



# THE SONG OF PEDRO COSTA

22.10.2022 – 23.04.2023

*The Song of Pedro Costa* is the first exhibition to adopt such a specific perspective on the film-maker's work: faces, voices and songs as signs of what is most particular to each person and as a response to the combined pressure of history and personal life. Five works of the ten that are presented were created by Pedro Costa expressly for this exhibition.

Pedro Costa (Lisbon, 1959) is one of the film-makers most appreciated by new film audiences and international critics, especially since the release of *In Vanda's Room* (2000). His latest feature film, *Vitalina Varela* (2019), received the Golden Leopard for best film at the Locarno Film Festival.

Costa's cinematographic approach is based on certain themes and ways of producing images, including the technical and aesthetic aspects and emphasizing the dimension of the work (economics, production structure, shooting and editing times, types of relations, etc.).

Costa turned his back on the film industry by introducing a new approach to directing in *In Vanda's Room* and has since maintained an exemplary freedom and independence without abandoning his ties to the main trends of cinema history.

The coherence of his work allows us to understand it as a dynamic whole organized by lines that converge or intersect in various ways. The characters (or persons) in Costa's films have always been lost, displaced or disenfranchised people (drug addicts, migrants, etc.) towards whom the director shows an unusual identification and commitment. Added to this commitment is an increasingly sober and refined aesthetic approach, which develops visual and sound procedures to draw attention to bodies, objects and words, in addition to a succinct, sophisticated and diaphanous cinematographic language.

A process of radicalization from the hegemonic to the subordinate can be seen in Costa's films on two levels: professional and racial. *Blood* (1990), his first feature film, featured white professional actors (except the children). The next, *Casa de lava* (1994), introduced Cape Verde, colonialism and black bodies, with more amateur actors and fewer professionals. From then on, white professional actors were progressively replaced by black amateurs. However, one of Costa's greatest achievements is that his directing transformed these amateurs into accomplished performers. Vanda Duarte, Ventura and Vitalina Varela are perhaps the most outstanding actors, but there are many more who perform their roles flawlessly. *Vitalina Varela* marks the culmination of this evolution, as it

only features black people. Significantly, Vitalina Varela received the award for best actress at the Locarno Film Festival in 2019.

In his work, it is as if Pedro Costa has abandoned his dual identity as a white Portuguese man and a professional member of the film industry. The choice of Cape Verdean characters involves a rejection of the metropolitan position within the colonial structure that defines Portugal's immediate past, in addition to confirming Costa's refusal to forget that past and its current consequences. The exultant presence of black bodies, coinciding with the growing darkness of the films (which has several readings), is an aesthetic, racial and political manifesto. Costa's films show an increasing presence of black actors (*Vitalina Varela* features them exclusively) and an increasing use of Cape Verdean Creole instead of Portuguese. This development can be clearly seen in several works of the exhibition *The Song of Pedro Costa*.

This extraordinary process of acculturation is in the opposite direction to the usual one: objects of western high culture are localized into the Cape Verdean minority culture. A long sequence of *Colossal Youth* (2006) gives an account of Ventura's visit to the exhibition of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Collection in Lisbon. In this important scene, Ventura is seated on a superb 18th century French couch in a kind of symbolic appropriation of the Portuguese and European heritage. He, a black man who comes from an island marked by the slave trade, a Portuguese colony until 1975, shortly after the Carnation Revolution, takes the liberty of sitting on a luxurious symbol of Western aristocracy.

The same actors are featured in successive films of Pedro Costa. Their life experience and intentions are decisive for the definition of their roles, as are certain places that are visited again and again (Cape Verde, the Lisbon neighbourhoods of Fontainhas, 6 de Maio and Cova da Moura, cemeteries and architecture, especially shanties, self-built houses and ruins). Also repeated are certain arguments of the gaze and listening, such as fixed images, low lighting, night,

a long tempo, silence, and a very rich sound atmosphere, whose content is provided partly by the voice-over. Added to all these elements are phrases, objects and themes that pass from one film to another, creating a very rich system of internal references that works in favour of the filmic language. Because of the abundance of these congruences, we can call this poetic cinema.

