

Pedro Costa's *Ossos* and Heterotopia

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Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa began work on *Ossos* (1997) after receiving a bundle of letters from residents of Cape Verde, the former Portuguese colony and setting of his previous feature *Casa de Lava* (1994). The letters were addressed to friends living in a Lisbon neighbourhood called Fontaínhas (Sante 22), where a kind of pirate urbanization existed in this almost derelict space. Costa was clearly an outsider to this community, which makes his first foray into representing the neighbourhood so interesting. *Ossos* is marked by its juxtapositions: it at once serves as a realist documentary and formalist art film; there's a compositional repetition and variation in representing both Fontaínhas and Lisbon; and it's a film that engenders a kind of local knowledge in the spectator while the subject remains continuously ambiguous. Ultimately, this aesthetic articulates the concept of the community, which is defined by a perpetual expansion that occurs for the viewer through developing this local knowledge. Through these aesthetic techniques, *Ossos* provokes the spectator's consideration of how Fontaínhas and its community of inhabitants may be communicated by and to outsiders.

Michel Foucault's concept of the 'heterotopia' is a useful tool for considering spaces that are organized against common spaces. Heterotopias are literally 'other spaces'. Foucault believes that "[s]pace is fundamental in any form of communal life" ("Space" 252) and this is especially true of "social spaces whose functions are different or even opposite of others" ("Space" 252). Edward W. Soja suggests such a connection when he notes that this consciousness of space begets an "explicit consciousness of geographically [...] uneven

development” that in turn requires “a new critical perspective, a different way of seeing the world” (*Postmodern* 23). As the neighbourhood of Fontainhas may primarily be described as a derelict space of pirate urbanization – one which will be razed by the homogenizing forces of Lisbon, as recorded in Costa’s next two films – an investigation of heterotopias provides a means of considering the locality of Fontainhas, what separates it from the rest of Lisbon and how this can be aesthetically conveyed to outsiders in *Ossos*.

How can Costa convey this local knowledge in a space that would otherwise be hidden – and later destroyed – due to its poverty and illicit activity? Although *Ossos* is the only Costa film set in Fontainhas to be shot on 35mm film stock with a style somewhat comparable to art film traditions, it is nonetheless referred to by Costa as the “documentary” of the three features. This seems to be an odd categorization for the film given its production, aesthetic and the presence of a loose shooting script. The film’s style certainly does not convey this function as immediately as, for instance, the shaky camera associated with *cinema vérité*. Yet, as the first of the three films made in Fontainhas, there is a systematic representation of space here that might best be described, like a documentary, as exploratory. To this end, Costa represents certain spaces repeatedly to provoke an awareness of space – and its documentation – but varies the composition of the shots of these spaces to convey the multitude of choices that occur before more common representations of space. Consider first the way in which Fontainhas is introduced in the film. This shot does not function as a common establishing shot would because it is not the first shot; the film has already begun in the domestic space of a Fontainhas apartment. This is a more tenuous, cautious introduction, first coding the space as a lived environment. The delayed establishing shot is given a notable reprise when the outsider character of Eduarda

travels to Fontaínhas and is shown entering the space from a high-angle, canted shot. At this point, Fontaínhas has been established as the principal space of the film, but by repeating this camera position the preceding portion of the film is understood to serve the same exploratory function that Eduarda is undertaking herself.

Beyond this significantly repeated shot, Fontaínhas is afforded a number of establishing shots throughout the film that revise the film's representation of the space and in so doing, the viewer's awareness of the space. There is a specific symbol of this revision that is distinctly coded as a spatial marker: the lamp or telephone pole at the border of the community. The pole is first shown when Tina and Clotilde return to Fontaínhas, baby in hand. The second example is, appropriately, the Father's return in shroud of darkness – attempting to avoid confrontation with Tina and Clotilde over the baby after its near-death experience in the bathroom stall. In both shots the pole's placement in the composition of the shot varies, but symbolically recognized to be the same. It is not until the third example, where a long shot is used to show this corner of Fontaínhas like a traditional establishing shot: at the beginning of a scene to establish spatial relations. This more traditional technique of editing to convey a spatial awareness to the spectator indicates that in *Ossos* knowledge is slowly accumulated rather than granted immediately. The pole recurs in two more shots, but the next significant usage is when Eduarda first visits Fontaínhas. Her arrival in the neighbourhood is coded by the presence of the pole – the camera in an entirely new position to show the same border space for an outsider character. It is also notable as the first time the space is shown in daylight. This variation serves two functions: the spectator's understanding of the multiplicity of possibilities in documenting this space, as well as the cognitive process of the spectator's growing awareness of this space.

