and with modernist painters, such as Vincent Van Gogh and Gustave Courbet, with whom the Portuguese cinema shares certain visual motifs and, above all, a common social sensibility<sup>3</sup>.

In the mentioned trilogy, Costa films Cape Verdean immigrants and other residents of the Fontainhas slum, in Lisbon<sup>4</sup>. Along with the social misery in which they live, there are solidarity gestures, the brotherhood created in meetings and within the coexistence between neighbors. As of *In Vanda’s Room* (2000), such social fabric is threatened by the destruction of the slum due to an order from the Lisbon Chamber. Residents are relocated to a housing development in the Casal da Boba, a popular housing neighborhood, in a transfer process that concludes in *Colossal Youth* (2006). From one film to another, especially in

the last two, space demolition threatens to fracture the community experience. Residents will be separated from the territory that preserves their personal and collective memories. At the same time, an atomization of the collective body precipitates, since not everyone accepts this change, choosing to look elsewhere for a place to live. It is in this scenario of vulnerability that Costa's cinema engages in darning and exposes the intricacies that make up community ties.

Before the analysis itself, it is important to recall that the theme of the community has received renewed attention in the field of Western European philosophy in recent decades. The launch of Jean-Luc Nancy's *La communauté désœuvrée* in 1986 motivated a series of subsequent works, such as those written by Maurice Blanchot, Giorgio Agamben, and Roberto Esposito. The territory that some of these authors explore crosses, to a certain extent, one of the fundamental questions for Nancy (1986/1999), namely: how to define the terms of a community in the modern world, without the myths of yore, without an identity essence, without repeating the same risks of collective proposals of the twentieth century, whose common ideal motivated the exclusion of what is different, being at the root of the violence and intolerance of certain totalitarian states? The reflection is broader and more complex, and its understanding follows its own path, according to the author. We mention it exclusively to point out that our proposal does not seek a starting point or an arrival point in such a philosophical field, a path chosen by other Costa analysts<sup>5</sup> The analysis in the following pages, as will be seen, touches writings of Esposito (2000, 2009) only once, without, however, allowing himself to be immanent in the intricate network he weaves. The preference will be for the construction of an argument based on the melee with the films.

to the reduction of the film crew and the cinematographic apparatus, allowing greater intimacy between the director and the cast. There is a constant crossing between strategies associated with documentary and fiction. More than placing the films in such categorizations, we are interested in understanding how the experience is being interpreted or lived by the residents of Fontainhas in front of the camera, going through a work of figuration, audiovisual conformation by which reality is subjected to formal choices, and potentialized by them.

<sup>5</sup>The case of works already cited by Olivier Cheval (2016) and Daniel Ribeiro Duarte (2018).

## THE PAIRS, OR THE UNITY OF COMPOSITE SKETCH

A programmatic data from the Fontainhas trilogy allows a specification for the first movement of alterity in Costa's films: a body is rarely alone on the scene. Observation is not the most inventive, as a matter of fact, but the simplicity of such evidence should not obscure the promise being revealed. If the renouncement of a numerous presence of bodies in those films and the preference for a composition in pairs possibly have to do with visual purification and the importance given to the dialogues, its centrality in Costa also signals a poetic founded on what is built between two or more human figures. Everything is there.

At first, these are pairs. There are many in *In Vanda's Room* (2000). Vanda and Nhurro. Nhurro and Crutches. Zita and Vanda. Russo and Nhurro. Vanda and the flower seller. Nhurro and Zita. The same arrangement continues in *Colossal Youth* (2006), with a difference being delimited by the protagonist's

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inescapable presence, a kind of fixed coefficient that reduces variations and imposes a pattern. Ventura and Vanda. Ventura and the “daughter”. Ventura and Nhurro. Ventura and the “son”. Ventura and Lento. This rigidity of the scheme is smaller in *Bones* (1997), but it still consists of the composition in pair basis, the harbinger of its future appearances. Let’s observe two moments in the film.

In the first one, Clotilde smokes cigarettes near a bus stop, from where the neighborhood residents walk past at the end of the day, after the workday. She waits for a friend and neighbor, Tina, a mother who tried to kill her own son and herself because of poverty. The wait is not a smooth one, either because of Tina’s last actions and her mood, or because of Clotilde’s expression, which is invariably rigid and circumspect in her silence. Her face, under watchful, impassive tension, looks, more than any other in *Bones* (1997), used to the ungrateful demands of everyday life. While waiting, another neighbor approaches, tries to talk and offers her a piece of bread that she brings with her. Clotilde remains faithful to the reserve and silence vote: she says nothing, refuses the offer with her eyes and continues to smoke as if she were alone, framed by her thoughts. And then, in an atypical behavior for a film in which until then the characters either suffer the bitter everyday with hardness or walk around convalescent corners, the neighbor makes fun of this waiting. She does this once, twice, three times and then, unexpectedly, Clotilde starts laughing. The neighbor follows her.

