

Csilla Markója

## MARKED PLACES

PEDRO COSTA, LAV DIAZ AND ISTVÁN FARKAS<sup>1</sup>

One of the most significant directors of auteur film in our age, Pedro Costa is speaking about his latest film, *Vitalina Varela* on the TIFF stage, in the hour of Q & A. More precisely, he is stammering. He is stammering, not only in English, but also in the language in which he should tell what it was like to shoot a new – the fifth – film in Lisbon’s slums, Fontainhas, what it required to find the protagonist, Vitalina Varela, what it means to shoot a film without a script, to have the non-professional actress improvise the text on the spot, in her flat as the setting, from session to session for months, for hours at a time, from which only a few minutes would get into the film, because she trusted you, revealed herself, her story, her fate upon your request. Who could tell what is real and what is fiction, and this being, this natural force, this primeval voice instinctively adopts the lamenting intonation of antique choruses and ancient dirges, all you have to do is follow her with lights, sounds, atmosphere effects. But make no mistake, it’s not a documentary, even though with your four-strong staff you took up quarters in the sad and hopeless black lives of these people from quondam colonies. Although you use your black colours to lend emphasis, your own lights to stress the secret, inner life of the rabbit-burrows of Fontainhas, though you share the immigrants’ dreams, build their huts, allot them some meagre daywage, insurance, hospital care calculated from the shooting budget raised from the community (but who would give money for films, you falter out, whose shooting time is not fixed, which has no script and its theme has been the same for a decade?), and although you are also motivated by anthropological, sociological curiosity, what you create is so much more than a sheer documentary that even the exuberant gratitude of the protagonist woman in Locarno cannot make us forget that we were not in Fontainhas but in Hades where a woman showed up from Cape Verde to appropriately mourn for an unfaithful husband who deserted her and went to Portugal, to mourn and bury him, and in the meantime to expose, or bury even deeper, her secrets.

And although I agree that it oversimplifies matters to reduce the interpretation of the Fontainhas trilogy to stations of foundation, agony and mourning, that in *Horse Money* we are not confined to the wandering in the dying man’s mind, nor only in the mourner’s mind in *Vitalina Valera*, and I may subscribe to the interpretation that her mourning is more revenge or testimony, still: Pedro Costa’s fragmentary

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<sup>1</sup> Part of a planned larger text on the relationship between Pedro Costa and the visual arts. Translated by Judit Pokoly.

words are never about time, which he finds excessively private, personal, but about the place in the sense of “trope”: Fontainhas is such a place, torn from the natural world of the Cape Verde islands and also from the urban body of Lisbon, a xenolith of subaltern existence (think of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the “affirmative sabotage”) with the fantastic labyrinth of its slate huts and pits, and at the same time a memento of the vices of the colonialists, symbol and allegory, a mythic stage equipped with the black colours of Costa, a locus in the sense Auschwitz is a trope, an marked place on a real and an imaginary map, or as in Lav Diaz’ 8-hour long film *Melancholia* the tropical forest is the territory in which hiding guerrillas get lost and finally surrender, one goes mad and rushes to a deserted clearing, a riverbank and starts shouting “shoot here” and the invisible enemy – who we thought were non-existing, just an obsessional idea – begin to shoot. A cut later one of the revolutionaries is sitting on the riverbank in the melancholy pose of the ancient river gods, tearing up the letter written to his love and letting them fall in the water of forgetfulness, of the Lethe on which in Lanzmann’s *Shoa* the survivor is rowing (in Kharon’s ferryboat, of course) and instead of speaking he keep singing.