Costa must then root his representation in a type of symbolism to adequately provoke an interpretive reception. In Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space*, the spatial practice of the individual's lived experience is different from the representations of space found in city planning. Representational space trades precisely in "symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art" (33). Deciphering is necessary to the depiction of space and how its inhabitants experience it:

Where natural space exists, and even more so where social space exists, the movement from obscurity to enlightenment – the process of decipherment – is perpetual. It is in fact part and parcel of the way in which the existence of space is established (183)

Pedro Costa depicts Fontaínhas as a unique and heterotopic space by juxtaposing precisely these objective and subjective productions of space: the 'objective' documentation of space, and the more 'subjective' awareness of space accumulated through the spectator's experience.

The use of minimal lighting is the one such technique that provokes a process of decipherment from the spectator in order to understand the space. Cinematographer Emmanuel Machuel has stated that more powerful lights common to film productions were removed because of the demands of inhabitants of Fontaínhas, specifically the scene where the Father returns back to Fontaínhas after the baby's near-death experience in the bathroom stall. The reason for his cautiousness is no doubt his guilt over abandoning his baby, but this, like his figure in the overly dark frame, must be deciphered – without full knowledge as to why the duration of the shot is so long or, more broadly, the story behind the baby's birth and the reason for its abandonment. There are further scenes in

Fontainhas that convey the varying degrees of visibility, often in the foreground and background of the same shot, showing the potentially inscrutable setting of Fontainhas or even characters. The technique approximates the actual conditions of visibility in this space, often using the artificial light of lamps when the inhabitants we follow return to the space at night. The depth of space and the objects within this space require greater deciphering due to this lack of illumination, which is given counterpoint in the perpetual brightness of the apartments Clotilde and Tina clean in central Lisbon during the day. This lighting counterpoint associated with central Lisbon recurs by showing Fontainhas in the day when Eduarda, an outsider, arrives.

Just as Eduarda's arrival at Fontainhas is pitted against all the other uses of the pole, which are scenes with inhabitants of Fontainhas arriving, Eduarda is also used in the variation of other shots used earlier in the film. Recall that the first shot of the public space of Fontainhas is not the establishing shot that later comes with the third variation of the pole shot, but rather a high-angle, canted shot of a small corridor of the area, and that the exact same camera position shows Eduarda's entrance into Fontainhas, though the space is different. The film's ordering process implies a similarity – the camera's position is the same – but the specific space, which may not be remembered by the spectator, is not the same. Likewise, the Father's return to Fontainhas the night of Tina and the baby's return features a *Caligari*-esque shot of Fontainhas with a tree branch serving as an expressionistic foreground device. The only other shot of a tree branch in Fontainhas follows the high-angle shot of Eduarda entering Fontainhas and, again, the surface similarity is belied by the fact that it is not the same space, regardless of compositional cues. The reason for the comparison between these shots is ambiguous, however much the

aesthetic prompts the comparison to be made. The film's penultimate shot is a similar example of a comparison being obvious, though the reason less transparent. We are presented with a character we know almost nothing about, but the shot emphatically repeats one earlier in the film, drawing attention to this character's significance. This is not the first time we have seen her, as we know she is friends with many other characters of whom more is known – we even know where she works. She is, like the pole, symbolic for the representational space of Fontainhas, conveying the underprivileged inhabitants, but like the pole this symbol also conveys the difficulty of representing spaces and people such as these because intimate knowledge of her motivation is still denied.