The poetry is understood as a structural feature, insofar as the story no longer advances through a traditional plot of cause and effect, or at least not mainly. That is why ambiguities often arise, when the narrative logic is loosened to offer greater complexity, allowing plot variations to come into play at times: the texture of the story gains density by tempting us with parallel interpretations, just as the words in a poem have more than one meaning without the divergences between them collapsing into each other. This is a poetic cinema subject to its own laws and consolidated by attention to detail, by the internal echoes and the resonances between films, seeking the accuracy provided by the thresholds of meaning rather than blurriness. This approach demands an open, flexible attitude on the part of the spectator in response to the stimuli that are offered.

The coherence and organic nature of Pedro Costa's films is located primarily in a conflict that is featured from the very beginning. The first scene of *Blood* shows us a father who is about to abandon his children. Vicente, the oldest son, asks him what he should say to Nino, his little brother, and the father answers laconically: "That I died". This sinister, deceitful separation takes on different nuances from film to film, with more irregularities and all kinds of implications, until the recent *Vitalina Varela*.

Children left on the seashore while their mother swims away, dumped or killed by their mother and sold by their father to a prostitute appear here and there as variations of the same subject. It is inevitable to think that the bruised bodies of the young drug addicts who star *In Vanda's Room* are an embodiment of this trauma. All have been abandoned by fate,

family, the State or themselves. And in its most political version, that devastating mistreatment is suffered by the bodies of black Cape Verdean immigrants. The colonial mother country has caused a disease that Ventura and his fellow immigrants diagnose accurately as patients in the mental hospital in *Horse Money* (2014). “I know what my disease is”, Ventura answers the psychiatrist, “it’s the damp stain on the wall of our houses”. Marginalization and disease.

Continuing with the above, several of Costa’s films (*In Vanda’s Room*, *Colossal Youth* and *Horse Money*) refer to a famous passage from the novel by Georges Bernanos *Diary of a Country Priest* (1936), from which Robert Bresson’s film of the same name (1951) was adapted. In this work, the abbot of Torcy does not consider the young priest to be individually responsible for his alcoholism, but rather understands its social and historical origin: “And don’t imagine I’m calling you a drunkard. (...) So you see, this thirst was bound to get you in the end, and all said and done it isn’t even yours. And mind you it lasts, it goes on for centuries. — poor people’s thirst! It’s a certain legacy!”<sup>1</sup> This legacy is the collective translation of the nameless father’s “That I died” at the beginning of *Blood*.

Some of the variations of the initial conflict are severe, as in *Bones* (1997), in which the excruciating strain of the family bond results in a young father selling his baby. There are also responses as extraordinary and imaginative as that of Ventura in *Colossal Youth*. Ventura is entirely different to the father who abandons his children under the sign of death. Throughout the entire film, he expresses his yearning to have many children, in a broad, expansive, almost delusional impulse. When he is going to be rehoused, he demands more rooms for his children. A town hall official asks: “How many children do you have?”, and Ventura replies: “I don’t know yet”. Often, it will not be clear if someone is his son or not. Sometimes it will seem so and other times not, showing the typical instability of Costa’s narrative.

The theme is therefore not one of having, obtaining or producing children, whether biological or even imaginary, but

one of stubbornly constructing the much more disorderly and elusive fiction of a father. Ventura represents all the characters moving through the landscape of poverty and exclusion, corresponding to the definition given of himself by Fernando Pessoa under the pseudonym Bernardo Soares in the second part of *The Book of Disquiet*: “an abstractly maternal being”.<sup>2</sup> We can also call him a “matriarchal man”,<sup>3</sup> which is how the priest Don Manuel Bueno was called in Unamuno’s novel *Saint Manuel, Martyr*. For these reasons, the character of Ventura compensates for the mainly male drama that drives Pedro Costa’s narrative (Nino’s character is adopted by a series of males and—with differences—females).

The difference between women and men is a crucial issue. This difference is observed throughout Costa’s work. It is described by material and formal means, and most obviously by the separate spaces occupied by the two sexes. This is seen clearly in *In Vanda’s Room* and in the exhibition *The Song of Pedro Costa*. The females are much more resolute and, from the point of view of representation, even though their condition is the same as or worse than that of men, they fit less into the role of abandoned girls because they are less accepting of their condition.

