

This is an adapted version of a longer text originally written in Portuguese, “O cenário à nossa frente”.

They are living in homes they didn't build themselves. The shacks of Fontainhas, no matter how bad they were, were the shacks of the pioneers, houses that they made with their own hands, with the bricks and the sand they brought from the yards where they were working, half borrowed, half purchased; made during the weekends. The colours were theirs, and the organisation of space was also theirs – it was theirs on the edge of illegality where they lived. Now, with this new kind of false freedom, all is gone. True freedom is gone, and they don't know what to do with those walls.
Pedro Costa

Settings have been part of the action since the very beginning of cinema, be they real locations or constructed sets, natural or artificial. Their downgrading to mere informative backgrounds belongs to the most deplorable developments in film art. Similarly, the loss of sensorial qualities in the built world – and therefore architecture – corresponds to a mutilation of our lives.

There are few films nowadays in which place is as important and complex a character as in Pedro Costa's *In Vanda's Room* and *Colossal Youth*. The action in these two films, the lives and fates of the protagonists, cannot be separated from their settings, which are reclaimed from the background to confront us: the now-demolished slum neighbourhood of Fontainhas in the former, and the new housing project of Casal da Boba, where many Fontainhas residents were relocated, in the latter. *How* the other half lives – to borrow the title of Jacob Riis' book – goes hand in hand with *where* the other half lives.

In 2007, during a discussion at the Portuguese Cinematheque, the critic João Bénard da Costa perceptively observed that *In Vanda's Room* is exclusively an inside film (even when the action takes place on the street) while *Colossal Youth* is almost entirely an outside film (even when the action takes place in a room). This is also why these films are frequently described as being about architecture – or about its lack, as I've often said.

The Fontainhas streets of *In Vanda's Room*, teeming with people, children, dogs and bonfires, recall the “squalid but vibrant neighbourhoods” that Henri Lefebvre spoke of when describing Paris before the urban operations carried out “to comb [the city] with cannons.” That is to say, they are ‘insides’. By contrast, in Casal da Boba the street does not really exist, nor do the houses or rooms – they are all ‘outsides’. Here, the only possible place is that which belongs to each lonely body.

The living misery of Fontainhas is opposed to the nothingness we face in the misery of Casal da Boba – however, because it's cinema, it's an absence that can be seen and heard.

Sky



Sky

In *In Vanda's Room's*, we rarely see the sky; we catch glimpses of it behind the remains of houses as they are being razed in the demolition of Fontainhas that takes place throughout the film.

In *Colossal Youth*, it's only during the brief scenes on the streets of Casal da Boba – when Ventura calls, “Vanda, Vanda, where do you live?” and his voice reverberates as if cried out in a closed, empty space – that we see the sky. But what sort of sky is this? It can't be night, as neither the moon nor a street lamp could draw the stark shadows that backdrop Ventura. And yet, no day could hold such a black sky. Its blackness, at one point emphasised by the passing of a white bird, is reminiscent of the black cloth that we architects place behind our white scale models in order to photograph them.

Ground



Ground

Fontainhas is a dense neighbourhood made up of cramped alleys and small squares. The ground is always visible, covered in mud, debris, and people passing through or gathered around open fires.

In Casal da Boba, we never see the ground. Even when Ventura sits on the floor while Semedo, the clerk from the city council, points out the apartment allocated to him – “Third floor, right. The flat is full of light.” – the ground is invisible. “The everyday geography more familiar to us,” to use a phrase by Marc Augé, has vanished. In Ventura's wanderings through Casal da Boba, there are no “axes or paths that lead from one place to another ... to crossroads and open spaces where people pass, meet and gather.”

Borders



Borders

At the edge of Fontainhas, Paulo leans against a post, contemplating (with us) the world just beyond the neighbourhood. The border is clear: inside Fontainhas there are dilapidated walls, the remnants of a bulldozed house; outside, there are the smooth surfaces of the housing blocks of Vanda Nova. Only two residents ever exit Fontainhas: Paulo begs or parks cars in the Colombo shopping centre, and Pedro sells flowers he steals in the Carnide Cemetery. The transition between the inside and outside of Fontainhas – a path that runs through weeds and scattered trash – is the film's only no man's land. (It's not by chance I use a military metaphor.)

