

# The Camera Devoured: Cinematic Cannibalism in Pedro Costa's *Casa De Lava* (1994)

Thomas Moran

Monash University, Australia

Correspondence: [tom.moran1@monash.edu](mailto:tom.moran1@monash.edu)

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## Abstract

*Pedro Costa's Casa De Lava (1994) draws on the cannibalistic potential of cinema in order to excavate the history of colonialism in Cape Verde. Cannibalism operates in a two-fold manner in Casa. Firstly, it refers to Costa's practice of employing cinematic references in order to draw out otherwise concealed elements of earlier films. Secondly, it denotes an aesthetic practice in which the film is cannibalised by the people and geography of Cape Verde. By operating in a zone between documentary and fiction, Casa undermines the commodifying and exoticising tendencies of cinema. Instead, by drawing on the stories of the people of Cape Verde, the film illustrates the way in which the legacy of colonialism continues to haunt the island. Cannibal cinema in Casa is a method for making these otherwise concealed histories speak, and in doing so, create new forms of cinematic invention.*

**Keywords:** Pedro Costa; Casa De Lava; post-colonial aesthetics; documentary; cannibalism; Portuguese cinema

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Pedro Costa's film *Casa De Lava (Down to Earth, 1994)*<sup>i</sup> exemplifies the cannibalistic power of the cinematic medium. I will argue that the cannibalistic quality of the cinema operates in *Casa* not as a force of exploitation or objectification, but as a power of cinematic invention. This paper seeks to develop a new theorisation of cannibalism as an aesthetic strategy by focusing on how it can operate within cinema. Cannibalism functions in a number of ways in *Casa*. Firstly, cannibalism characterises Costa's approach to cinematic history, through the film's loose adaptation of Jacques Tourneur's horror classic, *I Walked with a Zombie (1943)* and Roberto Rossellini's neo-realist *Stromboli (1950)*. Secondly, cannibalism structures the relationship between the film and the people and landscape of Cape Verde, which eventually overtakes the original script and begins to determine the direction of the film. Finally, cannibalism is understood as the basis for a formal approach to creating films, in which the film's attention to the specificity of people and geography allows cinema to tap into the otherwise concealed histories of Portuguese colonialism.

Costa was born in Lisbon 1959 and was part of the first generation who came of age after the fall of the *Estado Novo*, the far-right corporatist regime led by Prime Minister Antonio de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970). *Estado Novo* had governed Portugal since 1933 and was overthrown in the Carnation Revolution of 1974. This event which returns in Costa's film *Cavalo Dinheiro (Horse Money, 2014)* is one of the many historical undercurrents which shape his work. But what is most relevant to *Casa* is the anti-colonial struggle in the Portuguese colonies of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau which destabilised the dictatorship during the 1960s. Cape Verde gained its independence in 1975, but, as *Casa* shows, the colonial legacy remains.

Costa was a musician in the Lisbon punk scene before deciding to study film at the Lisbon Theatre and Film School in 1979. There he was taught by the famous Portuguese director Antonio Reis (1927-1991) and Costa has been characterised as belonging to the 'School of Reis' (Lim, 2012: 101). Reis was an important influence on Costa's approach to cinema. Reis made films about the impoverished peasants of the Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro province in north-eastern Portugal. But as Costa himself notes, Reis was also a lover of classical Hollywood and avant-garde European cinema, meaning that his films were never straightforward documentaries and instead destabilised the boundary between documentary and fiction. (Costa, 2015: 19) The relationship between fiction and documentary is important to understanding *Casa*. But what is also significant about his film school education is that it provided Costa with a large canon of cinematic references which he would use to great effect in his first film, *O Sangue (Blood, 1989)*. This film was shot in chiaroscuro black and white lighting

and is full of references to the history of cinema, from Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948) to Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* (1955).

In order to understand the significance of *Casa* we must understand the place it has within Costa's broader filmography. Costa is most famous for the series of films he made in the Lisbon slum of Fontainhas, an area populated mostly by immigrant workers from places like Cape Verde. The film *Ossos* (*Bones*, 1997) was made after *Casa* and the series continued with *No Quarto da Vanda* (*In Vanda's Room*, 2000) and *Juventude em Marcha* (*Colossal Youth*, 2006). These films have been grouped as the 'Letters from Fontainhas' and along with his most recent film, *Cavalo Dinheiro* (*Horse Money*, 2014), are characterised as works of 'docu-fiction', eschewing scripts, employing non-actors and pieced together from hours of improvised shooting. The notion of the 'Letters', which recurs as a motif throughout these films emerged after the shooting of *Casa* in Cape Verde when Costa was given a large number of letters by islanders to bring back to relatives who had emigrated to Portugal to find work. In this way, *Casa* is key to understanding the development and direction of his filmography.