*Melancholia* is about the grief elaboration of women mourning the revolutionaries in a psycho drama group and about its failure ending in suicide. Or think of Apichatpong’s marvellous film *Cemetery of Splendor*. Soldiers are in the lethal stupor of sleeping sickness, who refusing service all fell into coma at the same time, soldiers of Hades whom volunteering women nurse in a hospital converted from a school which was built over a cemetery, or more precisely, over the underground crypts of a quondam palace. Think of the virtual map the young soldier in sleeping sickness and the old woman nursing him perambulate led by a young soul-guiding girl like Hermes. While the excavator burrows the earth around the school, turning up the corpses, the memories, as if were – on the heaps of dirt children are playing football – maybe the woman is just remembering. Or dreaming. All is possible. A waking dream: the man exists in coma, the woman dreaming awake, alert. Someone descends into the realm of the dead, someone is a guide, someone mourns love. It would be impossible to touch on all the films that directly or indirectly are about mourning, grief work, spirits or ghosts. The wonderful films of Reygadas, Albert Serra, Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang.

Or Wang’s four-hour long shocking fictional documentary he shot while he put up in a Chinese mental hospital. As if contemporary art film were exclusively centred on spectres and mourning, and this includes such experimental Anthropocene educational films as Ben Rivers’s peculiar works in which the abandoned objects, cities of people appear as geological finds or strata, our entire civilisation is like a single growth ring on the immense trunk of the earth that will long outlive us.

Put on your red dotted mouth covering mask, sink the small bottle of disinfectant in your pocket and set out in the endless nights of the quarantine. Just for an evening walk around the Chestnut grove, without descending into the valley where joggers pull a long aerosol behind them on the rekortan track. In the first weeks you expected to tumble amidst heaps of corpses. Everything that got into the flat was

scrubbed, soaked in germicide. You only dared out for a health walk after midnight, and stopped with a weird sensation in the middle of the multi-lane junction, under the empty flyovers. Only the traffic lights kept flickering, and in a bus-stop the vaporized disinfectant was sprayed from a truck. In the first days of the quarantine the Freudian concept of anticipatory grief we feel when we know that someone close to us is severely ill and is going to die soon was mentioned frequently. Mourning for the climate, mourning for the pandemic, we mourn for the termination of our civilisation – or only of global capitalism to replace which we are (so far) unable to imagine something else, maybe we have no moral strength, no courage to do so.

Pedro Costa's art testifies to creative imagination and morality in this sense. Almost apprehensive, he warded off the words that praised his shocking, unique painterliness, the pictorial quality of his lighting techniques. What is common in contemporary art films is not only the thematization of grief and mourning, but nearly all can be characterized by an almost voracious attachment to the fine arts. Some adopts or conjures up definite paintings like the freelancing Catalonian film maker Albert Serra who furnished de Chardin paintings as tableaux vivants, who has created unparalleled quality of a digital film image with his wonderful still-lives and sfumatos in *La Mort de Louis XIV*. Another director used polyurethane foam and paper mâché to patch up dilapidated houses, he performed interior sculpture to harmonize the ramshackle design of stage sets with the performances of the homeless living in the street, like in Tsai Ming-liang's *Stray Dogs*. Another creator was inspired by Velazquez with his suits or rooms and passageways opening and mirrored into one another like Edward Yang, and there are filmmakers like Pedro Costa who stepped beyond Velazquez in the wake of the Caravaggioists or Rembrandt to illumine his nocturnes in such a way that they are endowed with the materialist emphasis of Netherlandish painting and the chiaroscuro transcendental emphasis of the baroque, spiced with the abstraction of modernist photography. Flashes of edges and glowing details convert the dilapidated, ruinous alleys, dens, gutted interiors and narrow alleyways of Fontáinhas reminding of the realm of favelas into never-seen images by magic; we have never seen such images in film art, but Costa eludes praise, directs conversation to the sound designer; he had been fussing too long about where to put the camera, where the spotlights, where the mirrors to diffract the light oozing in through the window so that his figures would wander about like spectres from realms beneath or above ours, but now and then a chair back, pot or home altar with a still-life of silk flowers flash up in the naturalism of the Dutch. And who has photographed faces like Costa's dignified, at times almost rural Vitalina in her grief, whose thick swollen knees appear in the foreground of a blue washbasin evoking the gown of the Virgin as a profane allegory of the consecrated foot-washing? Who has approached the reality, the facial features and murmured or chanted words of an immigrant, a manual worker with such reverence only to create exclusively with cinematographic tools, digital image and sound recording, cutting, condensation and lighting technique – the cheapest possible technology – a testimony and an almost incomprehensibly complex philosophical chamber piece? It reminds me of Pasolini,

