

Pedro Costa's *Vitalina Varela* and the endless night

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Written and directed by Pedro Costa

Bare and swollen feet descend from the airplane to the tarmac in the dead of night. A woman takes halting steps toward a solemn group of airport workers who look on her with pity. One embraces her stiffly and says, “Vitalina, you arrived too late. Your husband was buried days ago. There is nothing in Portugal for you.”

So begins *Vitalina Varela*, the latest film by Pedro Costa, which recently became available for streaming. The Portuguese director has been acclaimed in various quarters, especially in and around certain international film festivals and cinema journals, as, for example, “one of the most important artists on the international film scene today,” “one of the world’s greatest filmmakers” and “possibly the most intriguing, relevant filmmaker at work today, captivating viewers with his spare, austere aesthetic, willful ambiguity, and combination of documentary, avant-garde, and fiction.” In our view, a far more critical approach is needed.

Vitalina Varela is an almost unrelentingly bleak film in which we barely glimpse the sky, let alone the sun. In the Lisbon slum where Vitalina vows to live out her days, it seems always to be night. Streetlights reveal little besides crumbling cement walls, unpaved streets and bare, sickly trees. Some residents scavenge for food or scrap metal, others shuffle around like lost souls or stare resignedly into space. Long shots during which characters and objects barely move emphasize the general torpor. Distant sounds of people talking or children playing only underscore the characters’ silence and isolation.

Despite being—or because it is?—full of darkness, both literal and metaphysical, *Vitalina Varela* won the Golden Leopard at last year’s Locarno Film Festival. Previous films by Costa, such as *Colossal Youth* (2006) and *In Vanda’s Room* (2000), also have gained

international acclaim.

The WSWS has commented before on Costa’s films. In 2006, in regard to *Colossal Youth*, we wrote: “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.’” Of *Horse Money* (2014), we wrote in 2015 that much of the work “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.”

More recently, the WSWS suggested that the films of a number of glum European directors, including Costa, “more than anything else, reflect the *consequences* of critical social events and traumas (the rise and collapse of Stalinism, the social origins of fascism and the Holocaust, the betrayed or abortive revolutions in France, Portugal and elsewhere in the years 1968-1975) that the artists have not worked through or understood.”

Costa was born in 1958 during the Salazar dictatorship and was 15 when it was overthrown during the Carnation Revolution of 1974. After studying film in Lisbon under António Reis, whom the Portuguese consider one of their most significant directors, Costa developed a distinctive visual style that relies heavily on chiaroscuro. He has preferred to work with nonprofessional actors, and the latter sometimes collaborate with him in writing his films.

For decades, Costa has set his movies in the Fontainhas slum in Lisbon, where many African immigrants from the former Portuguese colony of Cape Verde live. This is where Vitalina (a character named after the actress who plays her) makes her new home, having arrived too late to meet her estranged husband Joaquim. Neighbors soon file in, as though in a weary

procession, to pay their respects. Each whispers simply, “I’m sorry,” or “My condolences,” before sitting and lapsing into silence. One neighbor tries to sell Vitalina cans of tuna that he has stolen.

Ntoni and Marina, a young couple, come for a visit. As the tattered Ntoni eats food that Vitalina has prepared, he remarks that he had almost forgotten what home-cooked meals tasted like. He and Marina sleep rough at the train station, he explains. For sustenance, Ntoni forages for food at the grocery store. He relates his tale quietly and with little affect. He is not looking for pity and, like the other characters, seems not to believe that his life could improve.

As Vitalina settles into her new home, which belonged to Joaquim, she complains about its leaky roof and unfinished walls. She judges that Joaquim went into decline after leaving her. Years earlier, the two had built a cement home in Cape Verde with their own hands. Working night and day, they completed it in 45 days. Sitting alone in Fontainhas, Vitalina remembers how Joaquim left her one day without a word. It took her 40 years to gain the resources to fly to Lisbon to find him.

One day, Vitalina goes to the corrugated tin shack that serves as the neighborhood church. The only congregant, she sits in one of the student chairs that line the dirt floor. The priest, played by nonprofessional actor Ventura, is a gray and palsied man with a pitiless gaze. He hoarsely mutters that he can no longer say mass and that he has lost his “faith in the darkness.” This remark is an example of the stilted, artificial tone that mars the movie.

Seeking information about Joaquim’s life without her, and perhaps seeking simple companionship, Vitalina regularly visits the church. The priest admits that he said mass at Joaquim’s funeral, but refuses to give further information. He suggests that Vitalina speak with Joaquim herself, but admonishes her to learn Portuguese, since spirits only speak that language.

Vitalina digs graves for the priest in exchange for Portuguese lessons. During one lesson late at night in the graveyard, Vitalina repeats after the priest as he recites the story of Judas’s betrayal. The priest’s version of the story ends with the world being split in two: one half lit by the sun, the other plunged in darkness. “We were born of the shadows,” the priest intones. Such self-conscious dialogue is unnecessary in

a film so clearly permeated with pessimism. One doesn’t know whether to snicker or groan at such teenage existentialism.

Perhaps the most arresting aspect of *Vitalina Varela* is its visual beauty. The sharp, clear light that partially illuminates the ubiquitous darkness accentuates textures and casts shadows that define as well as obscure the characters and their surroundings. Although the film’s palette is subdued, the chiaroscuro lighting enriches it, especially the few colors that stand out.

But the movie’s formalism (e.g., its slow pace, ritualistic movement and spare, whispered dialogue) soon seems like an end in itself, and thus becomes increasingly tedious and alienating. We sense that the film is the work of a pretentious *artiste*. That is because the beautiful light never penetrates beneath the characters’ surfaces and into their psyches. Apart from references to Cape Verde (and one mention of Queen Elizabeth), the film does not acknowledge the outside world at all. Nor does it locate the story concretely in history. In *Vitalina Varela*, the world consists entirely of the timeless waste of Fontainhas.

Costa’s admirers, and perhaps the director himself, might argue that the film is a portrayal of immigrant workers’ difficult lives. If so, then why don’t the characters ever smile, laugh, or show simple human warmth toward each other? As poor as the residents of Fontainhas may be, they surely do those things. And the film never hints at any historical, political or economic reasons for its characters’ misery. Worse, it does not offer any hope that they might change their situation. The film is not an examination, but an aestheticization of these immigrant workers’ lives. Its treatment of these workers offers little insight and does them no favors.



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