The outside of Casal da Boba is far away in space and time. There is no transition space: not between Casal da Boba and Peter Paul Rubens' *Flight of Egypt* hanging in the Gulbenkian Museum, which Ventura helped build, nor between Casal da Boba and Ventura's shack in Fontainhas, which he also built. There are only sudden jumps and collisions – I'm also talking about editing, the film's architecture. In between cuts, Ventura moves from his brand-new apartment to the garden of Campo Grande where he bought roasted chestnuts on a Sunday thirty years ago, to the shack he and his companion Lento barricaded themselves into on 25 April 1974: “Just when things were working out for us, this coup d'état breaks out. Soldiers all over... In their armoured cars, ready for a fight, checking IDs... They're bound to come here. Don't go out for anything.”





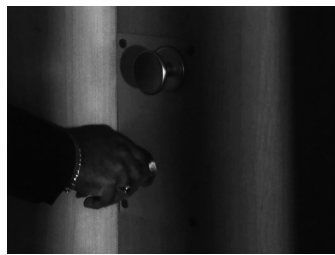
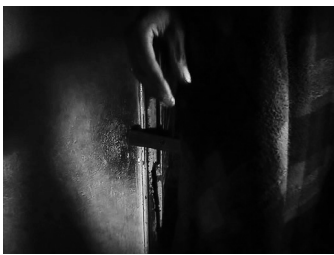
Nhurro converts a box into a coffee table, moving it to the corner of the house he shares with two other men. Like all the shacks in Fontainhas, as Thom Andersen described, it's "small and crammed with objects which are treated with doting and constant care." The obstinate sweeping of the floor and surfaces, the traffic of objects from position to position, room to room, house to street and back again – this relentless movement represents the only possible gesture of resistance in the face of hopeless squalor.

Vanda, Ventura and Gustavo are having Sunday lunch in Vanda's new apartment. Looking beyond the frame, she says, "I've had enough of these couches. Papa, I can't believe what I see. Looks like ghosts. Like a woman or a girl. White things... They get up, sit down, they move back and forth. My daughter sees them too. She never comes here by herself. She gets scared."



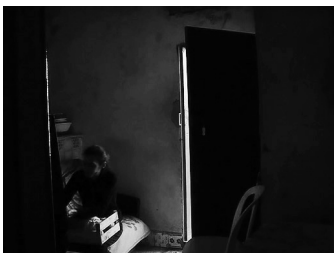
The window is an essential element of architecture, as of painting (at least since the invention of perspective). In Costa's Fontainhas, these are not the Renaissance windows that open onto landscapes and the horizon. Rather, they're those of Vermeer and other Delft school painters; windows, often barely seen, that throw a strained light beam upon someone sweeping the floor, playing music or reading a letter. Evangelina is washing dishes when a hand passes through the window holding something: a finch, offered for sale.

We almost always see the window in Vanda's new bedroom in Casal da Boba. As in all the new windows of all the new houses, it appears as a fuzzy stain of white light. Nothing is visible beyond. Instead of the constant sounds – voices, machines, music – that drifted into Vanda's old room, all we hear from the outside now is emitted by her television. Vanda's new window – this real window of a real room in a real apartment in Casal da Boba – provides a chilling illustration of a theatre backdrop's uncanny perception, which Walter Benjamin described as "the blue distance that never gives way to foreground or dissolves at our approach, which is not revealed spread-eagled or longwinded when reached but only looms more compact and threatening."



Unannounced, Nhurro opens the rudimentary latch on Vanda's bedroom door by reaching his hand in from outside. He asks her if he can take shelter there for a while, and she welcomes him. The relationship between her room and the outside world is intense: it's a place of movement and permanence. As Costa explained, the "idea of a key was nonexistent. In Fontainhas, the public space and private space was undetermined ... Vanda's room was a square or a street, and it was also the most secret place."

Ventura tries to turn the key to the new apartment he's been allocated. "My head is spinning and I ache all over. I can't open it," he says, so Semedo unlocks the door for him.



The marketplace refrain – "Madam, lettuce or cabbage?" – echoes through the neighbourhood. In her daily rounds selling vegetables, Vanda opens doors and then closes them again if she finds the houses vacant. She hovers in the doorway and sometimes enters. In Senhora da Luz's home, she sits down and exchanges a few words, just like the salesman in the Tokyo suburb of Yasujirō Ozu's *Good Morning* who chats with his neighbours on the steps of their doorways, already inside their homes.