who gave wooden swords in the hands of his non-professionals acting in front of the scenery of the Morocco desert and kasbahs and created *Oidipus Rex* from an amateur dramatic group; but while Pasolini cites, revives the (presumed) ancient Greek theatre (as imagined by Hölderlin), Costa really paints with light and models with shadow, his abstraction and realism are equally artistic. And although Pedro Costa did exhibit with the Portuguese sculptor *Rui Chafes*, and he names – in addition to Straub and Huillet – another great experimental film-maker, Andy Warhol, the maker of *Beauty 2*, not the pop art icon but as his inspiration, and although each frame of his films is a self-contained work of art uniting the realism and transcendence of North and South, the Portuguese film director eschews the glory of pictorialism with good reason. This filmed mapping superseding documentarism, this wonderful exploring glance is in the service of moral intentions. Costa looks on Fontainhas first of all as the symbol of a segregated territory: “for me the territory is space. It’s tangible, it’s real, it unites all of us. I found it to be a concrete territory. The territory that was very close to me, close to where I was and where I was living, although it was entirely invisible to me. However, it was a segregated territory. I started to work there: that territory became real, and it became a problem”<sup>2</sup> and he adds that his aim is to render each space as the location of a secret in which people constitute the only reality, all else must be filled in by imagination; for him, the ability of forgetting has key importance, for his co-authors the witnesses live amidst dreadful conditions: “The human experience is oppressive, life is oppressive. And in my case, I work with people who are sick, have no money, die or live in terrible conditions. We have extremely small budgets, and I’m well aware that I work with budgets as much as fifty times lower than those of a normal European film considered to be low-budget, if not poor. [...] I can see money on the screen. In fact, I can literally see it running in front of my eyes: I know how much it costs to block off a street, to have light even at night – that unique kind of light – and how to use interiors in a certain way, how to work with those actors... These are things I can do directly, but in a completely different way. In short, I’m not interested in time, I’m not interested in memory, I’m not interested in money. I’m interested in space. Space is something I can always recognize. I feel very far removed.”<sup>3</sup>

A possible antecedent to Costa’s segregated territory is how certain contemporary artists try to represent the persistence or the reality of the memory of Auschwitz. One can find attempts by artists to rescue Auschwitz from temporality ironing out, domesticating, rationalizing everything to cause-and-effect narratives (cf. historical consciousness), from the captivity of institutionalized policies of memory, as a deliberately concrete locus instead of a euphemistic name for some generalized sacrifice, like Holocaust.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Lissoni: The Need to be Dehypnotized. *Mousse* 33. Apr.-May 2012. <http://moussemagazine.it/pedro-costa-andrea-lissoni-2012/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Several numbers of the periodical *Enigma* are devoted to these experiments of art and their interpretation (Nos 37–38 and 42), each compiled and edited with the help of Hédi Turai.

The gesture to negate confabulating temporality, to do away with the lies of the narrative, which in Costa's interpretation is space, goes back to the Freudian concept of the "subconscious" which the Hungarian poet János Marno translated into poetic language in a lecture never put to paper: "the subconscious is the body itself". Around the turn of the 19-20<sup>th</sup> century the subconscious was thought to be a locus, palpably a deep-lying layer of the mind, as if there was a place in our skull beneath consciousness. "Mourning", Freud writes in *Mourning and Melancholia*, "is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or the loss of an abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal."<sup>5</sup> Freud differentiates mourning from melancholia (depression): "In mourning, it is the world which has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego itself." "Melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious."<sup>6</sup>