A final juxtaposition between Fontainhas and central Lisbon as a space is the long take tracking shot of the Father walking from Fontainhas with a garbage bag, which lays bare in one shot this process of decipherment that has been associated with representing this space. It's the most aesthetically unique scene in the film, while also providing the most suspenseful moment in the film's narrative. The narrative tension of the scene revolves around the ambiguity of whether or not the baby is in the garbage bag the Father is carrying and what he plans to do if that's the case. The formal properties of this scene occasion this interpretative process. Running two minutes and three seconds, the scene is one of the longer takes in the film, while the camera's perpetual tracking is the longest sustained movement of the camera in a film where most scenes are shot with a static camera. Just as this tracking maintains the camera's attention to the Father and the garbage bag, which the spectator must study for any movement of the baby, the background is perpetually slipping away. The ephemeral quality means the representation of space is solely conveyed in glimpses – glimpses of inhabitants of different age and race, glimpses of

buildings in varying states of decay, and glimpses of other portions of Lisbon elevated in the distance. Like the difficulty of interpreting whether or not the baby is in the bag, the formal technique makes difficult the viewer's ability to grasp the complexity of the space in what is, paradoxically, the most coherent and wide-ranging recording of space in the film due to the single take and distance travelled by the tracking of the camera.

The subsequent scene with the Father is just as important insofar as it functions as the tracking shot's inverted image. Once in central Lisbon, the Father uses the baby to beg for change in a busy subway entrance, where the length of the tracking shot is almost met – it is only eleven seconds shorter – while the bustle of the people in the frame has replaced the movement of the camera in the tracking shot. Thus, the focus is no longer on the mobile Father, but instead on the mobility of the many people surrounding him. The background is just as significant as in the previous shot, but is no longer slipping away due to the static camera allowing the contrast between the Father and his surrounding to be slowly measured: the city rising up in the distance, with a monument for the city's sanctified history emphatically placed in the centre of the frame. Finally, the need for interpretation is just as strong, as the begging is not immediately apparent, nor are many of the interactions actually heard. Decipherment is still required for the characters because their class does not change from one locale to another.

Ossos is almost exclusively concerned with the local space of Fontainhas and includes central Lisbon only insofar as it pertains to the lives of the inhabitants of Fontainhas: the subway entrance begging, the hospital visit, and the quasi-patronage of Eduarda. It juxtaposes the peripheral status of Fontainhas against the centre of Lisbon. Yet,

the representation of central Lisbon in *Ossos* is similar to Fontaínhas. The repetition/variation schema is less programmatic as, say, the spatial awareness created by the repeated shot of the pole, but it otherwise functions in a similar way. There is one composition that the film gratuitously reprises in both Fontaínhas and the Lisbon apartments, while the meaning of this motif remains deliberately impenetrable like the pole: the doorway motif. In a series of lectures to film students, Costa used the door as a metaphor to discuss the difference between the “open door films” interested in complete transparency and films that slightly close the door: “It hides certain things, it tells you that you can feel pain, but not everything, and so that suggests a bit of trouble” (“Closed Door”). Instead of providing complete access, the repetitions of these slightly closed doors indicate that the film’s aesthetic schema does not explicitly divorce Fontaínhas and central Lisbon, but does not grant complete access to these characters as they traverse both spaces.

The shot is used to first show Clotilde getting ready for work, to show Tina back in Fontaínhas, in a graphic match of the recurring characters that remain almost exclusively silent throughout the film, Tina and Clotilde both in crisis at a Lisbon apartment, Eduarda looking for Tina’s apartment in Fontaínhas, Maura left behind as Clotilde leaves for work, and an eye-line match when Clotilde notices the Father in Eduarda’s apartment and potentially kills him. Not only does this motif include every major character in the film and both major spaces, the graphic match and eye-line match draw attention to the technique through editing, as in both cases the composition is repeated in two successive shots. There are varying degrees of access to the characters literalized by the position of the door, but also figuratively in the limited knowledge of these characters. In the graphic match, a comparison is tantalizingly offered, but what is the basis for the comparison?

Consciousness is provoked, but decipherment is still required to approach the reason for these two figures occupying the same position in the composition. In the last example, the narrative importance coalesces with this aesthetic significance, but, as with the characters themselves, the meaning is ambiguous: does Clotilde actually kill the Father?