The histories of cinema, painting, poetry and music are present in these films, often mixed with particular and collective references to the people who accompany the director. We must highlight at least one more case after that of Bernanos and Bresson. Very early on in Costa’s second feature film, *Casa de lava*, a letter appears among the papers of Edite, the wife of a Portuguese political prisoner who died incarcerated in the Cape Verdean prison of Tarrafal, often described as a concentration camp. The letter is written in Creole and runs through the film in various semblances: at another point it is said to belong to Leão, the young islander who, after a work accident in Lisbon, is returned to Cape Verde in a coma, triggering the story. The letter therefore embraces both Portugal and the islands, and by extension involves all the characters in Pedro Costa’s imaginary universe.

The letter is related to the last one that the surrealist poet Robert Desnos sent to his companion Youki from the Flôha concentration camp on 15 July 1944. This love letter is appropriated by various characters in later films by Costa, especially by Ventura and Lento in *Colossal Youth*, of which it becomes the centrepiece, and it is also evoked in *Vitalina Varela*. The terrible love story of Desnos and Youkimerges with others that are equally dramatic: the one represented by Edite and Vicente (the political prisoner of Tarrafal) and the one personified by Leão, Ventura and the other Cape Verdeans who were forced to emigrate to Portugal for economic reasons. All of them are worthy of that deeply emotional text loaded with the negative weight of history. The texts are miscegenated in their translation into Creole, as in the conversion of “a little house in the Compiègne forest” into “the little house of lava you always dreamed of”. And there are added passages that are fundamental to the content of Costa’s films, generating countless echoes, like the end of the letter: “It hurts to see these terrible things that I don’t want to see (...) Sometimes I lose strength and think I’m going to forget.”

Memory thus takes on outstanding value. In *Colossal Youth*, Ventura proposes a pedagogy of memory. Lento, who shares a shack with him in a Lisbon suburb, asks him to write a letter to his wife who lives in Cape Verde on his behalf because he is illiterate. Ventura composes the letter in his head and repeats it to his friend, partially or totally, up to six times throughout the film. After it is recited a seventh time by Lento, it seems that we, the spectators, are the ones who must learn the text. The cinema works against the loss of memory, against the oblivion of the dead and their dilution in history. And hard work triumphs, at least for Lento and Ventura, who see their situations transformed at the end of the film.

Something of enormous importance occurs for the evolution of Costa’s work: because of its content and its vocalization, Ventura’s repeated chant becomes the first and most important of Pedro Costa’s songs. The voice is more powerful than those heard previously, though the voices of Vanda, Zita, Nhurro and many others are full of expressive richness, vernacular and

particular tones, as if conveying the essence of their speakers’ bodies. The voice of Ventura reciting the letter is the matrix of the cinema to come, of what is now being presented as a pre-view in the exhibition *The Song of Pedro Costa*.

The text of the letter highlights the character of the loving black man, displaced from his cultural environment by the need to emigrate, exploited even more than his white fellow workers in the city, but nevertheless preserving his love and fidelity towards the wife he left behind on the islands. The political connotations of this beautiful voice bring out poignant echoes (Desnos, a prisoner of the Nazis and the prisoner of Tarrafal, subjugated by the Salazarist dictatorship), but it does represent a certain idealization of the male.

Put in simple terms because of the lack of space here, there comes a time when the difference between men and women is expressed clearly and even forcefully. Vitalina Varela, as the film of the same title recounts, travels to Lisbon to attend the funeral of her husband, who had practically abandoned her thirty-five years earlier, as soon as he settled in Portugal. When Vitalina arrives, Joaquim has been buried for three days. Vitalina’s voice is intertwined with Ventura’s, exaggerating the qualities of the whisper, creating a strange, tense sound product with enormous audiovisual effectiveness. (It would be difficult to reproduce such an intonation in the theatre.) It is a voice that sings without the need to sing, but it reveals the real woman, who belies the ideal female that Ventura’s letter suggested and also the idolized male created by the needs of a migrant man subjected to a castrating regime. She achieves this by settling the accounts with her husband and thus expressing all the values of the conflict that runs through Costa’s films. “Your death doesn’t wipe out all the evil you’ve done”, Vitalina tells Joaquim’s spirit.