*Casa* is therefore often characterised as a transitional work, between the more straightforward fiction of his first film *O Sangue* (*Blood*, 1989) and the more experimental mature docu-fictional works. Jonathan Rosenbaum notes that *Casa* represents a 'constant and furious tug of war between Hollywood narrative and the non-narrative portraiture of both places and people, staging an almost epic battle between the two' (Rosenbaum, 2010: 210). Similarly, Volker Pantenburg notes that the Fontainhas Trilogy, 'indicates a shift on several levels: from the film-historical references of *O Sangue* and *Casa de Lava* to the social reality of Fontainhas, from fiction to documentary, from working under 'professional' conditions to working in small communities akin to family contexts' (Pantenburg, 2010: 56). What is essential to consider is the way in which *Casa* initiates an approach to filmmaking which still characterises Costa's work to this day.

### **Cannibal Cinema: Beyond Cannibalism as Critique**

This paper builds on the existing theorisation of cannibalism as a form of aesthetic resistance to colonial and post-colonial exploitation. An exhaustive account of the troubled history of the concept of the cannibal, which examines its place in the European imaginary and its role as a means of demonising indigenous and native populations of the Americas, is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead I am drawing on the notion of anthropophagy as a conceptual practise, evoked most famously in the Lusophone context by the Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade in his 'Cannibal Manifesto' of 1928. In this poetic declaration Andrade seeks to develop a Brazilian art which 'neither apes nor rejects European culture,

but “devours” it, adapting its strengths and incorporating them into the native self.’ (Barry, 1991: 36). For Andrade cannibalism serves to fuel a mythopoetic practise by inventing an origin story of pre-colonial Brazil as utopian, tribal and matriarchal. It stages a reversal of Freud’s structure of the origin of civilisation in which the law of the father is established through the passage from totem to taboo an act that is founded on an act of ritual cannibalism. (Freud, 1919: 234) Instead Andrade valorises the act of cannibalism as a resistance to the civilised injunction to respect the law of the father which in the colonial context is understood as the imperative to emulate bourgeois European progressive culture. In this sense Andrade’s cannibalism is a symbolic reversal of the telos of modernity by nonetheless adopting modern practises to develop a disjunctive artistic practise.

While academics have critiqued the ostensibly exoticising or primitivist impetus behind Andrade’s original manifesto, it is essential to understand, as Carlos Jáuregui notes, that anthropophagy ‘was a collective practise’ which exceeded the original modernist moment and has recurred within a number of colonial and post-colonial aesthetic experiments. (Jáuregui, 2012: 26). While not the focus of this study, but of particular interest in this regard, is the work of the Brazilian *Cinema Novo* movement, particularly the work of Nelson Pereira dos Santos and his film *Como Era Gostoso o Meu Francês (How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman, 1971)* and closer to Costa’s time the work of Luis Alberto Pereira and his film *Hans Staden - Lá Vem Nossa Comida Pulando (Hans Staden – Here Comes Our Food Jumping, 1999)*. Both films are entirely scripted in the language of the Tupis, one of the indigenous tribes of Brazil who were devastated by European colonisation, and in very different ways examine cannibalism both as a narrative concern and more crucially as a formal trope. While Costa is not concerned with cannibalism in a literal sense, like these filmmakers his work involves a close attention to the linguistic, cultural and historical context of the island of Cape Verde, a place that, like Brazil, was a former Portuguese colony. It is also essential to note that my understanding of cannibalism is drawn as much from cinematic and artistic practise as from its theorisation within academic discourse.

At the same time, it is evident that cannibalism has operated as a form of cultural critique. As Richard King argues in this context, ‘Cannibalism is not the eating of human flesh but an asymmetrical system of cultural appropriation and consumption’ (King, 2000: 112). In his genealogy of the term he suggests that cannibalism in this critical form has come to signify everything from capitalist exploitation, to the tourism industry, to the appropriation of non-Western culture within art. King tellingly draws on Australian director Dennis O’Rourke’s film *Cannibal Tours (1988)*, which critiques the exploitative nature of Western tourism to Papua New Guinea.

