

THE ROAD TO PERDITION:

PEDRO COSTA'S
HORSE MONEY



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W H A T

I S

H O R S E

M O N E Y

A B O U T ?

WHAT IS *HORSE MONEY* ABOUT?

Perhaps the difficulty of answering this question is itself an answer: in its structure and in the content of its dialogue, Pedro Costa's film investigates the possibility of talking about experience, of making what has happened intelligible and communicable. It can't be said that this is ever accomplished in the film in other than a paradoxical way. The paradox arises from the fact that the space of *Horse Money* — a hospital which is possibly a psychiatric hospital, i.e., a space purposed to facilitate something like a "talking cure" — already announces that anything and everything can be said here: it is a space where speaking is the daily business. But, because everything can be said, it becomes all the more important to speak carefully, to tie one's words to what exists between the lines, and avoid speaking too easily.

There is, in the film, a full report: Vitalina reading her husband's death certificate. Why is this read? Perhaps because the essential is not there: it is only words, only facts, a kind of life that is outside experience, the official record. What is experienced, if it can be spoken at all, can only be whispered in snatches, surrounded by silence.

The reticence on the part of the heroes of the film, if reticence is the right word for their attitude toward language, is the counter-strategy to a certain reticence on the part of authority. In the space of the

hospital, power does not act; it is merely present, manifesting itself in a blandly mistrustful *laissez-faire*. *Horse Money* suggests that this is how power exhibits itself and exerts itself today, precisely through withdrawal, by taking itself away, as well as things ("The food sucks. No salt"). Though the relationship between power and its victims is played out in a deformed manner, as if the two sides could collaborate and did not have to be adversaries, a different truth is expressed in the guarded look the silent doctor gives Ventura in the cafeteria. Authority can, in fact, only fear its charges and seek to destroy them or cause them to destroy themselves.

The manifest withdrawal of authority depicts a fantasy about how power could act. Whose fantasy is it? Consider the whole metaphor of sickness and cure that governs the narrative. Are we to see in the film a representation of a "successful" transference? Rather, it seems to me that *Horse Money* gives an image of a thwarted counter-transference, and that this is the politics of the film: power imagines itself to possess a mastery so complete that it need no longer intervene in anything, and imagines its "patients" as desiring just this degree of arrogance; but the latter take the good intentions of power for granted and accept the relaxation of power at face value, as part of a policy intended entirely for their benefit.

The question of healing is perhaps the crux of the film, the most impenetrable part of it. How does healing happen, if the doctors do nothing; for that matter, what is the disease? On the latter question, at least, it is easy to be clear, just as Ventura himself is clear about it (“I know my sickness,” he tells his doctor). The disease is the political and economic situation of these Cape Verdean laborers in Portugal; here the metaphor is not just a metaphor, since the etiology of the range of physical maladies from which they suffer can be traced directly to their living circumstances, as one of them states very early in the film: “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. It’s all the mould in the walls of our houses. We always lived and died this way. This is our sickness.”

Of this sickness, the film reveals, or depicts, another symptom: Ventura’s trembling. This trembling, which immediately links Ventura to us, the viewers, is not merely, and perhaps not at all, for a while (perhaps not until Ventura explains to Vitalina that the trembling is the result of the pills he is being given) something that signifies and that has a meaning. It is a writing of the body that acts directly on the space and on the image. (The question of whether this trembling is involuntary or not really should not come up; we should take the

trembling as belonging to the mystery of Ventura, his way of writing himself in the image.) Mostly unremarked on by the characters, and mostly not so much framed by the director as simply permitted to appear, the trembling goes on surreptitiously, beneath everything that *Horse Money* is “about” and that the film “deals with.” It does not, as far as we can see, inconvenience Ventura: it is just a vibration that happens, when he is there in the space. At the same time, it disconcerts, it forebodes an upheaval of space, or another way of perceiving reality (suppose our vision of the world were anchored to the trembling of Ventura’s hand). Isn’t Ventura’s trembling — alternation, rhythmic beating, oscillation — also a sign of the movie camera and projector, with their regular alternation between exposure and darkness? A sign, in the face of the unblinking stare of the digital camera, of loyalty to another form of inscribing images, and a vestige of that form in the digital? (For Jacques Tourneur, too, the vibratory nature of cinema was to be inscribed in the image: for example, he demanded a fan on the set to keep a curtain rustling.)