So, we finally discover two tensions that run through these films: one that starts from the opening scene, marking the abandonment suffered by the men and continuing until character of the priest Ventura in *Vitalina Varela*, abandoned by his parishioners and by his faith; and one that we now

clearly read from Vitalina backwards, including the numerous women who stand up more clearly and courageously to the situation of social and domestic injustice in which they live: Edite, Clotilde (who, at the end of *Bones*, kills the unconscious father who had sold the baby), Vanda (who admits to Nhurro that she had chosen drugs and justifies it using the Abbé de Torcy's argument), Zita, Bete, Jeanne Balibar and Danièle-Hueillet (who argues with her husband Jean-Marie Straub in the portrait dedicated to them by Pedro Costa in the 2002 documentary *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?*).

Vitalina's extraordinary voice solves the mystery of a difference; that is, it creates a new state of conflict by putting the images in motion through pure opposition: uttering her words with absolute friction and a radical resistance. She presents the negation of everything that went before and embodies the ever-ambiguous addressee of the wishes expressed in the letter. She gives an image to a woman who did not have one, but the image is totally contrary to the expectations that were set. We therefore feel that something has concluded in the investigation launched from the root conflict that appeared in *Blood*, because Vitalina's mourning has been repeated and tested in images film after film, its various forms pursued almost to exhaustion, until she finally presents the antithesis. All of this results in an interweaving of truths and fantasies regarding the suffering and its derivations: story, image, scene, character and voice. Vitalina is therefore the apex of Pedro Costa's work and ushers in the future. The striking transfer from the male viewpoint to Vitalina's forceful one marks the director's retreat from his national and professional identity and from his gaze.

The specificity of Costa's film narrative, based on the intensity of the echoes rather than on the succession and its consequences (this allows us to consider it as a whole, as stated above), poses a state in which Vitalina's grievance does not cancel out the premises of all the previous characters and scenes. In fact, the last shot of *Vitalina Varela* offers a positive recovery of the themes associated with the letter: a young cou-



*Casa de lava – Scrapbook, 1994*



*Our voices will sign no more. Adelaide, 2022*



*To the little radio, 2022*



*Our voices will sign no more. Clotilde, 2022*



*Ne change rien, 2009*





*Stone song*, 2015

ple build their “house of lava” with their own hands in Cape Verde. This recovery suggests that the entire fictional apparatus will once again be launched on the basis of the old themes. However, there are signs that what follows is moving towards altered, sublimated forms typical of a second degree, in which the conflict is only established as a representative form of another form. And here we enter the core of the curatorial perspective of the exhibition *The Song of Pedro Costa*.

A song can be considered a second degree declaration if we place it in relation to the common verbal communication of the same content: for example, the declaration of a situation or a feeling. A song involves a greater distance from the referent, among other things because of the musical discipline and the forms it takes, including the preparation of the performer, rehearsal, repetition and musical conventions. We must therefore focus on two significant antecedents: the film *Change Nothing* (2009), which focuses on rehearsals and performances of the actress and singer Jeanne Balibar, and the music and film show that Pedro Costa put on together with OsMúsicos do Tejo in 2016 with the title *The Daughters of Fire*. Both works indicate the importance of music and singing at this time, when perhaps the conditions could arise for a new cycle and a new attitude, as we have seen by briefly following the evolution of the films.

Although Costa focuses mainly on cinema, he has exhibited works related to his films on numerous occasions, often accompanied by other creators such as the sculptor Rui Chafes, the photographer Paulo Nozolino and the film-maker Chantal Ackerman. He has exhibited, among other places, at the Fundação de Serralves in Porto (2005 and 2018), at the Hara Museum in Tokyo (2012) and at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2022).

*The Song of Pedro Costa* is an exhibition conceived for La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, in which the film-maker’s work is approached from the specific perspective of the direction that it may take in the future. It also rehearses one of its possible immediate developments. The exhibition revolves around faces,



voices and songs as signs of what is most particular to each person and as a response to the combined pressure of history and personal life—a response to suffering and loss. This is the first exhibition that specifically investigates this facet, which is so important to Costa’s latest work. Its theme was not a question of personal taste or a free selection from a wide range of material: it was chosen because it is relevant at this precise moment in the evolution of the film work of Peter Costa. We might even venture that his next feature film will be a musical in the strict sense. The works included in *The Song of Pedro Costa* come closer and closer to this likely new stage in his work.