The film echoes Andrade's reversal of cannibalism although in this instance with critical connotations, as the cannibal is no longer the exoticised other, but the cultural practises, particularly that of photography and cinema, which contribute to the creation and consumption of the exotic image. O'Rourke's film is merely the most overt expression of an underlying assumption in much contemporary film criticism which uses cannibalism as a means to critique filmmaking practises which rely on appropriation and exploitation. This discourse has its roots in artistic debates that have long preceded the institutionalisation of anti-appropriation discourse. Of particular relevance is the Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène's critique of Jean Rouch's ethnographic films and the work of critical ethnographic filmmakers such as Trinh T. Minh Ha which I will discuss in more depth below. While I do not deny the power of cannibalism as a form of cultural critique, I want to emphasise what can be described, following Andrade, as a form of active cannibalism. In other words, I am proposing a cannibal cinema, which does not feast on those it films, but turns the cinematic apparatus into a vehicle of cannibalistic creation.

My understanding of cannibal cinema is thus drawn from a careful attention to Costa's filmmaking practise. I seek to show the way in which his films do not passively consume the body of those he films, but rather stage an active encounter between the apparatus and the actors. In this way cannibal cinema draws on cannibalism as both a critical discourse for diagnosing exploitation as well as an impetus for creation. It is important to note that cannibal cinema is not a prescriptive definition or an attempt to rewrite film history from first principles, but rather a means of understanding certain tendencies within *Casa* which reflect Costa's wider filmmaking practise.

### **Referential Cannibalism: Between Horror and Neo-realism**

The use of cinematic references is one element which recurs throughout Costa's work and represent the first level of cinematic cannibalism in *Casa*: the tendency toward re-making, adaptation and referentiality. As noted above, *Casa* primarily draws on two films; Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* and Rossellini's *Stromboli*. Tourneur's film is itself an evocative example of cinematic cannibalism. It is an adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) combined with an account of Haitian vodou by Inez Wallace (Bansak, 2003: 146). *I Walked* is set on the fictional island of Saint Sebastian in the Caribbean and home to sugar plantations. The film follows a young nurse, Betsy (Frances Dee), who comes to the island to take care of the wife of the plantation's owner only to find herself at the centre of an intrigue involving family disagreements, vodou practises and the legacy of slavery. Rossellini's *Stromboli* also follows a young woman, Karin, travelling to an isolated island. Karin (Ingrid Bergman) travels to the

volcanic island of Stromboli located between Sicily and the Italian Coast, which is the home of her new husband, a young Italian soldier. The films are produced in vastly different contexts, Tourneur's within the Hollywood studio system of the 1940s and Rossellini's as part of the post-war Italian neo-realist movement. But, they both share a concern with an outsider in an isolated community and the effect of the violence of capital accumulation on such places. Both of these elements are of particular importance to *Casa*. These two films are by no means the only works referenced in *Casa* nor is there universal critical agreement as to which films are most essential for understanding the film. For example, film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum has dismissed comparisons to *Stromboli*. He has argued that its 'less politicised form of mysticism' is 'a distraction and an obstacle' and only *I Walked* is a useful reference point. (Rosenbaum 2012 np) But I will argue that the films original sources are transformed through their collision with other references.

*Casa's* cannibalism is a means of recontextualising the cinematic past as well as forming the basis for a new cinematic work. By combining these two films, Costa reconsiders the supposed distinction between the fantastical horror of *I Walked* and the social realism of *Stromboli*. Through this juxtaposition we can begin to see the historical and social elements which the genre film taps into as well as the fantastic and mythic quality which Rossellini's neo-realism employs in order to represent social reality. *Casa* is the product of this cannibalistic union drawing on both films for inspiration and sustenance. Costa's film follows a young nurse, Mariana (Inês de Medeiros), who travels from Lisbon to the Cape Verdean island of Pico Do Fogo with a comatose man, Leão (Isaach de Bankolé). Leão is a migrant worker, one of the thousands who have travelled from Cape Verde to Lisbon in search of work. Like Bergman's character Karin in *Stromboli*, Mariana struggles to be accepted by the local community in part because she cannot speak the local creole, just as Karin cannot speak the local Italian dialect. Similarly, Medeiros, like Bergman, is a recognisable face of European art cinema and, like Bergman, she is working largely with a cast of non-actors. Another profound similarity between the films is that the Island of Pico do Fogo, like the island of Stromboli, is an active volcano and the black ash covered landscape is a central visual reference in both works. Consequently, both islands have been largely depopulated. This is in part due to the geological disturbances, but also due to the tendency within capitalism which generates a movement from the countryside to industrial centres. *Casa* brings out the way in which the volcano attains an almost mythic significance in both films, dramatising the conflict between modernity and tradition. *Stromboli* becomes a kind of horror film viewed in light of *Casa*, in which the horror is not tradition or modernity, but the impossible conflict in which neither appears to be desirable.