Ventura says goodbye to Semedo and then the buzzer rings. Ventura opens the door but doesn't see anyone, so he picks up the intercom.

Ventura: Yes?

Semedo: Does it work?

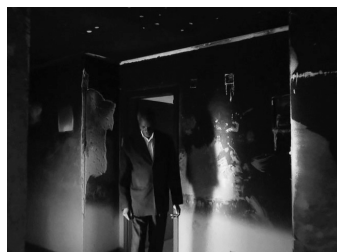
Ventura: Yes, it does.

Semedo: Good luck.



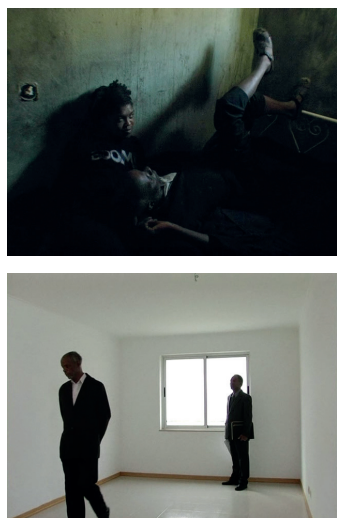
A door moves through the streets of Fontainhas – the colours, the light and the viewpoint make it seem as if the door were floating through the air. The basic elements of architecture have become absurd. Everything in the neighbourhood is on the move, constantly changing. Before it was because everything was under construction, now it's because everything is being demolished.

In his Casal da Boba apartment, Ventura repeatedly opens a door, which closes again on its own. Having worked in construction, he knows there is no mystery: the hinges are shoddily fixed, so the doors close by themselves. As Tag Gallagher pointed out, “Pedro Costa has had a long romance with doors.” This romance is as old as cinema itself, beginning the moment a door opened to let out the workers from the Lumière factory. If, as Costa says, “fiction is always a door that we may want to open or not”, at the very beginning cinema wanted to open that door, just like opening a door was one of the first constructive gestures of man, right after raising a wall.



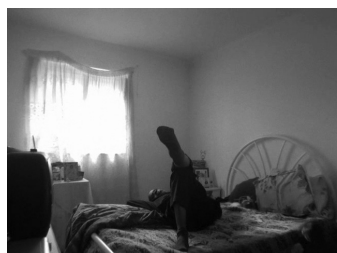
Excluding the shots of the Carnide Cemetery or the wastelands of Venda Nova, material clutters all space that isn't engulfed by darkness. Textures, patterns and colours are violently legible: on the bed sheets, objects on the table, the marks on the floor, walls and ceilings (or what remains of them), we see traces of time, hands, or money that wasn't enough.

Ventura visits the burnt-down apartment in Casal da Boba that Lento set ablaze with his whole family inside. As the architect Manuel Graça Dias said, “In order to live in those white apartments it's necessary to set fire to them.”



There are colours we've learned to distinguish and name: raw sienna, cobalt blue, Naples yellow, Veronese green... We should name a new one: Fontainhas green. Powerfully emerging from the darkness or blending with it, this colour pervades the neighbourhood.

Ventura and Bete, the last inhabitants left in Fontainhas, play like children (or artists), imagining figures suggested by the textures and colours of the dilapidated walls: two turtles; a crested chicken; a policeman wearing a cap; houses; a lion baring its teeth; a woman and a man with a tail, maybe a devil. Bete says: “When they give us white rooms, we'll stop seeing these things. Everything will end.”



A few years ago, I showed *Colossal Youth* to one of my architecture classes. During the screening, when Ventura points at the ceiling of his new apartment and says it's full of spiders, one student stood up and said in a terrified voice, “But this is the living room of my house! It's the same size, the same window... It seems like it's on a different planet but it's exactly the same as mine.”

One of the missions of cinema is to give us back the familiar as a surprise, or as something we hadn't realised we already knew. As Jean-Marie Straub said, invoking Bertolt Brecht: “To exhume the truth buried beneath the rubble of the obvious, to strikingly connect the singular to the general, to keep hold of the particular within the larger process: this is the art of the realists.”

Vanda's new room is like millions of others in this world, just as her old one resembled a billion others, reminding us that what we're seeing is certainly not the best of all possible worlds.