The second moment happens at the end of the film, when Clotilde visits Tina. She finds her sleeping. She wakes her up and goes to the kitchen, where, it seems, she prepares something for the two of them to eat. In the room, they don’t exchange a single word. They have their backs to each other. The friendly moment is impregnated by the same ambience charged with the other scenes. However, something happens. In an awkward movement of Tina when carrying a pot, the two characters end up colliding and the food falls to the floor. None of them know how to react. Tina had spent the entire film in melancholy and looking sleepy. Clotilde, confined in her already described seriousness. They are two personalities unable to respond to a situation that in another context would be natural in their total prosaism. The silence remains and becomes heavier for what the previous scenes have already warned: in this film, one must always expect the worst. But things take a different turn. The characters move towards the doorway, approaching the camera. Tina looks at her friend with a smile on her lips, looking for a complicity that is denied. With a certain delay, the smile comes. Clotilde bursts out laughing. Tina does the same. The joy does not last and they soon return to their respective masks of apathy and seriousness.

There is no difficulty in perceiving the strict correspondence both in the course and in the direction. The beginning of each scene is marked by the suffocating

ambience of *Bones* (1997). Similar to the other two films in the Fontainhas slum, asphyxiation is due to both the material poverty and the predominance of closed spaces. The point of view rarely allows seeing what is outside the buildings. In *Colossal Youth* (2006), even the visible windows are so overexposed that they only circumscribe white opacity. They are more for walls than for an extension of what is seen<sup>6</sup>. The cloister of the other films exists even when showing the neighborhood streets, surrounded by walls and with no visibility to the sky. *Bones*, less radical in this sense, contains one or another more open shot capable of locating the image of bodies widely. But in general, and especially in *In Vanda's Room* (2000) and in *Colossal Youth* (2006), one dives into a closed reality and architecture. The shot is a prison<sup>7</sup>. Considering this, the two described scenes of *Bones* reveal a breach, the main and sometimes only opening to which one is entitled in Costa's films: the other.

If in the Fontainhas films it is not possible to count on the State or even any type of public policy outside the neighborhood, an intrapolitical policy for solidarity among residents is established in compensation. Costa will systematically unfold this network of mutual support based on plans made up of two and three figures in *In Vanda's Room* (2000) and in *Colossal Youth* (2006). Filmed with long takes and with fixed cameras, the bodies are framed in autonomous images. They are linked to the plot, of course, but they carry a strong unity in themselves, like small independent universes. Nothing disturbs this type of composition: figures do not enter the field, the camera does not move and there are no actions that break out, requiring the removal of the painting, or even the rearrangement of the bodies. The compositional austerity certainly has something of a portrayed inflection, a descriptive appeal in Costa<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, it affirms the shot as a unit maintained based on the relationship established between two bodies, marked by a closure that is less alienation before the world than the attempt to recover a protection within each image, a sufficiency and even a refuge cemented on the fraternity. Nothing should interrupt that drive. The montage only happens to announce another scene. Given these conditions, Costa's films point towards an important director for his work, Ozu.

A recurring composition in the cinema of the Japanese director resonates with Costa's doubles. These are *sojikei*, or similar figures (Bordwell, 1988). Present since at least *Tokyo Chorus* (1931), it refers to a shot with two characters, side by side, standing with the same posture or performing the same gestures rhythmically and synchronously, in a kind of kinetic arabesque. In addition to functioning in the composition of gags and visual rhymes, mirroring gestures reflect the understanding of what exists between two figures, as it happens between husband and wife in *Tokyo Chorus*, between father and son in *There Was a Father* (1942), and between the two sisters of *The End of summer* (1961).

<sup>6</sup> See more about the debate concerning the window as staring expansion in Jacques Aumont (1989).

<sup>7</sup> About the reality that imposes itself as a prison in Costa's films, see Mateus Araújo Silva (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Regarding the relationship between the pictorial portrait and the audiovisual, see Oliveira Júnior (2017). Specifically about the portrait plan in Pedro Costa's cinema, see Costa Júnior (2018).

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In the last of the aforementioned films, Noriko and Akiko, the younger and older sisters, respectively, are pressured by the family to marry. If the first is entering an age suitable for marriage, the second is a widow and mother who the family fears will no longer get a husband. Under the unity, there is a polarization: they share the same moment, but in diametrically opposite positions. In her conversations, Akiko will try to share with her sister the importance of following her own feelings regardless of parental and social imperatives. She herself refuses to accept the suitors suggested by the family, preferring the right to decide, either on someone who really pleases her, or on loneliness. It is in this way that, in two scenes, Akiko and Noriko appear figuratively mirrored. First, during a family trip. While relatives were talking about possible marriages, both talk about their respective suitors. None seems truly comfortable with the imposed situation, an identification that will be emphasized by the alignment of these figures. The gestures will be rigorously and perfectly synchronous in their development: the steps, the looks, the *seiza* sitting and standing up.

More decisive for what it is intended to be highlighted here is the second *sojikei*, at the end of the film, when the head of the family dies. Again, the two sisters move away from their relatives for a moment of intimacy. The gestural mirroring expresses not only two characters experiencing the same situation, but a more solid and long-lived connection: the transmission of the experience. Under the impact of death and, therefore, under the sign of ephemerality that imposes itself, Noriko finally understands the importance of Akiko's words in respecting her own desire, although in contradiction to the family's will. While in the previous *sojikei* the clothes marked a difference between them, in the latter case, dressed in mourning, the horizontality is evident: the figures are in visual and gestural unison, but also in their respective social positions. In the scene, the passage of time from the family head death marks the rupture between tradition and modernity. The change from the past to the current generation is accompanied, from the socially imposed matrimonial rite to the union by individual desire. What exposes the communication of new values is the sharing of such gesture.