It is not easy to think - to say - that in Auschwitz stereotypes killed their fellow human beings, instead of flesh-and-blood people, or, to put it in another way, it was not a hangman-versus-victim (or, in a deeper and more serious interpretation of Agamben: hangman-turned-victim) situation.<sup>7</sup> Agamben, of course, knows Rilke's concept of one's "own death"; presumably, the possibility of one's "own death" and very soon afterwards the possibility of losing it were experiences from World War I. It is synchronous with the emergence of Freud's transposition of the unconscious to the subconscious as a concept in the heads of the receptive, which called to life in art the subconscious spatial fantasies. It is odd that, on the one hand, Agamben denies the right to humanity of the 'Muselmanns' and condemns the survivors if they are not witnesses, whereas, on the other hand, he can put in writing about a survivor so-and-so that he always speaks in the voice of the true ones. As if he was simultaneously fighting against Rabbinic pathos and yielding to the compulsory tone. Does anyone survive something only to testify? What do we want to have testimony about: power? About the impact of power on man? Whether a person driven by power is still a human being or only an "animal" eager to dominate? If he is an animal, he is a prejudiced animal whose brain is boiling with cultural miasmas, and not a lion driven by the stings of hunger or a hunting urge. How could death in Auschwitz be *sine causa* death, "without reason"? Then Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd's neck without any reason, didn't he?

And thus we have arrived at Nobel laureate Imre Kertész, the writer of *Fateless* and a reader of Agamben, opening the posthumous exhibition in 2005 of the great Hungarian painter István Farkas murdered in Auschwitz. We have arrived at Farkas's

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud: *Gyász és melankólia és más elméleti írások*. [Mourning and Melancholia, and other theoretical writings] Budapest, 2011. 83.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben: *Ami Auschwitzból marad*. [What remains of Auschwitz] Transl. Darida Veronika. Budapest, Kijárat, 2019. Originally: Giorgio Agamben: *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, New York, Zone Books, 1999. <http://artsites.ucsc.edu/sdaniel/230/Agamben-Remnants-of-Auschwitz.pdf>

territory, the snow-ball realms of a central field of force as distinguished spaces populated by lingering ghosts. The notion of anticipatory grief may well be used for the interpretation of his transparent spectral figures, of his entire oeuvre. The painting of Farkas – who arrived in Auschwitz with Kertész but found an alien death there in the gas chambers, which was “still his own death” on account of the oeuvre – reveals his experience, a soldier in World War I, of “the loss of one’s own death” and his vision and anticipatory grief for Auschwitz as a concrete locus, a segregated territory in which we are now locked. For our world is becoming Auschwitz. His contemporaries did not recognize the significance of this insight, though they sensed its volume and sometimes even uttered some magic words. “His figures are not from flesh and blood, they are spectral phenomena whose external forms, however distinct they may be, are grotesquely frightening. The forms are blurred, the colours visionary, we almost perceive how they sink formless in the painter’s imagination to seek their realistic motifs. Especially his oil paintings are full of exciting expressing values and colour sensations. A table-top or a dress is often given colours whose memory we can’t, and don’t want to, leave behind for a long time,” a journalist wrote in *Budapesti Szemle* under the penname Spectator.<sup>8</sup> And: “In another sheet the figures like ephemeral, daring presentiments show through the paint texture. But from the depth of each depiction and vision the same primeval feeling unfolds: man’s baleful loneliness and his lethal endangeredness in our age,” the brilliant former critic of Bauhaus, Ernő Kállai wrote in 1941.<sup>9</sup>