The exhibition is based on ten works, with titles alluding to the idea of singing: *Casa de lava – Scrapbook* (artist’s book, 1994) and *Songbook of Fogo* (a documentary video to display the contents of the notebook), *Balar de Balibar* (projection, 2009), *Ventura’s Song* (projection, 2014), *Our Voices Will Sing No More* (a set of three independent works projected in different rooms of the exhibition, 2022), *Stone Song* (five photographs on paper, 2015), *Morna of Shadows* (installation with five projections on screens suspended from the ceiling and soundtrack, 1994–2022) and *Songs to Avoid Suicide* (installation made up of the works *On Suicide* and *To the Little Radio*, both from 2022).

*Casa de lava – Scrapbook*, an artist’s book produced during the production of Costa’s second film, presents many of the themes that would unfold over the years in his films and even contains the text of the famous letter recited by Ventura. For this reason, we can consider it a songbook, the title given to the video that presents its pages in full, *Songbook of Fogo* (2013), which is exhibited together with the original scrapbook. The abundant visual compendium of press clippings, photographs, handwritten notes and other signs collected in the scrapbook reveals the author’s mental process—true cinema. In silence, the final part of the exhibition presents the film’s plot and returns the gaze to work, a place of intimacy and thought. The scrapbook presents a careful listener with early echoes of the songs that came later, one by one.

The first song is a scene from *Ne change rien*. Jeanne Balibar tries to master a seemingly easy rhythm: tararirara / titarira / tararira ta / ta tarira.

It is the skeleton of the song *Cettenuit* and the work done to embody it, which is why it opens our exhibition. The composer of the music, Rodolphe Burger, accompanies the singer on guitar. The sequence demonstrates Balibar’s difficulty in keeping time (she sings too fast or too slowly), but it also shows us the difference in her voice. What is this voice about? It is about its difference, especially when she seems to be out of tune or strays out of time. Any failings concern only the order of the music and not at all the presentation of the body. What is this voice about? It is about its indifference.

*Ventura’s Song* comes from the short film *Sweet Exorcist* (2012), which was the first footage of *Horse Money* (2014), of which it is a part. It has a wide, fixed shot. Ventura disgorges in brief bursts the words of *Alto Cutelo*, a poem by Renato Cardoso set to music by OsTubarões and released in 1976 on their first album, entitled *Pepe Lopi*. The song was set in the context of the independence of Cape Verde, which was obtained a year earlier. It is surprising that the lyrics of *Alto Cutelo* manage to accurately summarize the main story provided by Pedro Costa’s films. It could be the film biography of Ventura. This is the song, as he sings it:

#### ALTO CUTELO

*In Alto Cutelo*  
*The juniper no longer sprouts*  
*The root has withered*  
*And can’t find the water*  
*The water runs very deep*  
*And it doesn’t reach men*  
*For a week the woman*  
*hasn’t lit the fire*  
*Her children...*  
*Her children in the street*

*Only one is working  
 Her husband left for Lisbon  
 A long time ago  
 He was hired  
 He went to Lisbon  
 He sold his land  
 There you work  
 With rain and with wind  
 In the CUF chemical company  
 In Lisnave and in J. Pimenta  
 Cheap labour  
 No matter how hard you work  
 Cheap labour  
 A shack without electricity  
 Another dark day  
 On earth  
 My conscience  
 And I worked  
 The juniper no longer sprouts  
 In the Cutelo...*

It is worth paying attention to the lyrics of *Our Voices Will Sing No More*. Written by the three singers and the director, they express their common state of concern and are therefore a valuable artistic and experiential document. Karyna Gomes, Alice Costa and Elizabeth Pinard, or Irondina, Clotilde and Adelaide. And among the voices of the women is that of Pedro Costa, a voice interlined with the other three, just as we imagine occurs in each text and image filmed by him. But if we listen carefully, we will clearly hear four more voices:

Olga, Masha, Irina and Anton, the characters of *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov, whose fourth act forms the textual basis of the song<sup>4</sup>. In our case, the sisters are poor, disoriented immigrants of a different race. The three works of the group *Our Voices Will Sing No More* have different singers (the character's names are added to the titles). Their lyrics are related but they differ in length and in some details. The following is the longest.