Ozu's excellent compositional rigor is far removed from Costa's work. Both resort to fixed shots and a certain moderation of the human figure, but the sovereign control of the former over every minimal visible aspect would not serve the type of realism proposed by the latter, in his attempt to work the staging in correspondence with a certain welcoming of places and the respect for the verisimilitude of the people being filmed. The way in which the doubles appear, however, suggests an ethical affinity between the filmmakers. A body that appears next to another in the Fontainhas films does not show the mere shared

presence of a space, nor will it engender an event resulting from the meeting. There is a greater sense. Being together is equivalent to the experience and, despite the difference between the figures, finding something in common. Everyday life is invented in sharing. Close to Ozu, this micro history takes place at home and in the neighborhood, among the solidary bonds that are created in them.

### AT THE TABLE

The composition in pairs – sometimes in trios – shows a branching principle in Costa. Instead of a bodily unity, there is a dilution and constant expansion of the human figure towards a collective identity and belonging. In addition to the pairs, the visual dynamics based on body extension continues with a reason that has spread in the filmmaker's work since *Down to earth* (1994): to sit at the table. What is revealed from there underlines the figure from its social and economic state, by the concrete reality and by a series of factors that conjure up the presence within the material world. However, what could be so expressive about sitting at the table? First, it is necessary to recognize the uniqueness of the action. In Costa's films, one is not at any table, but at the poor man's table. This has relevance to the second point: sitting there is not a fluke or a culturally hermetic ritual, but a necessity and especially a pleasure. Before justifying the statement, let us start with a look at this visual motif in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and in two modern paintings, Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* (1885), and *After Dinner at Ornans*, by Courbet (1849). Such a pathway critically informs us about issues also present in Fontainhas films.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), Tom Joad (Henry Fonda) receives his parole and returns to Oklahoma. Due to the Great Depression and the loss of their land, their large family is leaving for California in search of jobs and better living conditions. Tom's arrival happens during breakfast, when relatives are around the table. The space is wide and crowded with furniture and objects on all sides. Different generations are seated, from children to the elderly. Chairs for some, stools for others. During the scene, the elderly couple begins to argue: the woman makes fun of her husband for eating on the sly, during the prayer for breakfast. There is a commotion between the two that softens the atmosphere. Despite being forced to leave their lands, they are hopeful about moving to California.

The first mark that emerges in the staging is the little importance given to the individual body. The disposition of figures in concomitant actions around a table certainly has to do with the predilection for the long shot. However, it must be understood that the essential supplements one or another individual behavior, starting to subsist in social life. Ford uses the following devices: passing

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the food to someone on the other side of the table, establishing a circularity between the bodies; the distribution of work that delimits the separation between genders and associates the female figure with the responsibility for cooking and the care in serving; the presence of different generations that interact and live harmoniously; the occasion being a social rite that exposes intimacy between family members. The scene aligned with the comment of the historian Luce Giard (1996) regarding the importance of food to strengthen, sediment the social links: “Eating, in fact, serves not only to maintain the biological machinery of the body, but to make concrete one of the specific modes of relation between a person and the world, thus forming one of the fundamental landmarks in space-time” (p. 250). Or even its complement, on cooking: “basic, humble, and persistent practice that is repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one’s self by the ‘family saga’ and the history of each” (p. 218).

*The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) transforms the act of being around the table, gathering for the meal, in a rite that unfolds a series of continuities between the bodies. Except for the distinction between the genders for the role assumed by the female figure, the scene gathers signs of horizontality that go from long shots and, therefore, from a differentiated *mise en scène* for each character, to the circular disposition of the members around the table; socialization between different generations, sharing the same environment and time as equals, the climate of communion in which everyone strives to maintain an environment of conviviality and harmony. The table mediates the respective individualities and the space of the common.



Figure 1. *Potato eaters*, by Van Gogh (1885).



Figure 2. *After Dinner at Ornans*, by Gustave Courbet (1849).

As in Ford, Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* (1885) also focuses on a peasant family around a table. In this genre scene in Nuenen, in the Netherlands, one of the painter's first important works, the brownish and almost homogeneous tones establish a continuity between the bodies, potatoes, clothes and walls of the house, as if everything there was made up of the same subject. There is a famous quote by Van Gogh (1986), inspired by Millet, in which he says he tried to compose the figure of the peasants as if painted with the very land they sowed. The tonal aspect also creates a certain stagnation. The chromatic pattern plunges the image into a layer with few rhythmic variations, as if the duration was frozen.

The color and the other factors listed certainly contribute to the impression of both static time and austerity. Nevertheless, it is necessary to think about the other side of the screen, the human. The rigid modeling of the bodies and the carved physiognomic features give the image a solidity. The two figures at the both ends, the one on the left with a distant circumspection, the one on the right with his head down to serve the coffee, suggest a hardness that a detail confirms: the hands. Their rough and rugged aspect exposes the physical relationship with work, revealing the difficult social experience. In contrast, being at the table is, as in the Ford film, finding a break from toil and everyday life. The weight revealed by the bodies and reinforced by the dark and tonal color palette is softened by the moment of fraternization, which shares the humble ambience and the signs of horizontality with *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940).