A crucial distinction between *Casa* and *Stromboli* is the post-colonial context, which links *Casa* to the colonial horror of *I Walked*. To simplify greatly, Bergman's Karin is at odds with the locals of *Stromboli* because she is a figure of modernity who refuses to conform to the traditional pattern of island life. But in *Casa* Mariana is even more compromised by her status as a white Portuguese woman on an island that has been devastated by colonialism. In this way the history of the Portuguese colonies emerges as a significant narrative and formal element structuring *Casa*. The legacy of colonialism is also crucial to *I Walked*, which is set on the fictional former colony of Saint Sebastian in the West Indies, home to sugar cane plantations worked by the descendants of enslaved peoples. This resonates with the history of the islands of Cape Verde, which were uninhabited until the sixteenth century when they began to serve as a stopover points for the Portuguese slave trade, during which slaves were transported from West Africa to Europe, the Americas and the Atlantic islands. While the specificities of these colonial contexts are different, what is important is the way in which both *I Walked* and *Casa* draw out the atmosphere of haunting which besets both places. But, as Nuno Jorge notes, what is merely latent in *I Walked* is brought to the forefront in *Casa* (Jorge, 2014: 260). *I Walked* after being cannibalised by *Casa* is transformed from a supernatural horror film to an even more terrifying tale of the all too human brutality of slavery.

In *Casa* there is a further element of complexity as the zombie body is not only that of the comatose Leão, but also that of a character named Edite, (Edith Scob) an alcoholic white woman who lives on the island with her son (Pedro Hestnes). Edite's blonde hair, languorous expressions and trance-like alcoholism reference one of the zombie figures in *I Walked*, Jessica (Christine Gordon), the wife of the plantation owner, whose coma is the result of a *vodou* ritual. As Nuno Jorge notes, Costa's casting of Scob in this role is another intertextual cannibalisation of a canonical horror film. Scob is most famous for her role in French director Georges Franju's film *Les Yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without A Face*, 1960), playing a disfigured woman who spends much of the film in a mask (Jorge, 2014: 256). The medical horror of *Eyes* is also cannibalised by *Casa* when the vaccines which Mariana brings to the island are revealed to be out of date and make the children who receive them incredibly sick. Mariana slowly begins a fraught relationship with Edite and learns that she was the wife of a man who was imprisoned on the island during the anti-colonial struggle of the 1960s. Cape Verde was the site of the notorious Tarrafal prison which imprisoned opponents of the Portuguese regime in its first phase and anti-colonial dissidents in its second. Thus *Casa* moves beyond the colonial legacy into the history of the decolonisation process.

Cinematic references in *Casa* do not merely function as empty signifiers of taste but are instead means of addressing the complexity of history through other works which have attempted to do the same thing. What Adrian Martin describes as the 'cinophile experience' in Costa's work is insufficient if we understand this experience merely to constitute the pleasure of recognising the references to earlier films (**Martin, 2009: 3**). Instead, the references should be understood as ways of thinking with cinema, using cinema as a means of conceptualising problems of representation and history more broadly. *Casa* also allows for the recontextualization of *I Walked* and *Stromboli* in effect transforming the source material to bring to light otherwise invisible or concealed elements of these films. In particular it brings out the colonial horror which underscores Tourneur's *I Walked*. We do not merely recognise these earlier films so much as we consider them anew, reinterpreted in light of Costa's use of them. They are cannibalised by *Casa* and begin to take on new qualities, new resonances most of which are as sinister as the history they represent.

### **The Camera Consumed: Beyond Fiction and Documentary**

Cinematic cannibalism is not only a question of referentiality, but of the potential for cinema to consume or be consumed by what is filmed. *Casa* is a film which is open to being cannibalised by the place and process of filmmaking. Such a notion challenges the predominant understanding of cannibalism in cinema, the potential for cinema to exoticise, commodify and simplify which has been the focus of much film criticism. Susan Sontag's critique of ethnographic photography, summarised by the aphorism that 'the camera is a sublimation of the gun', has been extended to cinema, particularly cinema which focuses on formerly colonised peoples (Sontag, 1973: 10). But beyond criticism, filmmakers themselves have explored this problem. For example, the work of filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha has engaged with this dilemma, as evidenced by her film *Reassemblage* (1982), which focuses on Senegalese women and seeks to 'not speak about/just speak nearby'(Trinh, 1982: np). This sentiment echoes Gayatri Spivak's famous post-colonial ethic of not speaking on behalf of the other. Trinh's films are essayistic documentaries and address the problem of representation through self-reflexive voice-over and internal commentary. *Casa* opts for a different method, to address the problem through a cannibal aesthetic that blends documentary and fiction.

