

FICUNAM 2015: Part 3

Pedro Costa's *Horse Money*, Jean-Marie Straub's “leftism” and other problems

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This is the third part of a series of articles on the recent FICUNAM film festival in Mexico City. The first part was posted March 18 and the second part March 20.

The recent FICUNAM film festival in Mexico City screened films by Pedro Costa from Portugal (*Horse Money*), veteran French-born “left” director Jean-Marie Straub (*Kommunisten* and others), Lisando Alonso from Argentina (*Jauja*), Spanish documentarian Hermes Paralluelo (*Not All is Vigil*) and Brazilian Adirley Queirós (*White Out, Black In*), which, while not belonging to a single school by any means, provide the opportunity for something of a generalized overview.

A mood or sensibility, more than anything else, connects the various works, which are distinguished from one another in many other ways: immobility, resignation, gloom. Is this all that a so-called “demanding” or “radical” cinema might offer the public today?

A period of political stagnation produces many cultural peculiarities, even certain monstrosities. Responding to phenomena which, from the long view of history, are ephemeral, the artist may draw impressionistic and quite misleading conclusions.

The past several decades have been characterized by relative social quiescence, the product, in the final analysis, of the ever more glaring worthlessness of the nationally based labor and social reformist organizations under conditions of a globally integrated economy. The demise of the Soviet Union, brought about by the final horrific betrayal of its Stalinist ruling clique, was the most dramatic expression of this process, but the transformation of the different “Socialist” and “Labour” parties and trade unions into component elements of the capitalist establishment has been no less definitive.

The working class has come under relentless attack over the course of 30 years or more while its “traditional” leaderships and organizations have all entered lock, stock and barrel into the enemy camp. The shock of these enormous betrayals and their definite practical consequences has produced a historically momentary paralysis. This is an inevitable and necessary prelude to the reorientation of masses of humanity in a new and revolutionary direction.

However, to those intellectuals who, perhaps without fully articulating it even to themselves, perceived the existence of the USSR, the social democratic parties and the unions, or petty bourgeois “national liberation” movements, as some sort of buffer against the harshest social realities, and as a “comfort zone” in which they themselves could exist and even modestly flourish, the events of the last few decades have proven discouraging and disorienting. They have drawn the most pessimistic—and wrongheaded—conclusions about the working class and the possibility of social revolution.

Many of the “protest generation of '68” and their spiritual offspring from subsequent generations simply threw in the towel and

accommodated themselves to the existing order. But not all, by any means. There are pockets of resistance, as it were, in the art film world, for example. There are those whose formal “innovation” or “rigor” supposedly counters the banality and triviality of the commercial cinema and encourages the viewer to see the world in a new, more insightful manner—or so the argument goes.

What of these “pockets of resistance”?

Pedro Costa is a Portuguese filmmaker, born in 1959. He has made a number of films about impoverished immigrants from Cape Verde, an island in the Atlantic Ocean and a Portuguese colony or “overseas province” until 1975, living in the slums of Lisbon. I commented on *Ossos (Bones)* in 1998 and *Colossal Youth* in 2006, both times unfavorably.

Costa’s films are largely static, with their anguished central figures often moving about like wounded people, or ghosts. In *Horse Money*, Ventura (a recurring presence or performer in Costa’s work), one of the Cape Verdeans living in Portugal, is a patient in a hospital. He has a nervous disease, or perhaps he is sick as a result of the hard and painful life he has led.

A group of friends, all compatriots, visit him. One of them says that no matter what, “our life will still be hard ... We’ll keep on falling from the third floor. We’ll keep on being severed by the machines. Our head and lungs will still hurt the same ... We’ll be burned ... We’ll go crazy ... We always lived and died this way ... This is our sickness.”

Significantly, Ventura imagines the year is 1975, a year of revolutionary upheaval in Portugal, and he is only 19. It seems he got into a knife fight at the time and needed stitches. He meets a woman, Vitalina, who has come to Portugal three days too late for her husband’s funeral. When Ventura asks her about his house on Cape Verde, she tells him it is “all gone,” the animals “are dead” or they ran away, his horse was “torn to pieces” by vultures. Later, he flees the hospital wearing only his underwear. Soldiers stop him on the street, a tank comes up behind him. Ventura visits his old factory. It is in ruins. A man there tells him he has been waiting 20 years for his unpaid salary. “The boss ran away,” and the firm went bankrupt.

In the final, lengthy sequence set in an elevator, Ventura encounters a mannequin-soldier, covered in metallic paint. Again, this is a reference to the revolution of 1974-75. The soldier evokes those events, when “we took up positions against the fascists.” Ventura is tired, “Can’t work no more, can’t fight no more.” References are made to the suffering of the population, but the filmmaker’s attitude is unclear. At one point, the soldier says, “The day will come when we will accept our sufferings.” Why should anyone do that? At another, he says, “It won’t be long before we know why we live and why we suffer. We’ll know everything.”