A final, brief detour is by Courbet's *After Dinner at Ornans* (1849). The image differs from the scenes previously mentioned due to the autonomy of each figure, dispersed in space, and the subject of representation: no longer the peasant or the

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<sup>9</sup> In the original:  
“l'autobiographie commence  
quand des amis se réunissent  
au coin du feu, quand toute  
une bourgade se rassemble au  
cimetière ; quand l'expérience,  
sous une forme banale et  
ancestrale, devient unique”  
This and other translation of  
the author.

poor, but bourgeois – the painter, the father and friends – who live in the countryside. Realism, which abstains from a figuration of the pastoral field and from archetypal figures in their anonymity, is rooted in the tension between banal forms of life and particular faces, in the social rite objectified by private practice: “autobiography begins when friends gather around the fire, when an entire village is in the cemetery; when the experience, in banal and ancestral form, becomes unique”<sup>9</sup> (Clark, 2007, p. 148). Within an ordinary occasion, between dinner and the moment of going to sleep, the light of friends in their particular and universal intimacy.

Let us then return to the meetings around a table at Costa's cinema. A mapping of the reason in Fontainhas films would start with *Bones* (1997), when the nurse receives the poor people at her kitchen table to feed them and there to initiate an attempt to get closer to their respective universes. *Colossal Youth* (2006) is even more systematic. Ventura appears several times at the table with those he believes to be his “children”. He picks them up at work to have lunch together. With Vanda, he experiences silence and sadness over Zita's death. With Lento, at work, he listens to music, plays cards or recites a letter he wrote to the woman who stayed in Cape Verde. Next to one of the “daughters,” who after successive refusals accepted her fatherhood, he had chicken for lunch. This last scene is a synthesis of what such meetings at the table represent, as it is not clear whether the “daughter” really believes that Ventura is her father or whether she simply recognizes the need for or is convinced of the pleasure of being able to experience similar sharing.



Figures 3 and 4. Ventura shares the table with Vanda (left) and his “daughter” (right), in *Colossal Youth* (2006).

In *In Vanda's Room* (2000) the table is replaced with a bed and the meal with drugs. The exception is Nhurro's home. There, friends gather to use heroin at the table, where they recall personal stories: episodes of theft, even when they

bitter a few coins in their pockets; sleeping in shelters that would be set on fire; the fear of dying in poverty (“We, the shitty ones, never die”)<sup>10</sup>; the relationship with the mothers; the greed from those who give them alms and so on. Always in evidence in the image, even when nothing happens on it, the table endures as a reliquary of the meetings. On its surface, traces of drugs and poverty: a bottle of water, syringes and other materials for preparing and consuming heroin. Everything is very tangible, as it was also on the table in *The Potato Eaters* (Van Gogh, 1885). A kind of object synthesis of a miserable socioeconomic state, the table also beckons to a collective power. In the dark, when doors and windows are closed to consume heroin by candlelight, it is around the table the narratives take place, the transmission of an oral memory, the thickening of the collective ritual experience. Figuratively, such scenes dilute individual bodies in the gloom. Anatomical traces and the sound of voices murmuring stories move and occupy the plane in a phantasmagoric manner. Physical integrity disappears on behalf of a collective permanence framed by the visual horizontality of darkness – even more radical than Van Gogh’s tonality. A turbid fabric encompasses the figures together, creating an imaginary re-creation of the experienced sharing.

<sup>10</sup> Quote from a dialogue between Nhurro and Muletas.

Costa, like Ford, Van Gogh, and Courbet, makes the meeting around a table a rite of social relation sedimentations. Although food preparation and feeding are almost always neglected, there is an affective investment or a certain kind of intimacy whose effect is the warp between individuals, similar to that suggested by the previous comment by Luce Giard (1996). Integration depends to a great extent on what has been said about the uniqueness of the table of the poor, present both in Costa and in two of the other examples mentioned. Faced with the other expropriations, in a small house, with modest tables and humble people, it is there that the body is able to abandon its own dramas and that of an individual existence in order to, away from the dark hours, share a collective pleasure.

The meeting around the table in Fontainhas films coincides with what is most personal or sometimes most painful for each character on the scene. The signs of horizontality listed in Ford and Van Gogh are also there, but according to Costa’s poetics: fixed long shot simultaneously framing two or three bodies, never separating them by the field/counterfield scheme, the different generations at the table, the alignment moods, fraternization and, above all, intimacy strengthened by the transmission of experience. Specifically, on Nhurro’s table, the darkness of the image is also incorporated as a mantle that overlaps uniformly over the groups.

As for Courbet, it is true that the social class and the deprivation of its figures are nothing like the hierarchy and gestural restraint of the miserable in Costa’s films. *After dinner at Ornans* (Courbet, 1849) was evoked, because,



more than any other example, there it is visible on the faces of the characters the pleasure of a time in suspension, the pleasant enjoyment of a fraternal moment. A similar cut in reality for the benefit of what happens between two bodies is at the very basis of Costa's encounters. Laughter is rarer and gestures are more rigid, but the pleasure of socializing is close. There is also a personification in Courbet's canvas, given the abandonment of archetypal models in favor of real figures. Perhaps it is a little reckless to point out as a correspondent, but Costa does the same when choosing real people to stage his films, endowing universal situations with a strong peculiarity.