*OUR VOICES WILL SING NO MORE. ADELAIDE:*

*What a shitty day!  
 I'm tired...  
 We'll be left alone  
 We'll start again alone*

*One day we'll know why we suffer  
 And that mystery will end*

*But you have to live  
 You have to work  
 Work and nothing else*

*Listen!  
 That music is so beautiful...  
 You have to live  
 You have to live*

*We'll disappear forever  
 They'll forget us  
 They'll forget our faces  
 Our voices will sing no more*

*Nobody will remember how many we were  
 Our suffering will turn into joy for the people of the future*

*Oh, dear sisters  
 Our lives are not over yet  
 We'll live!  
 We'll know why we live and why we suffer*

*If we knew...  
 If we knew...*

*One day we'll know why we suffer  
 And that mystery will end*

*Let's leave it...!  
Those dead people can't answer*

*I'm tired...*

Face, song, life. Oblivion, silence, death. This series of linked concepts perfectly explain the argument of the exhibition *Song of Pedro Costa*: the reason for his attention to faces and songs as antidotes or denials of oblivion and death. And, if we look at the period between lines 7 and 13, the music remains in the middle of the parenthesis formed by the repetition of the verb to live, reformulating the interval of life as work and song. That embrace suggests that work consists precisely of making music, as if singing served to exploit the mystery of living in pain. Another way of glossing it is that the beautiful music that Adelaide talks about is nothing more than the music of work, the sound of activity—work music or the work of making music.

*Stone Song* is a series of five photographs. The images come from frames of *Casa de lava*, *Colossal Youth* and *Horse Money*, which were projected on the stone of the Cryptoporticus of the Museo Nacional Machado, de Castro in Coimbra. Photographs were obtained from these projections and printed on Japanese paper for this exhibition. The porosity of the paper coincides with that of the stone, which pierces small pathways in the faces: little tunnels through which time passes, and with it all the history (of the flesh) that we are capable of assimilating. The five dimly lit male faces are eloquent precisely because they are mute. The dual texture (stone and paper) of the photographs produces a dual silence and therefore an interval, which is typical of all vocalization. The skin of the image reminds us that the voice, that texture of the body, can essentially be mute.

Morna is a style of Cape Verdean music and *Morna of Shadows* is an installation that has five projections on suspended screens immersed in a sound environment that was edited with material recorded in Cape Verde during the filming of *Casa de lava*. The projections feature five shots with women's

faces, just as *Stone Song* featured five men. The women are far brighter and more elevated, demanding two different ways of contemplating the gender separation that is so present in Costa's films. The men and women are mute. They listen or, as often happens, they sing internally.

*Morna of Shadows* is the title of a song composed by the violinist Bassoé (Raul Andrade) for *Casa de lava*. The song, in Tina's teenage voice, is included twice in the installation's soundtrack, first a cappella and then accompanied by Bassoé's violin. The lyrics are a Creole version of the last poems that Robert Desnos kept with him at the time of his death, recently liberated from the Czech concentration camp of Terezin, where he was interned in June 1945. There are just eight lines adapted from verses of *I have dreamed of you so much*, the second poem of the book *To the Mysterious Woman*, from 1926. The last words of Desnos impregnate Costa's imaginary and his musical atmosphere dually and profoundly.

It is the sweetest song of all those fighting to be heard in *The Song of Pedro Costa*.

#### MORNA OF SHADOWS

*I will dream of you so much  
I will love you so much, I will talk to you so much  
I will love your shadow so much  
That nothing will remain of you  
I'll be just a shadow among the shadows  
I'll be a hundred times more shadow than your shadow  
To be the shadow that comes and goes  
In your life full of sun*

The installation *Songs to Avoid Suicide* is composed of two screens facing each other. The projections work in such a way that they seem to pay attention to each other. *On Suicide* and *To the Little Radio*, the two independent works that make up the installation, have lyrics by Berthold Brecht and music by Hanns Eisler.