The film has a few intriguing and compassionate moments, including a

series of shots of Cape Verdeans in their impoverished dwellings, which echoes a sequence of photos by Jacob Riis of poor immigrants in New York City that opens the film. But much of *Horse Money*, including the repeated shots of Ventura walking down a corridor and his tour of the empty factory, is tedious and almost unendurable. Costa's grim, joyless filmmaking is useful at communicating one or two emotions. This is not a film taken from life. The director is too obviously striving to impress.

As I suggested in 2006, "At its best, this is filmmaking of the utmost social passivity, which accepts the oppressed almost entirely as it finds them, aestheticizes their condition and, perhaps without meaning to, makes a virtue out of what is, in fact, transitory and ephemeral social 'necessity.'"

Horse Money does nonetheless touch upon complex and important events. The failed Portuguese revolution of 1974-75 was one of the most significant episodes in the period of global revolutionary upsurge from 1968 to 1975.

In 1974, after decades of brutal dictatorship, the Portuguese population rose up in massive numbers. On April 25 of that year, sections of the Portuguese military carried out a coup, claiming to be acting in the name of the people. In fact, it was a preemptive measure, aimed at heading off the independent mobilization of the working class and countering the threat of socialist revolution.

Following the coup, as the WSWS noted on the 30th anniversary of the events, "workers took over factories, offices and shops and peasants occupied farmlands. Half a million marched through the Portuguese capital, Lisbon ... on May Day [1974]. The revolutionary atmosphere spread through the armed forces, with soldiers and sailors marching alongside the workers carrying banners calling for socialism."

As the mass movement developed, "strikes hit all sectors of the economy. Workers set up committees that demanded a minimum wage, the arrest of fascist sympathizers, workers' control and socialism. On May 15, 1974, 8,400 workers occupied the Lisnave shipyards. Timex workers struck on June 3, continuing the struggle started in November 1973, and two weeks later 25,000 CTT workers went on strike, paralyzing the post and telephone services. Newspapers were taken over and the manifestos of the parties filled their pages." Landless agricultural workers began to seize the large estates.

Meanwhile, in an effort to gain a breathing space for the Portuguese ruling class, the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) installed a series of provisional governments, which included representatives of the Communist Party and the Socialist Party. The Stalinists and social democrats worked might and main to suppress the revolution and preserve bourgeois order, assisted at every point by the various Maoist, Pabloite and other middle class "left" groups. All these forces accepted the subordination of the mass movement and the working class to the military, with disastrous consequences.

Eventually, in the absence of a revolutionary leadership, the Portuguese elite and its political representatives managed to wear down and demoralize the insurgent working class and restore "order." The betrayal of the Portuguese revolution and the subsequent ability of the Spanish bourgeoisie to make the transition from Francoism to "democracy" without the mass intervention of the working class played a role in restabilizing European and world capitalism and changing the geopolitical momentum.

Costa toys with these world-historical events in *Horse Money*. He views them, first of all, almost exclusively from the point of view of the Cape Verdean immigrants, or that section of them with whom he has come into contact. In interviews, he explains that Ventura and his fellow immigrants hid after the military coup in April 1974, fearful of what the army would do. But does Costa, in line with the attitude of the Portuguese left at the time, identify the army with the mass of the people, as the scene in the elevator would suggest? One has no idea. In any event, his films have not

demonstrated the slightest interest in the conditions or fate of the bulk of the working population in Portugal, one of the poorest and most oppressed in Europe and now the victim of savage austerity measures.

Clearly, the director does not have in mind making a coherent study of the 1974-75 events or drawing any conclusions from them. That would be insufficiently poetical and amorphous. In an interview Costa observed that "if the Revolution had succeeded, neither Ventura nor the others would have continued in the same abandonment and in the same unhappiness for the last 30 years," and leaves the matter there. His films conspicuously avoid considering which political and social forces were responsible for the defeat. Like many of his filmmaking contemporaries, Costa remains evasive and noncommittal on the most important questions.

In that same interview, he went on, significantly: "The past [i.e., the 1974-75 period] is fraternal, utopian, romantic. ... The present is resigned, unfortunate, mediocre."

Even if that were the case, and it is a dreadful misreading of the present circumstances, that would be no excuse for "resigned" and "mediocre" art, such as Costa produces. In fact, the contemporary glum school of filmmakers tends to adopt the shallowest and most reductionist—and non-innovative, non-dialectical—aesthetic approach: life is bleak and miserable, therefore art should follow suit! The task of the artist, on the contrary, having thoroughly immersed him or herself in life, is to stand back somewhat and convey the *truth* of the situation, not simply its surface appearance, to others.

Jean-Marie Straub, or the radical blockheaded as filmmaker

Pedro Costa cites as one of his influences or inspirations the impossible Jean-Marie Straub (whose longtime filmmaking partner Danielle Huillet died in 2006) and, in fact, made a documentary about Straub-Huillet's work in 2001, *Where Lies Your Hidden Smile?*

Straub and Huillet for several decades, starting in the 1960s, made a series of films that were for the most part hermetically sealed from the public, in the supposed name of "Marxist" or "Brechtian" cinema.