A question that could be addressed to Costa's cinema in comparison with the works of the other artists mentioned is: where are the families or the numerous figures around the table? Why restrict them to two or at most three people? The hypothesis lies in a possible loss of parental relationships: the main family of *Bones* (1997) is in danger of separating because they barely have money to feed their newborn child; in *In Vanda's Room* (2000), except for the protagonist who lives with her mother, what is known is the difficulty of the main characters to reunite with their parents, as they generally feel ashamed of whom they have become and the difficult life they lead. In this disaggregation, the family is replaced by a brotherhood, a common policy among the neighbors. Instead of a large table made up of relatives who live together, there are visits from one resident to another.

### **CHARACTERS PASSING BY: DOORS, WINDOWS, GESTURE AND THE SOUND AROUND IT**

In the Fontainhas trilogy, apart from scenes with encounters, the collective figuration follows a vector logic manifested in the director's cinema since *Blood* (1989). It implies the existence of an element that will range towards other characters, narrowing the distance that they preserved among themselves, implying them within a collective existence, aligning them around a common object or destination. The responsible for assuming the design in *Bones* (1997) is the newborn. A living body, but whose existence hangs over the parents like a specter of death, a cursed mark to trigger the drive for destruction, it will be he who creates a space in between, a common medium to be shared by the characters. The baby passes from hand to hand. It connects, narrows and exposes the relationship between the neighborhood residents, as well as establishing contact between the parents and the nurse who, from then on, will feel ethically impelled to help them, feeding them, trying to advise or so only sharing the silence into understanding.

In *In the Vanda's Room* (2000) use of drugs is made as a vector to cross the bodies on stage and to stimulate the creation of an imaginary and ritualistic space in which the physical territory is in the process of being destroyed. The closest to the collective gesture will be the joint involvement in the detailed preparation of crack and heroin, as well as its subsequent consumption. Injection and swallowing are the ways to create connective tissue. There are some narratives through which the experience and the imagination of individuals are based on a collective memory, on a continuity, at first lasting, opposed to the imminent demolition. The extension of one body to another is intrinsic to what threatens and denies life: the depletion of material conditions by poverty and the aggression to the body by drugs. We'll get back to that.

Ventura is perhaps the greatest emblem of vector logic in Costa. His presence in *Colossal Youth* (2006) is figuratively that of a being who travels from one shot to another, going from street to street, from house to house, talking to neighbors whom he calls children, among them establishing a bond, a darning centered on its existence. The community that in *Bones* (1997) and in *In Vanda's Room* (2000) existed by a predominantly negative prism, an extermination of bodies by themselves and by the brute reality that oppresses them, being forged by a living and free aggregating gesture of the destructive drive of previous films.

The vector, then, is shaped in three distinct ways: the body (the newborn and Ventura), the gesture (consumption of drugs, the meals around the table), and the object (drugs). Its operability in the films depends on the creation of passing spatial figures that facilitate communicability by reducing the real and symbolic walls. In other words, the transit of vectors requires the creation of an opening, a breach that allows violating the barriers imposed by spatial/social stratifications and, thus, transgressing what could segregate and alienate the human figure. The first object to assume this function are the doors, which are abundant and almost obsessively spread throughout Costa's filmography. Nhurro's arrival at Vanda's house – filmed as a kind of invasion, given that the visitor opens the door from the outside – shows close attention to the object. Not only by using the detailed shot, but also because after “breaking” the lock, the figure remains on the doorstep, neither inside the room nor outside it. The same “no place” will be assumed by Ventura when he is at one his daughter's house. The door seems to shelter something unusual throughout the Portuguese work<sup>11</sup>. Still Ventura, when visiting the apartment in the Casal da Boba neighborhood, opens and closes, successively and comically, one of the doors, as if attesting to its functionality. Why so much interest? After being displaced, Nhurro appears carrying a bag with his few belongings and. . . a door. Also common are the bodies inside buildings, usually one-bedroom, filmed from an external point of view, through the crack in the door that is ajar.

<sup>11</sup> In a course held at the Tokyo Film School, Costa (2010) mentions the door as an object and metaphor, in order to discuss what cinema delivers to the viewer or, more precisely, what they prefer/can watch.



<sup>12</sup>The director's proximity to the genre should not be surprising, given his constant direct mentions, in interviews and in films, to directors like Jacques Tourneur and Georges Franju.

In order to understand their use as an ambivalent and essential mechanism for the creation of a community, it is necessary to think the doors of Costa's films in the light of fantastic cinema<sup>12</sup>. Among other elements of that genre that is appropriated, the door works as a border device of impediment and communication between worlds. In the Fontainhas films, it is the *one between two*, which often symbolizes the social limbo of the residents, who have no property and thus nowhere to go. They experience a world at the same time that they are outside it, on its edges. Jean-Louis Leutrat (1995) comments on the role that the door plays in fantastic cinema:

Thematically, the door, also a border, is at the same time a place of passage. It defines, closes, delimits the territory. Related to the separation, it works with the bridge, as Georg Simmel realizes. It is closed from the inside, the bridge opens towards the outside. The bridge, like the door, separates, but also sutures: in the version of Dr. Jekyll's story proposed by Rouben Mamoulian, a walkway crosses the space that separates the doctor's laboratory from his apartment; the door, like the bridge, opens, but it also closes: beyond the door, as well as beyond the bridge, there is the country of ghosts<sup>13</sup>. (p. 62)

<sup>13</sup> In the original: "Thématiquement, la porte, elle aussi une frontière, est de même un lieu de passage. Elle définit, enclôt, délimite le territoire. Liée à la séparation, elle fonctionne avec le pont, comme le remarque Georg Simmel. Elle est refermée sur l'intérieur, le pont ouvre vers l'extérieur. Le pont comme la porte sépare, mais il relie: dans la version de l'histoire du Dr Jekyll proposée par Rouben Mamoulian, une passerelle enjambe l'espace qui sépare le laboratoire du docteur à son appartement; la porte comme le pont ouvre, mais elle clôt: au delà du pont, c'est le pays des fantômes".