*On Suicide* adds to Eisler's music a fragment of *Cantata BWV 4, Christ lag in Todesbanden*, by Johann Sebastian Bach. The text of the song comes from the work *The Good Woman of Szechuan*. The prostitute Shen-Te prevents the suicide of the aviator Yang Sun, after which she sings this song:

### ON SUICIDE

*In this land and during these times  
There may not be gloomy evenings,  
Also high bridges over rivers  
Even the hours between night and morning  
As well as the entire wintertime All this is dangerous  
For because of this suffering  
People throw away their unbearable lives  
In only a moment.*<sup>5</sup>

The background of *To the Little Radio* is related to *On Suicide* more than it seems at first sight. Brecht is fleeing Nazi persecution, saving his radio (he does not mention anything else that can be salvaged in this poem, but he does in others) to ensure that he is informed in exile of everything that happens in ill-fated Germany. Here are the lyrics:

### TO THE LITTLE RADIO

*O little box I carried in my flight  
So carefully your lamps and tubes protecting  
From house to boat, from boat to train held tight,  
So that my enemies could still address me,*

*Beside my bed and much to my dismay  
Last thing each night and first thing every day,  
About their victories (defeats for me).  
O please do not fall silent suddenly!*<sup>6</sup>

The two songs were written by Brecht during his exile, so they have a historical background whose tonality also affects the work of Pedro Costa. *Songs to Avoid Suicide* displaces the endless and often unbearable anguish, correcting its scale by first being enacted and then sung. Strictly speaking, this double distance constitutes avoidance, because an effect replaces a cause.

The five independent works that make up *Songs to Avoid Suicide* and *Our Voices Will Sing No More* were produced expressly for the exhibition *The Song of Pedro Costa*. They come from the theatrical material of *As Filhas do Fogo* and were filmed for the exhibition with an original cinematographic staging. *Morna of Shadows* shows significant variations from earlier versions. *Balar de Balibar*, a fragment of the film *Ne change rien*, is presented in this form for the first time.

An essay also entitled *The Song of Pedro Costa* written by the exhibition's curator, Javier Codesal, was published to accompany the exhibition.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Georges Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*. Translated by Pamela Morris. Tea Books, 2019, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*. Translated by Richard Zenith. Penguin Books, 2002. p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *Saint Manuel, Martyr*. Translated by Marciano Guerrero, Kindle Edition, 2013

<sup>4</sup> *Plays by Anton Tchekov*, translated by Constance Garnett, New York, Macmillan, 1916.

<sup>5</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Suicide Song from The Good Woman of Szechuan*. Translated by Philip V. Bohlman in *Jewish Musical Modernism, Old and New*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman, University of Chicago Press, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Poems of place and circumstance*. Translated by Philip V. Bohlman in *Jewish Musical Modernism, Old and New*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman, University of Chicago Press, 2008.

In collaboration with:



Curator: Javier Codesal

## TO PREVENT SUICIDE

Seminar on the work of Pedro Costa

13 – 17.02.2023

This seminar focuses on Costa's cinema and its expansion into the terrain of contemporary art, from the starting point of the exhibition on show at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge.

With the participation of Pedro Costa and Javier Codesal.

Inscriptions at [lavirreinaci@bcn.cat](mailto:lavirreinaci@bcn.cat)

## FILMOTECA DE CATALUNYA

17.01 - 07.02.2023

During the exhibition, a complete retrospective and carte blanche will be held, with resenatations by the film-maker himself, at the Filmoteca de Catalunya. See the programme at [www.filmoteca.cat](http://www.filmoteca.cat)

Tuesday 17 January

8.00 pm – Screening of *Onde jaz o teu sorriso?* (Pedro Costa, 2001) and discussion with the film-maker

Wednesday 18 January

5.30 pm – Screening of *Cavalo Dinheiro* (Pedro Costa, 2014)

8.30 pm – Screening of *Mudar de vida* (Paulo Rocha, 1966).

Both sessions accompanied by the film-maker

La Virreina Centre de la Imatge  
Palau de la Virreina  
La Rambla, 99. 08002 Barcelona

Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday  
and public holidays, 11 am to 8 pm  
Free entry



#PedroCosta

@lavirreinaci

[barcelona.cat/lavirreina](http://barcelona.cat/lavirreina)