As a European filmmaker making a film about a former colony, Costa is open to the charge of the exploitative notion of cannibalism. bell hooks famously described this as the tendency of European art to 'eat the other' (**hooks, 1992: 59**). For example, Quintín argues that Costa's movement

toward a documentary approach in his later work overcomes the problem of a distance between the filmmaker and the subjects of the film, which he sees as particularly apparent in Costa's earlier work (**Quintín, 2009: 33**). I will argue that such a categorisation of *Casa* fails to see the way in which the film is shaped by the people and place of Cape Verde. *Casa*, like Costa's late work, already displaces the boundary between fiction and documentary. It is precisely the fictive, or the capacity for cinema to create and elaborate stories, which allows him to undermine this false opposition between the honest documentary and the dishonest work of fiction.

*Casa's* process of production is evidence of a form of cinematic cannibalism in which the direction of the film adapts to the conditions and histories of Cape Verde. With regard to the specificity of the site, Cape Verde is never merely an exotic backdrop for a love story, but a crucial element of the work. In short, it is the camera which is consumed and not those which it shoots. The initial script, entitled *Terra a Terra*, was largely abandoned during the process of filming (**Jorge, 2014: 257**). *Casa* bears little resemblance to the original script, which was closer to a more straightforward adaptation of *I Walked*. Costa notes, 'at one point I just left the script behind, because I thought that if I'm going to try to shoot this girl in this new place that's foreign and dangerous, then I have to shoot it from her point of view' (**Rosenbaum, 2010: 209**). At one level this reflects a pragmatic decision: the filming process was beset with difficulties brought about by the isolation of the location. It was a constant struggle to transport cameras and equipment around the island. Costa describes the project as his *Apocalypse Now*, 'people fell ill [...], half of the team had been dismissed; I had a fight with a member of the cast' (**Jorge, 2014: 258**). We can see that this pragmatic change is also linked to an aesthetic decision. It was impossible for Costa to make the film he initially set out to make and it was this impossibility which led to the cinematic invention that, in turn, allowed him to challenge the commodifying logic of both narrative cinema and ethnographic documentary.

Mariana can be understood as a reflexive stand-in for Costa. She, like Costa, arrives in Cape Verde with certain expectations only to find them undermined by what she finds there. As Jonathan Rosenbaum writes, 'Costa can't interrogate her motives for remaining on the island without interrogating his own' (**Rosenbaum, 2010: 211**). Throughout the film characters ask her: 'why are you here?' and she cannot answer. At first, she has a clear duty; to deliver the comatose Leão to his family and administer the vaccines she has brought from Lisbon. But, when no-one comes forward to claim 'the dead man', she becomes disillusioned and begins to wander aimlessly around the island. By the end of the film this disillusionment has intensified, Leão wakes up and seems disappointed to be home ('This land has fooled me', he cries). They have a short erotic

relationship, but he abandons her for the Frenchwoman Edite. By the end of the film Mariana is utterly demoralised. The vaccines she had brought are out of date and the children she has given them to become sick. This narrative crisis is echoed at a formal level by the ways in which Costa exposes the apparatus of cinema and in doing so undermines what he describes as cinema's 'false innocence' (Jorge, 2014: 261).

Cinema's 'false innocence' is exposed from the very opening shots of the film. *Casa* begins with archival footage of the 1951 eruption of Pico do Fogo shot from above by the Portuguese geographer, Orlando Ribeiro (Jorge, 2014: 260). The grainy footage clearly indicates that the film to follow will not support the illusion of cinema as a form of innocent documentary reportage or an escape into a self-contained fictional world. Firstly, because these images are clearly shot by a different camera to the one which shoots the rest of the film. Hence the camera, as a presence, is immediately exposed. Secondly, because the grains themselves designate the materiality of film, indicating that what we are seeing is the product of a technical apparatus whose illusion of continuity is formed through the labour of shooting and editing. The camera as a distinct presence remains our constant companion as we move through the island with Mariana. These techniques have appeared before, for example, they were essential to the grammar of American structuralist film which sought to undermine the notion of film as a window or mirror onto reality (Gidal, 1978: 10). But in *Casa* they also indicate the history of representations of Cape Verde, particularly those which also operate in the zone between fiction and documentary. Ribeiro's book on the volcano *A Ilha de Fogo e as Suas Erupções (Fogo Island and its Eruptions, 1954)* was influenced by the Cape Verdean author Baltasar Lopes De Silva and his novel *Chiquinho: Romance Caboverdeano (Chiquinho: A Novel of Cape Verde, 1947)*, which itself blends fiction and autobiography. Cannibal cinema finds its precursors to be similarly drawn to the indeterminate zone between fiction and fact.