The purpose of the doors in Costa is aligned with that of the windows, which enhance the permeability between what happens in the private space as well as in the public space. In *Bones* (1997), families are at home in the neighborhood streets. Through the houses, one can see passersby on the street. Of all the films, architecture is perhaps the most evident in this aspect, as it compartments the field in a game of framing and reframing that creates communicating vessels. Through the window: one of the neighbors sees the arrival of the baby, who will secrete everything in the film; Tina meddles during Clotilde's sex with her husband to ask for help. In *Colossal Youth* (2006), Ventura, from the street, speaks to his "daughter" who is inside the house. In *In Vanda's Room* (2000), Russo puts his hand into the kitchen of Vanda's house to ask if her mother doesn't want to buy the bird he found. The windows reinforce the doors as elements of infiltration, dilution or relaxation of the borders that should separate spaces and, consequently, bodies.

Circularity is also triggered by specific reasons that appear in one body and reappear or gain continuity in another. Outside the trilogy, *Down to earth* (1994) has anticipated the practice when the red dress that featured the protagonist appears in another character in the film. The passage of these clothes establishes the connection and the transfer from one body to another. In *Colossal Youth* (2006), before Ventura, the museum's security guard first puts his hands on his

waist in disapproval. When reprimanding the protagonist, sitting in an armchair, the employee makes the protest gesture that Ventura will repeat in the future – in a dynamic of gestural transference common to the cinema of Jacques Tati, another important director for Costa. When it comes to the previous film, Vanda tries to find a lighter to light a crack pipe. Until she finds one that works, she throws dozens of them in a trash can. The montage concatenates the scene with the shot of a hand plunged into darkness holding a lighter in Nhurro's house, establishing an imaginary *raccord*. This continuity between *In Vanda's Room* and Nhurro's room happens both at the level of experience with the drug and through gestural resonance and mirroring.

The circular dynamics still depends on the sound around them, the absence of acoustic insulation in the houses, from where one always hear what goes on outside, preventing the existence of an eminently private space. Finally, the corridors of the Fontainhas neighborhood should be mentioned. They often connect from one house to another in the editing. At the same time, they function as a transit space for Ventura when visiting his children, or Vanda when selling vegetables in the neighborhood. Together, the listed elements represent a shared space, a topography of one another, a network of constant interaction between figures and sounds capable of forging a collective body where only the ruins and the atomization of individuals around their personal miseries could exist.

### COMMUNITY AMONG DISPOSSESSION

In the course developed so far, we have signaled that the films from the Fontainhas trilogy are formally built based on procedures that stimulate contact and the practices of alterity among the neighborhood residents. First, we have presented how the unity of the plane relies on the relationship between two bodies, making such a space a refuge in the face of the enclosure of urban space and material poverty. In this sense, it was important to highlight how the composition in pairs dialogues with the *sojikei* of Ozu's cinema. Subsequently, we continued unfolding the expansion of the networks that connect the bodies from the recurrence of sitting at the table. We discussed the correspondences between Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* (1885) and Courbet's *After Dinner in Ornans* (1849) and Costa's cinema, by transforming the meal and the meeting at the table in a rite of social relationships sedimentation, the abandonment of individual existence and dark hours in favor of collective pleasure. For this, horizontality strategies are used, strengthening the intimacy between characters, as well as the transmission of the experience. That said, it is now necessary to present as a decisive resource for the community or for the

# A

## Community and expropriation

community experience in Pedro Costa's cinema a certain idea of expropriation. It will be it that underlines one last aspect of alterity. First, let us return to Ford's previously discussed film.

One of the scenes from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) synthesizes and takes to the limit the expropriation we have mentioned here. This is the moment when a farmer, accompanied by the sheriff, visits the land where the unemployed, landless, and other miserable people are camped, including the Joad family. He tries to summon workers to harvest the land he has leased. With the announcement made, one of the residents of the camp accuses the farmer of trying to apply a well-known scam, in which a job offer is made without a contract and without salary accuracy. The operation is always the same: the landowners await the arrival of the workers and, in the face of the consistent massive number of those present, as the labor force is plentiful in times of crisis, they decide for a payment below what was initially offered. The scam is revealed, the farmer asks for help from the sheriff, who forges an accusation and tries to arrest the resident who unveiled the scheme. This scene is what matters from then on. In it, the sheriff gets out of the car and walks towards the resident. As he approaches, he is punched by the character, falls to the ground, draws his gun, and shoots. He kills a woman who was not involved in the action, while the target flees away. He tries to hit him with a second shot, but is shot down by the protagonist, Tom Joad, who is assisted by Jim Casy, a former priest who also lives in the camp. When the police reinforcement arrives at the camp to find the culprit for knocking out the sheriff, Jim takes the blame.