Returning to the tension between the role of *Ossos* as a realist documentary and a formalist art film, the latter raises the question of who is documenting this space and its inhabitants. If Foucault's heterotopia may be seen as a way of conceiving of the relation between spaces rather than a categorization of a single specific space, so too is Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of community. It's a means of considering the relation between singularities – Fontaínhas, Costa and the spectator, in this case. Nancy's community is an inoperative community, indicating that there is no inherent, coherent identity present in a community, but rather community is the being-in-common of individuals. The community grows "according to an extension [...] such that each singularity is extended" and thereby exists only as it is perpetually exposed to an outside (29). Costa's involvement extends the community, which is not in any sense complete or restrained to a particular class, ideology, or even place. If *Ossos* is given the problematic distinction of being a documentary, which I have located in one example by charting how the film records the space of Fontaínhas and its inhabitants, the tension of documentation is not assuaged by an aesthetic of verisimilitude. Costa's mediation is foregrounded both by repeated shots already discussed, but also through the repeated shots of characters looking directly into the camera or at the device's presumed operator, confronting its gaze. There are three prominent examples of this technique: Clotilde meeting Tina at the hospital, Tina's return to Fontaínhas and the role of the character Jeff Wall has named 'The Watcher'. When Tina is

first introduced at the hospital, she is shot approaching a window – blurry at first and ultimately coming into focus as she stares into the camera. The reverse shot implies that this first shot had been the point-of-view of Clotilde, as she is seen looking through this very same window and, consequently, into the camera. The relationship between Tina and Clotilde, central to the film and here also marked by the occasion of Tina leaving the hospital with her newly born baby, is first expressed as mediated by the camera. The camera is, literally speaking, between them in this shot-reverse-shot. Similarly, when Tina returns to Fontainhas for the first time after having given birth, she enters her apartment and proceeds to close all the windows. Tina looks into the camera, recording from outside the window, before she draws the curtains. It is clear Tina is seeking privacy and the two shots of curtains being drawn symbolically block the camera's gaze before a reverse shot of closing the second brings the camera into this private space. Finally, Costa finds his surrogate in 'the Watcher' character. The film opens with this character staring back into the camera and this shot is reprised twice during the film to reinstate an awareness of how the film does, in a sense, subjugate those whom it records – these shots, certainly, serve no narrative purpose as the character does not speak. The Watcher is only watched by the spectator and shown watching other inhabitants, like Costa himself. She engages in both in the repeated scene of her looking into the camera before walking away, the second time being the emphatic end of the film I have mentioned previously. In this repetition, her walking away in the penultimate shot is unfinished – Tina observes her walking away, closes the door and the recording is terminated. If her looking back into the camera can be read as a form of resistance to the camera's subjugation, her future – as with the future of the potentially murdered Father and the inhabitants in general – remains outside the film's

recording of space and time. Costa confirms this (un)reading: “There's another absence in the film, and that's you, but *Ossos* ends exactly like Mizoguchi's film *Street of Shame* (1956), that is to say, there's a girl who closes a door and who looks at you, and the door is closed on you. That means that you can't enter this film” (“Closed Door”). The watcher is, like the community she first represents at the start of the film, untraceable – forever extending, requiring the communication of both to be infinite, which, as Tina closing the door indicates, the film is not. The remainder of the communication is the forbidden – unavowable – ‘film’ that Costa emphasizes in this quote: that is to say, the lives of these individuals.

Heterotopias, as we have seen, include the juxtaposition of difference and similarity. This approaches the inability to find a unique voice, as Nancy suggests, not because these spaces cannot be expressed, but because they are by their very nature relational – the perpetual extension Nancy observes in community. Thus, Costa is both distanced from Fontaínhas, while it is also integral to his work. His work points to what is, in Maurice Blanchot's estimation, the unavowable aspect of community. *Ossos* ultimately represents by tracing the limit of representation. Like the concept of the heterotopia itself, *Ossos* is not a film that seeks to deterministically categorize the space of Fontaínhas, but only provoke consideration of this as a different space, where the spatial practice of its inhabitants can only be represented in a film that takes into account this process of representation. Costa's techniques convey an understanding of the space only if the spectator actively engages the film by deciphering the repetition and variation in the form. Yet, even when this does occur, the active spectator soon recognizes the limits of the potential knowledge. *Ossos* ultimately reflects the perpetual expansion that occurs with community through these formal

techniques and, like the variation on a theme in music, they will recur in Costa's subsequent features set in Fontaínhas.

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