In *Casa* these defamiliarising strategies are combined with a focus on the act of framing. Jean-Louis Comolli argues, 'The frame distinguishes between nature and art. It is artifice, and the value of this artifice is precisely that it is not natural...naturalism is something that the deliberately pictorial quality of Pedro Costa's films rejects' (Comolli, 2010: 63). The archival footage cuts to a series of still shots which frame the faces and bodies of Cape Verdean women in this 'pictorial' style. In these cinematic portraits the women are filmed looking out of the frame, indicating the off-screen space which the camera is missing and giving the sense that there is more to these images than can be understood in a single glance. As Comolli argues, 'The off screen is the site of what remains: what remains to be shown, to be acted out, to be experienced' (Comolli, 2010: 65). These women will later appear in the film as characters in the

narrative. When they return, we cannot help but recall that they are playing a role, that they are actors. The film remains suspended within this ambiguity – these are characters and yet they are also individual lives. We are never sure when watching the film what is fictional and what is documentary. The final shot in this sequence frames a woman looking directly at the camera confronting the viewer with a piercing and implacable stare. The soundtrack, Hindemith's violin sonata, reaches a climax. It is the only time non-diegetic music appears in the film and so its presence is particularly disturbing. We are confronted with the subjects of the post-colonies staring directly at the viewer. The remarkably economical series of images which opens the film establishes the mandate of *Casa* and Costa's cannibal cinema more generally, to investigate what it means to enter a colonial space and make a film with colonised peoples. That is, what it means for cinema itself to be cannibalised. At the same time, it also suggests that what is to follow will remain within an indistinct space, between fiction and documentary.

The film is cannibalised by the fragments of history gleaned through the stories of locals which Costa incorporates into the film. From the character of Edite, the white woman whose husband was a political prisoner, to the local nurse, Amalia, who worked at the notorious prison camp of Tarrafal, the film conveys history through the form of conversations. In these dialogues, which more often appear as a monologue, Mariana's difficulty in understanding Creole means that the stories subvert and overtake her questions. Perhaps this is because a direct approach cannot properly get to the heart of the complex layers of the island's history. A local man, the *morna* musician, Bassoé tells the story of his travels around the islands of Cape Verde. He warns, 'Not even the dead rest here. Can't you hear them?' At first Mariana cannot 'hear' them, in part because she cannot properly understand Creole. Her exhortations to 'Speak Portuguese' are almost always ignored. But it is the camera which allows the dead to speak, because Costa allows the direction of the film to be dictated by 'the dead', in the sense of those who have died on the island, whether as slaves or as political prisoners, or as those who have been left behind as the island is slowly depopulated. The camera which is open to these stories and meandering echoes the improvisation of Bassoé on his violin. 'Even the dead dance', he says. And it is this deathly dance which allows for the film to elude the strictures of documentary reportage and the conventions of narrative film.

Cannibal cinema displaces the opposition between fiction and documentary in favour of the ambiguity of storytelling. It is too simple to say in relation to *Casa* that all documentary is ultimately fictive. Or conversely that all fiction is ultimately reducible to a historical truth. Instead, in being cannibalised by the stories of the people of Cape Verde

*Casa* draws on what Gilles Deleuze describes as ‘the storytelling function of the poor’ (Deleuze, 1985: 145). Deleuze writes, ‘What is opposed to fiction is not the real; it is not the truth which is always that of the masters or colonisers; it is the story-telling function of the poor, in so far as it gives the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend, a monster’ (Ibid). It is this trinity, of memory-legend-monster which I will explore in depth in the next section in relation to the figure of the zombie and the volcano. The point that Deleuze makes is not that fiction is displaced by truth. It is this opposition between truth and fiction which is displaced, in favour of the possibility of the false – that is a kind of storytelling which transforms into myth or legend. Bassoe and the people of Cape Verde destabilise the film and in doing so elevate storytelling to a power. These are not the kind of myths which reify history. The central tension of *Casa*’s aesthetic is between the tendency to expose the cinematic apparatus while simultaneously giving the camera over to these stories. Cannibal cinema suggests that the only way to access history is to pass through the mouths of those who have been devastated by it.