The scene expresses a collective gesture that takes shape not only through sequenced actions between various bodies, but also through a kind of figurative exchange that begins with the woman being shot instead of another character. Expropriation is preliminary, extreme, that of the body and that of life itself. Then, in order for the fugitive to escape, Tom Joad strikes the police officer. In order to prevent him to get arrested, Jim takes the blame. Thus, there is a gestural orchestration based on substitution: at first, one body is shot in place of the other, then a character assumes the authorship of a gesture that was not his. The action is carried out aiming to care for others in spite of themselves. The body is no longer merely the sensitive unit of an individual in the world, but the instrument, the tool of a larger body, that of the community. In order to preserve it, to resist the economic and police force that insinuates itself, a sacrificial logic is created. Faced with coercion, men are encouraged to a defense mechanism that, in those conditions of misery, can only occur through the creation of a collective space and action. Sometimes at the expense of themselves.

Is there any coincidence with Costa's film? We know that the Portuguese is a Ford enthusiast and that the universe of the last two Fontainhas films is very close to that of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), especially because of his interest in building a common sphere. Both in Ford and in *In Vanda's Room* (2000), for example, life is dominated by misery and not by freedom. Among these conditions, it will be the absence itself, the nothingness, what is missing or what has been removed from the human figure the axis around which the community is formed. Ford's characters lost their land. Costa's are beginning to be evicted. For both, the dimension of alterity remains as a form of power, an area of action, a way to exist.

An emblematic scene in *In Vanda's Room* (2000), is Nhurro's "invasion" of the protagonist's room, when he opens the door from the outside, without authorization. There is nothing less than the crumbling of the boundaries between two bodies, the self and the other, the flexibility between what should be private and what is public. Doors and retainers are useless. Vanda's private world and the risk of finding her "decomposed"<sup>14</sup> or even indisposed are alleviated by her engagement with her friend in need. This is just another way of designating the essentiality of preserving the other and what they represent. The human figure in itself, the space that should delimit its territory and protect its subjectivity, is punctual, has limited importance.

The communities of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and *In Vanda's Room* (2000) are built on the ephemeral. The shared universe is not rooted in a territory, in a physical space of durability. The distinction between public space is that created by the presence of others, and undone when the cause that brought them together comes to an end could not be applied to films, while the politician would be assured by a city or another tangible place capable of surviving the deeds and the actions of men, standing in the direction of posterity and the next generations<sup>15</sup>. How can we demand that the landless of Ford and the poor in Costa's film have a lasting territory, when they are devoid of a more elementary condition, when both films deal precisely with bodies that have lost their roots, cut off from their lands and homes? Considering a common sphere based on a community network, which in Costa's case takes the form of everyday gestures and rituals (drugs, sitting at the table, dialogues), would it be less political?

There is no need to use instruments or seek a breach in that distinction to understand what is being analyzed on both films, politics exists in another way. The ephemerality surrounds spaces as a result of misery producing a political space, although germinal and precarious, existing between bodies, regardless of physical territory or any other property. The gesture, in partnership with or towards the other, is the cornerstone. If fortuitous in its permanence,

<sup>14</sup> When Nhurro enters, Vanda complains that the risk of the unforeseen visit would be to find her "decomposed".

<sup>15</sup> According to Arendt (1993): "The public space of adventure and enterprise vanishes the moment everything has come to an end, once the army has broken camp and the 'heroes' - which for Homer means simply free men - have returned home. This public space does not become political until it is secured within a city, is bound, that is, to a concrete place that itself survives both those memorable deeds and the names of the memorable men who performed them and thus can pass them on to posterity over generations. This city, which offers a permanent abode for mortal men and their transient deeds and words, is the polis" (p. 54). In a previous work, the author states that, in the strict sense, the existence of a tangible space is relative: "The polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be" (Arendt, 1958/2009, p. 211).



<sup>16</sup> We consulted “Chapter XIII – Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning their Felicity and Misery” (Hobbes, 2003). In order to subsidize our rude reading of Hobbes and in order to understand Esposito’s reference to the author, we have sought support in a work that Norberto Bobbio (1991) dedicates to the English philosopher, in which he clearly and generously exposes the general principles of his political work. According to Bobbio, in Hobbes, the State, as a product of human ingenuity, *artificium* capable of repairing the defective product of nature, is in correspondence with one of the characteristics of Renaissance thought that marked the philosophy of Francis Bacon, Hobbes’ first master: the transformation of the relationship between nature and art. The second starts to be conceived not only as imitation, but as equal to the first, signaling a new evaluation of the things made by man, of his industriousness. Nature is then understood as a great machine, whose laws and mechanisms are capable of being unraveled; upon learning what makes up this “secret”, man is also able to recreate and perfect nature from his own machines. One of them is, for Hobbes, the State.

<sup>17</sup> Especially boasting. Derived from the idea of superiority over the other, and a more visible manifestation of the desire for power, it is at the base of social conflicts (Bobbio, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> When speaking of a “permanent war”, Hobbes understands “not only the state of violent conflict, but also the situation in which the calm is precarious, being ensured only by reciprocal fear, as today we would say ‘deterrence’; or, in short, what would that state be like in which peace is made possible only because of the permanent threat of war” (Bobbio, 1991, p. 37).

it is essential in its function. Visits and the other components of the vector scheme from *In Vanda’s Room* (2000) constitute this connection between the bodies, creating circularity. The crossing between houses is facilitated, as well as communication and dynamics between two figures. An existence based on externality is created. The totality only exists from the other, from a conduct or ethics of self-expropriation, of a charitable nature.