“Can you believe that there were times in Hungary when you could only whisper about István Farkas? Can you believe that there was a time in Hungary when you couldn’t boast of his paintings but had to hide or get rid of them? I was strolling on the shore in Szigliget, between the green water and the arc of the mountain called Golden Shell, like a woman’s lap. Up there in the most favourable cusp of the steep hillside, facing the water and the bluish blur of the opposite shore, a well-built cottage was dreaming in the vine-ripening sunshine. I was walking there, resident of the rest-house for writers, with great hopes that in these blues and greens and golden colours something would occur to me for my novel in the making. But only this cottage came to my mind, in the form of a waking dream: I am walking, in the depths of time, along this shore, in this shocking light, my face turned toward the vacant hillside; my eyes fill with longing and awe and suddenly my arm, my finger moves like in statues of heroes, showing forward and upward: I give an order to my company lagging behind, chatting: “Build it there!” Later I learnt that it had taken place almost exactly like that. Some time ago someone, a wealthy man, was walking here and he had a desire for this place. He must have yearned so eagerly and hopefully that this yearning lasted for decades to kindle my desire [...]”, Imre Kertész wrote, preparing for the opening of István Farkas’s exhibition in 2005. “Are you looking at

<sup>8</sup> *Budapesti Szemle*, 1941. Vol. 261. No. 764. 175.

<sup>9</sup> Neue Bilder von Stefan Farkas. *Pester Lloyd*, 30 March 1941, morning edition, 13. Transl. Hessky Orsolya.



the house?” a gaunt old peasant with bleary eyes asked me, perhaps a vine-grower in a checked shirt, with a spraying can dangling in his hand. He softened his lustreless, dull voice: “The Farkas villa,” he said. “Only the young man remained here in the end. He was taken. You know... Poor man... Where Jews were taken at that time...” I had to wait long, for many years, till I could see his pictures, these miracles, in an album. These faint figures in the radiant colours of landscapes, or in the dim light of interiors emanate a love of life. Yet, there is a knowing hidden in them, and the secret presentiment of danger. The cover of one of my books is resplendent with István Farkas’s ecstatic portrait of Dezső Szomory. There must be some stellar sign, some secret or sadness in these two geniuses meeting on the front of my book. A melancholic Ady line that occurred to him precisely in connection with Szomory: Each of our moments is a small, Hungarian fate.” But let us return to Szomory later. Let us rejoice to have the pictures of István Farkas here.”<sup>10</sup>

“Some time ago someone, a wealthy man, was walking here and a desire arose in him for this place.” Ah yes, here we are again, the usual Kertészian malice. For I have long come to develop an image of Imre Kertész, who read Agamben and demonstrably used, overused Bernhard’s hysterical-paranoid outbursts particularly in the *English Flag* and *Kaddish* said to be his main works, as somebody who was poisoned by Auschwitz, who was toxified by hostility (also against him). I am always astonished that special literature has elegantly ignored or overlooked the Thomas Bernhard passages borrowed by him, just as they did not object or criticize Kertész’s ethnicism. I darte not answer the question whether the “spectre” is the “eternal return of the same” or “a different return of the same” (positing the difference of “we don’t step twice in the same stream” between the two), but I imagine it as a spiral, a distinguished point of which returns slightly shifted a tier higher. The genius of the Hungarian language added to the meaning of *eltol* ‘shift’ the figurative meaning ‘spoil’. “The time is out of joint,” Hamlet exclaims. “O cursed spite! That ever I was born to set it right!” The territory of the spectral is the time out of joint, shifted time. The *unheimlich*, which in the aesthetics of the sublime appears as “immoderate”, in the aesthetics of the spectral it recurs shifted, that is, out of place, improperly, not in its right place. This is where Pedro Costa’s solution to our problem with Kertész and Agamben becomes plausible. Vitalina Varela’s monologue, lamentation about segregation, which copies Fontainhas upon Hades and Auschwitz, removes our prejudices from the confabulating narrative of time presented as a quantified stream that allegedly explains everything, and turns it into a place staring into whose mirror – provided that we have the courage to look – maybe everything will shift back into their right place.

<sup>10</sup> Kertész Imre: A Farkas Villa. A Farkas István életműkiállítás katalógusának előszava, részletek [The Farkas Villa. Catalogue foreword to the exhibition of István Farkas’s oeuvre] excerpts. BTM, 4 March-9 May 2005, curator: S. Nagy Katalin.