### **The Haunted Island: The Zombie and the Volcano as Images of Resistance**

Cannibal cinema is a form of resistance to the violence of colonialism which continues to haunt the islands of Cape Verde. Drawing on the notion of the power of storytelling, outlined above, I will outline two images, that of the zombie and the volcano, which in *Casa* are used to address the history of colonial violence. They are ways of accessing what Michael Taussig describes as the colonial ‘space of death’ (Taussig, 1984: 467). Taussig argues that the cannibalism imputed to colonised Indians in the Americas was predominantly, the ‘construction of colonial culture - *the colonial mirror* which reflects back onto the colonists the barbarity of their own social relations, but as imputed to the savage or evil figures they wish to colonise’ (Taussig, 1984: 495). Cannibalism for Taussig is an inverted image of the barbarism of colonial society as well as serving as a metaphor for the colonial process as a whole. Taussig is thus concerned with finding an aesthetic or poetic mode which is capable of representing colonial violence without revelling in it (Ibid: 470-1). Through the figure of the zombie and the volcano Costa’s cannibal cinema finds such a mode.

The zombie in *Casa* is a figure which designates the colonial legacy as a continuing state of suspension between life and death. Slavery has been theorised as a form of living death, as Achille Mbembe argues, ‘The slave is kept alive but in a state of injury, in a phantom like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity...Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life’ (Mbembe, 2003: 21). As discussed above, *Casa* cannibalises the zombie from Tourneur’s horror film *I Walked*. This zombie is not the flesh-

eating zombie of modern cinema, but it is nonetheless a cannibalistic form. It is cannibalistic in the sense that it developed as a way for formerly colonised people to address the violence that they were subjected to. The zombie is first found in the tradition of Haitian *vodou* which itself is a syncretic religion combining West African religious folklore with Christianity. *Vodou* developed in the slave plantations of 17<sup>th</sup> century Haiti, then the French colony of Saint Domingue (**Métraux, 1959: 282**). The zombie of Haitian folklore refers to a person who has died, but who has been reanimated by a *bokor* or necromancer. Alfred Métraux notes the profound similarity between the condition of the zombie and that of the slave. He writes, 'The zombie is a beast of burden which his master exploits without mercy, making him work in the fields, weighing him down with labour, whipping him freely and feeding him on meagre, tasteless food' (**Métraux, 1959: 282**). The undead body, dispossessed and existing within a state between life and death, allegorised the condition of slavery.

In *Casa* the colonial resonance is transfigured in order to address the post-colonial condition of the immigrant worker through the figure of the comatose Leão. As Fillol, Salvadó-Corretger and Bou I Sala argue, in *Casa*, 'the connection between zombies and colonialism is explicitly established...[and] a clear parallelism is established between slavery and exploited immigrants' (**Fillol et al., 2016: 62**). In this way they argue that Costa brings together both the Haitian zombie, which allegorised slavery, with the more familiar cannibalistic zombie, which allegorised the alienated producer under capitalism (**Ibid: 54**). Leão embodies this state of zombification. He is economically alienated from the labour he performs and socially alienated from his cultural origins. The brief glimpse of Lisbon shown near the beginning of the film shows it as a grey ruinous hellscape. The film cuts from workers demolishing a building to Leão looking vacantly into the middle distance. His eyes are glazed over and there is a sense that he is in the control of something else. By shooting Leão from below the image directly references the way the zombie is shot in *I Walked*. But, unlike the earlier film, this possession is not supernatural but rather what Amadeo Bordiga describes as the condition of the labourer 'possessed by the devil' (**Bordiga, 1951: np**). If capitalist exploitation is cannibalistic, it is so horrifying in *Casa* because it never fully digests those it swallows. It keeps them alive, just enough to continue drawing sustenance from them by extracting surplus value from their bodies. The next scene shows another worker reporting the accident. There is an implication that Leão may have jumped. Suicide is presented as a way out of this cycle of living death. But instead of dying Leão is shown in a hospital bed. The coma intensifies the zombie condition of a subject suspended between life and death, unable to live but incapable of dying. As Sarah Lauro notes, the threat of zombification was used by slave drivers

to dissuade slaves from committing suicide (**Lauro, 2015: 110**). When Leão returns to Cape Verde he is immediately identified as 'the dead man'. The doctor notes, 'No-one ever comes home...Every day they leave. I've never seen one return.' He haunts the islanders by returning from Lisbon as a spectre of living death. The hope of a new life in the city is shattered by the zombie body. When he wakes up his disappointment is palpable, 'I'm meant to be dead', he complains. Leão shows the terrifying cannibalism which awaits them in the slums of Lisbon and the manner in which colonialism, while no longer official, remains the fate of those from the former colonies.