Inside the perspective of time that is Ventura’s, it is difficult to say that anything at all is still to happen. He is definite only about the past he lived through, and to which he still belongs because he is attached to it by his losses (his wedding ring, especially). Everything in *Horse*

Money is a repetition, but a repetition that hopes, if only dimly, to encounter something for the first time, in order to get out of the cycle. (In Tourneur's *Experiment Perilous*, one of several films by that director on the theme of therapy, the route to salvation and health goes by way of a repetition of obsessive symbols, in order that they may be attributed properly — to the manipulations of the rich and socially prominent villain — and discarded.) This is the eternal return of the film: that everything gathers in the space-time of the hospital, with its division between a frozen and inert version of the ultra-modern, dating back to the grim late 20th century, and a sprawling subterranean complex of tunnels and stairways reminiscent of the Gothic and romantic novel, where a liberatory gesture, capable of changing everything, might still be awaited and imagined. In other words, the geography of *Horse Money* dictates that things can be experienced and worked through only in these two modes of perpetual impossibility and perpetual possibility. The two modes seem not just to contradict each other but to cancel each other out, so that we assume that for Ventura, any cure would have to involve the surmounting of their duality, either through some improbable synthesis, or, as is far more likely (and as, finally, occurs), through the most classical (in cinematic terms) form of renewal: the departure.

Before the departure can take place, Ventura endures the extreme of enclosure, inside the elevator that is stuck. The terms of Ventura's historical and personal fate are recited, in a magical incarnation whose power remains confined within an imaginary space so entirely removed from history that it fails even to fulfill the roles of dream, allegory, or static image of history. It is an emblematic moment of isolation and suspension, like the disconnected phone in the office.

On the other hand, Ventura's power and his status as a figure of cinema derive from his ability to serve as a vehicle of communication. Using the pen he takes from the doctor, Ventura writes a text that he finally gives to Vitalina. Like Costa's previous films with Ventura, *Horse Money* is concerned with the human as the bearer of the symbolic. This is the explicit theme of the scene in which Ventura and his godchild, Benvindo, debate whether the lyric of a song contains the epithet "*achada*" or "*camarada*" — an argument over the essence of what is human. The symbolic is not merely that within which the figures move, the forest of symbols, visualized in the film at several points by public statues: it is that which they themselves are.

So it would be meaningless to say that Costa's is a cinema of the body, and leave it at that: it needs to be asked, what is a body, in this film? We are confronted

immediately with the spectral presence of the body that surges up out of nowhere, or perhaps from hell, and that continues so strangely throughout the film to insist on its discreet domination of space; but, as we have seen, the body is not just a presence, it is also a sign. Nor is it very meaningful to declare *Horse Money* to be a ghost story, without asking about the liberation the film strives to enact, a liberation of bodies and signs from the dualities of life and death and past and future.

Horse Money confirms the heightening of a Mannerist treatment of space in Costa's films. The images are more oblique than ever, foregrounding a certain degree of effort involved in seeing, and the shadows that fall across the spaces assume a greater independence and force; at the same time, within the increasing fragmentation of the filmic space, the ability of the human figures to hold on and survive assumes an ever purer significance. It is in relation to this that we should think about the opening sequence of still photographs. One's first impression is of people enacting themselves, rather stiffly, for the camera, but also bringing with them the eternity that belongs to the definitive image of human life. In certain shots, we also get the sense that these people and their world belong to cinema: the cinema of Sennett and Chaplin (the uniformed and hatted policeman), of Murnau (the boat and the bridge), of Sternberg (the alley between houses, with sunlight streaming

through the hanging laundry). What we are seeing then is something like the birth, or rebirth, of cinema from within itself.

This prologue already hints at the disaster of subjectivity that will be marked in Ventura's partial nudity and a-signifying tremor; at the catastrophe that has befallen the characters' relation to history, which is all they have and all that defines them (thus the obsessive repetition of dates and place names). If Ventura and his comrades continue to endure and are even, within the formal conditions of their cinema, indestructible, it is at the cost of their ability to intervene in or reenter history. Which makes Costa's staging of what looks like a reentry into history in the last two shots of *Horse Money* all the more ominous and significant. Perhaps this would be the one true cure (which the doctors' decision to discharge Ventura merely anticipates): to find again the ability to act in one's own body, to become master of one's gestures. A cure of cinema.