Belonging to the collective requires renunciation of oneself. If we are correct in saying this, the community shares an anti-immune paradigm, against an organization based on the construction of limits and borders, but also on laws that preserve life. Since the vector circularity from *In Vanda’s Room* (2000) reduces the barriers that separate individuals, it also violates the protection, their protection, leaving them exposed. In order to understand better such community, we are tempted to seek a kinship, slight and not absolute, with what Roberto Esposito (2000, 2009) considers the immune project of modern societies, especially the one built in Hobbesian terms. The passage through its formulation will be extremely punctual. Only a fragment of the debate interests us, as inspiration.

Roughly speaking, it is a question of rescuing the community proposal elaborated by Hobbes (2003), in which it depends on the existence of an artificial man, the State<sup>16</sup>. Its primary function is to preserve integrity, to preserve members of society lives. In order to prevent one being from causing harm to another, to prevent individuals, in their state of nature, from surrendering to the passions and the incessant inclination for power<sup>17</sup>, whose danger is that of producing a permanent state of war<sup>18</sup>, an institution is established and artificial protection, a contract that subjugates them to an authority, is drawn up. For Esposito (2000), the creation of this imperative in the form of the Leviathan State “coincides with the dissociation of all community ties, with the abolition of all foreign social relations to the vertical exchange of protection-obedience” (p. 29)<sup>19</sup>. Once the community carries the crime, the possibility of survival lies in the “crime against the community”. What is produced within the collective dimension is rejected, walls are erected before coexistence, the relationship between its members is artificialized to immunize them from the contagion consequences – signaled by the peremptory virtual shadow that hangs over society: death.

Certainly unfair in its sharp conciseness of thought by the aforementioned authors, the mention of a hypothesis of community immunity had a single objective: to illuminate a recurring aspect in films that feature a collective body. In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) or in *In Vanda’s Room* (2000), the figurative community is built precisely on the virtual stain between its members, due to the possible danger of the other, due to the fractures that reside in the relationship of

human figures, in antagonism of any immune policy. Sometimes an environment is created, enabling a rise to individual disputes or solutions. In such conditions, the community establishes itself in spite of everything that attacks it and life, which threatens the integrity and the self-absorption of its members, as if it were possible to constitute it only through resignations, putting it in check, by a bias in the negative limit.

Before ties arise or concomitantly with them, both mentioned films reveal the intrinsic dangers of community living. The Joad family, from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), backs off from the possibility of joining the strike fearing its negative effects. When Tom says that his father and family will never accept to lose their wages and go hungry for strangers, that the strike does not interest them, his friend Jim is emphatic: they will have to suffer to learn. In other words, they will have to endure an even worse condition in order to realize that the private balance is illusory in its brevity and naive in its sovereignty – the stability experienced by the Joad family is only possible because the landowners want to please the workers who broke the strike. Despite the times, the historical process and the dissimilar figurations, there is a common axis with that of other films in which the human figure is framed under the individual-society tension<sup>20</sup>.

In Costa, the infamous fraternity runs parallel with the helplessness and vulnerability of the residents of Fontainhas. Nhurro's visit to Vanda ends when she, tired and disagreeing with her desolate friend, leaves the room and leaves him to mourn alone. Before, at the family's little shop, surrounded by fruit, Zita denies Nhurro a piece of bread. She says there is nothing left, nor does she offer anything. With the same lack of solidarity, Nhurro refuses to give shelter to a neighborhood resident who comes into his house asking for a place to sleep. Perhaps the greatest tension between the self and the other, of course, is the heroin ritual. One figure injects drug into another. Violence is explicit, notwithstanding being consented.

The easing of borders, the development of relationships and the realization of the community experience takes place between two poles: fracture and union, fear and certainty, risk and protection. It is always an *exposure to the other*, hence the recurrence of passing figures and the countless situations of encounters that we have described. Perhaps an epic law prevails unconsciously: the destiny of one is the destiny of all. It is endured what can exist as socially perverse, and at the same time serves as fraternity on the other side. To take a risk and accept a *duty*: a double donation. What is avoided in the immune paradigm, in Costa's films, is a condition.

Exposure to the other is never childish, even when small, even when it comes to receiving a homeless friend or just visiting. Such a relationship is paired by

<sup>19</sup> In the original: "coincide effectivement avec la dissociation de tout lien communautaire, avec l'abolition de toute relation sociale étrangère à l'échange vertical protection-obéissance".

<sup>20</sup> Films come to mind, because they relate with this themes of work and the community, such as *Two Days, One Night*, by Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne (2014), and in the Brazilian context, *Eles não usam black-tie*, by Leon Hirszman (1981).



expropriation on two fronts: voluntarily, as an act of donation; and involuntarily, in the condition of poverty. It is necessary to lose everything, to be facing nothing to engage with the other. In the State abandonment, in the distance from his homeland, relegated to a series of denials, under the imminent loss of physical territory, with nothing but belonging to a transitory fraternity, the weak human figure in Costa's cinema, sometimes sick and under drug threats, is represented by a single affirmative, irreducible and immanent aspect: its collective nature. The films create paths that lead one body to another, to establish contagion, from vectors to architecture based on leaks, from the solidarity network to the partial deposition of the self by the other. The human figure depends on what surpasses it. ■

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