

Exile and the Kingdom

Colossal Youth

Featuring the residents of a Lisbon slum, Pedro Costa's 'Colossal Youth' is a mesmeric, visually stunning portrait of a deprived community that confirms its director as one of Europe's major talents.

By Jonathan Romney

The intransigently austere *Colossal Youth* is the kind of film that must usually look for its exposure in those areas beyond the remit of commercial distribution, where cinema meets moving-image gallery work. It is not a film you would expect to find in a premium slot in Cannes, but its inclusion in the festival's 2006 competition was a welcome recognition of Portugal's Pedro Costa as one of today's most challenging and individual film-makers.

Colossal Youth demands to be seen more than once: a first viewing just about lets you acclimatise to its mesmerically slow pacing, visual stillness and incantatory verbal rhythms. In fact, *Colossal Youth* is a rather more approachable continuation of Costa's 2000 film *In Vanda's Room*, an engrossing but gruellingly unadorned semi-documentary study of Lisbon's Fontainhas quarter, particularly of its heroin addicts. Returning to Fontainhas, this time more specifically to its Cape Verdean community, *Colossal Youth* finds the quarter in the latter stages of demolition. Again, Costa's players are real people, apparently telling their own stories in starkly pared-down dialogue and in long, static takes. The central figure is Ventura, a tall, bald man with a thin grey beard, his quiet air of detached solitude chiming with a distinct resemblance to Ornette Coleman. Ventura figures at once as a ghost-like wanderer - embodying the communal memory of Fontainhas, about to vanish - and as a universal father leading his children, Moses-like, to a new home.

In this poetic essay on architecture and urbanism, the new housing development of Casal Boba - to which the Fontainhas community is being relocated - is first seen as a row of white, iceberg-like blocks. Its interiors are caves with glowing featureless walls, their windows framing blank white sky. We tend routinely to consider such spaces as

dystopian, yet compared to the squalor of Fontainhas, whose cramped spaces encapsulate a long accretion of misery, Casal Boba's whiteness suggests a blank slate for the future. For all its preoccupation with loss and deprivation, the film gestures at least towards the possibility of optimism. Where the English title emphasises the monumental quality suggested by Costa's compositions, the Portuguese means "youth on the march", better translated by the French *En Avant, Jeunesse!* ("Forward, Youth!"). Hope in future generations is suggested by the last voice we hear, the babbling of Vanda's little daughter.

In contrast to the forbidding rawness of *In Vanda's Room*, *Colossal Youth* is stylised on every level. The players' quietly monotone, almost mechanical diction gives their ostensibly mundane dialogue a ritualistic quality charged with shades of memory and mourning. Ventura's words acquire an oracular ring, his shamanistic function deriving from a love letter that he recites throughout the film: "I wish I could give you a hundred thousand cigarettes, a dozen fancy dresses, a car, the little lava house you've always dreamed of, a four-penny bouquet." Adapted from the words of French poet Robert Desnos, the letter has the attributes of a spell, a magical cure for nostalgic solitude.

The film's other dominant presence is Vanda Duarte, the central figure of *In Vanda's Room*. There we saw her as an emaciated addict, her violent coughing suggesting she was on the verge of death. Here she reappears, stockier and almost ebullient. Her character 'Vanda', whose circumstances presumably reflect Duarte's own, has moved from smack to methadone. She has a young daughter and is having trouble making ends meet, but she is surviving. Her raucous, sing-song tones (hers is the only dialogue that appears at least partly improvised) disrupt the prevailing tone of sepulchral solemnity. While some of the film's testimonies feel as if they come from beyond the grave, Vanda exudes an abrasive vivacity, the sort you sense in someone who has clung to life by her fingernails.

Words, however, are sometimes less telling than gesture. In one scene, Ventura plays a record of Cape Verdean pop while his son scribbles on a rickety table, making the needle skip: Ventura reaches out and gently stills his hand. Spoken words compete with ambient sound: dialogue exists against a clamour of television voices and demolition, but almost never traffic noise, as if to emphasise Fontainhas' isolation from the outside world.

Colossal Youth comes across as a heroically patient film. Like Straub and Huillet - the subjects of his 2001 portrait *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* - Costa favours stillness and uninflectedness. The film was shot over 15 months, with Costa often shooting up to 30 takes per scene, resulting in 320 hours of footage. The finished work feels as if it has slowly crystallised, like a mineral deposit. The film was shot digitally using only available light manipulated with reflecting surfaces, and this economy of means results in absolutely idiosyncratic textures. High contrast provides a striking quality of charcoal and chalk in the blacks and whites. Colour seeps in only at certain significant moments: for example, in a rare sighting of blue sky, as Ventura sits in the Gulbenkian Museum gardens, which he helped landscape.

Costa and co-cinematographer Leonardo Simões consistently shoot at low angles with wide-angle lenses, giving their compositions the status of spaces first and foremost, and only secondarily frames for human presence. People often inhabit the screen almost like living statues, notably Ventura, looming augustly in black suit and white shirt; in one shot, spatial distortion makes him tower over a council official.

Images resemble still photos: the first shot of Ventura shows him against a wall slanted away from the camera, its calcified texture suggesting an Anthony Caro sculpture. Alleyways resemble rock chasms, geological rather than human spaces. Walls glow as if with inner radioactivity. Often figures are haloed with light, suggesting the chiaroscuro of Old Master paintings - notably the scenes in a deserted Gulbenkian Museum where Ventura, next to a gold-framed scarlet canapé, seems to silently appraise the spoils of Western European colonial history.

Colossal Youth thrives on indeterminacies. It remains unclear whether Lento, the son who recalls a fire in his apartment, is living or effectively a ghost recalling his own death; whether Ventura's letter is to the newly-departed Clotilde, or to a lost love; or whether any of his racially diverse 'children' are literally his offspring. The scenes in which Ventura sports a head bandage turn out to be flashbacks to the 1974 Portuguese revolution that ended the Salazar dictatorship - a revolution which, Costa discovered, was experienced by Lisbon's Cape Verdeans less as liberation than as trauma.

Costa's engagement with Fontainhas' former residents comes across as a profoundly democratic endeavour, one that does not mythologise its disadvantaged subjects but attempts, as it were, to 'sing' the collective memory of a defunct community. Formally hybrid, *Colossal Youth* has as much to do with still photography, and with non-narrative theatre, as with conventional ideas of cinema. No doubt the film will find only a very limited audience, yet it is surely destined to have a resounding influence on the future of European independent film-making. This is cinema povera of a kind that achieves a truly epic weight.

Jonathan Romney. *Sight and Sound*. 06/2008

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