In 2002, I irritably commented: "Workers, Peasants (*Operai, contadini*), directed by the well-known team of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, is an absurdity. A group of performers, non-professional presumably, stands in the woods and reads monologues for two hours. The material comes from the pen of Elio Vittorini (*Le donne di Messina*), a left-wing Italian writer (1908-66). It recounts the story of a group of Italians who, at the end of the Second World War, decide to build together a new social life in the ruins of an abandoned village in northern Italy. Various dramas ensue, which will be incomprehensible to all but the most masochistic viewer. The piece is uninvolving, finally excruciating, pure charlatany....

"With *Workers, Peasants* (no less!) Straub-Huillet have inflicted on us their 'maximum program.' Two hours of flatly delivered, unintelligible nonsense. And people politely sit through this at film festivals.

"This passes for 'dialectical' art, for 'communist' art, as the film's presenter described it ... Well, Straub-Huillet have certainly perfected the 'alienation effect'; the new work is indeed alienating. They have not, however, after some decades of work, proven able to dramatize even the *most elementary* human emotions or situations. Or to convince anyone of anything. If such a thing as 'sectarianism' in art exists, Straub and Huillet belong in that category....

"Little more needs to be said about Straub and Huillet. To those who continue to be deceived, so much the worse."

Kommunisten (Communists), Straub's latest, carries on the absurdity. A black screen; disembodied, monotonous voices; two unmoving figures

with their backs to the camera, etc. The work is unwatchable.

For the record, Straub's outlook has nothing in common with revolutionary Marxism. This is a man who has said, "For me, industrial society is barbarism" (and who also called himself, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, "an old Stalinist"!) The trend Straub has much in common with, however, is the anti-Marxist Frankfurt School of Adorno, Marcuse and Horkheimer, and through them, irrationalist and idealist strains of thought.

Jacques Rancière is a dreadful ex-left post-modernist, but he was right on the mark when he commented about Straub-Huillet's moving away from "a workerist conception of communism" and their increasing fascination with "a peasant-based, ecological one." Rancière also commented, in 2004, about the couple: "I don't know if you can call that mystical. What is certain is that it is a matter of going back to a religion of the earth that existed under diverse forms during the Romantic era. The Straubs' Marxism has more and more of a tendency to move towards Heidegger and to distance itself from the Brechtianism of thirty or forty years ago."

From Spain, from Argentina, from Brazil

Spain's Hermes Paralluelo has cited Pedro Costa as a major influence. His oddly entitled *Not All is Vigil* (*No Todo es Vigilia*) is a film located somewhere on the border between documentary and fiction. It concerns his grandparents, Felisa and Antonio, married for 60 years and nearing the end of their lives. The filmmaker may sincerely want to investigate old age, illness and death, but I found the film rather dull and, at the same time, exploitative. It largely abstracts the social element, the conditions imposed on elderly people by the profit system, in favor of obvious or intrusive contrivances.

Lisandro Alonso is an Argentine filmmaker (born in 1975), known for *La libertad* (2001), *Los muertos* (2004) and *Liverpool* (2008). Those films are characterized by a lack of dialogue, no interaction among the characters and many shots of landscape. In 2008, I commented: "Alonso has a visual gift, but he needs to stop deluding himself that this cinematic 'restraint' is anything but an evasion of reality's more complicated elements."

Jauja is a somewhat more ambitious film, a period piece, set in the 1880s in Patagonia, in southern Argentina, during a military campaign to wipe out the aboriginal population. Viggo Mortensen is a Danish engineer, whose daughter runs way with a young soldier. The film at a certain point descends into quasi-mysticism and loses most of its interest.

Adirley Queiros' *White Out, Black In* looks at the lives of three unhappy individuals living on the outskirts of Brasilia, Brazil's capital city. Two of them were injured in a police raid on a disco in 1986: one was paralyzed, one lost a leg. They carry on as best they can in harsh and ugly surroundings. The third has apparently been "teleported" into the area, and operates as something of a secret agent, perhaps an alien.

Legitimate anger and resentment turn, in a deliberately primitive, cartoonish and absurd fashion, into a sort of terrorist attack on official buildings. There is something here, but, again, the drama is too weak and doesn't manage to concentrate the issues in the characters' lives in a compelling manner.

As I commented at the March 3 forum at the FICUNAM festival, in response to many of these films: "When I see films which I find are simply bleak or dreary, or paralyzed, and, if you will pardon the expression, constipated, where there's no movement, no life, I'm not convinced that that's formally innovative. . . .

"That's what I'm concerned about: more life, more vivacity, more

emotion, more drama in the so-called independent cinema. I think that is bound up with a greater appreciation of the historical issues, the contemporary situation, and I think it's bound up with a new social atmosphere. We can argue and we can make appeals, we polemicize on the web site, but we also understand that there has to be a big social movement which breaks up this situation, breaks up the situation so the skepticism and pessimism that exists among the intellectuals will also be changed."

To be continued



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