The condition of zombification is extended to the entire island, to the history which cannot be exorcised, cinematically or otherwise. The whole film appears to take place within a kind of trance, from the slow still camera to the way in which characters appear to do things without motivation. In part this is the result of Costa's use of ellipses, his refusal of standard narrative conventions. At times characters begin to speak seemingly unprompted, as if by some force outside their control. Edite's son tells Mariana about his father's imprisonment on the island in the graveyard where the political prisoners are buried. He seems for a moment to be possessed by the spirits that linger there. At other times this possession is the effect of alcohol. Edite wanders around for much of the film in an alcohol induced trance. In a particularly powerful sequence, we see the young girl, Tina, stumble through the streets of the village holding a bottle. While it is never clear, due to the ellipses, it is implied that Edite convinced her to sleep with the comatose Leão, in order to 'wake him up'. And when Leão does wake up he and Mariana drink until they are utterly stupefied. The film exacerbates this sense of alcoholic time distended: the long shots of characters stumbling through the landscape are another way of showing the island's zombie enchantment. Deleuze describes a form of political cinema, which moves away from inspiring political consciousness towards showing the temporal effect of post-colonial time. He writes that such films, 'consist of *putting everything into a trance*, the people and its masters, and the camera itself, pushing everything into a state of aberration, in order to communicate violence as well as to make private business pass into the political and political affairs into the private' (**Deleuze, 1985: 211**). The camera entranced evokes the sense of the undead which hangs over the island. Leão is merely the most dramatic evocation of it.

In *Casa* the zombie is a figure through which cannibal cinema steals from colonialism an undead power. It puts this capacity to use as a form of resistance, transforming it into a mode of understanding one's condition. The zombie is, as Annette Trefzer notes, a form of cultural memory (**Trefzer, 2000: 205**). The zombie state is one which speaks of the colonial

past more generally, it lingers unable to be worked through or forgotten and yet also unable to be fully comprehended. It is the product of a cannibalistic process, in which the only way to resist is to consume and create new legends. *Vodou* is one such form of resistance. As Métraux argues, 'For the slave, the cult of spirits and gods, and of magic too, amounted to an escape; more, it was an aspect of the resistance which he sustained against his oppressive lot' (Métraux, 1959: 30-33). But unlike Métraux's anthropological interpretation of the zombie, in *Casa* there is a genuine sense of the power of such a legend which seems to possess the island and in turn possesses the camera.

The volcano of Pico Do Fogo is the other image which haunts *Casa*. As noted above the image of volcanic activity opens the film, and returns repeatedly, towering over the landscape. Even when the volcano itself is not visible in the shot it is present through the black ashen soil which covers the island. The landscape is never merely a backdrop, it is a seething miasmatic force within the film. This is conveyed quite literally when Bassoe tells Mariana to take off her shoes to feel the heat of the ground. In another scene which echoes *Stromboli* Mariana and Leão stumble up its slope and make love against the black ash. The scene is melancholy, there is no sense that anything can emerge from their relationship and framed against the soil we have a sense of their pathetic finitude within the scope of geological time. But if the volcano of *Stromboli* evokes a geological time scale the volcano in *Casa* fuses the geological with the historical. The ash which covers everything is a continual reminder of the past. It is a condensation of the time which has already passed. Given that this past is haunted by the colonial origins of the island the volcano serves as another image which allows the film to access Taussig's 'colonial space of death'. (Taussig, 1984: 467) Indeed, the island was only inhabited once the slave trade began and the volcano has since erupted a number of times, most famously in 1680.

The volcano is a constant reminder of the destructive history which continues to inform the island. The title of the film *Casa De Lava, or House of Lava*, is hence metaphorical and literal. The volcanic ash is used to build the houses in which the islanders live. The camera frames a group of islanders repairing Leão's house, preparing it for when he wakes up. Like all the images in the film it is beset with a profound ambiguity. In one sense it suggests the continuing legacy of colonialism, the impoverished house of a victim of post-colonial capitalism. If as noted above, we see this soil as a reminder of the still active quality of the landscape, then the house is a sign that this colonial legacy is still present within the walls in which the people of Cape Verde live. But the phrase also appears in a love letter which Leão sends back to Edite from Lisbon, 'I will build you a house made of lava'. The house made of lava thus comes to take on a utopian quality

in direct contrast to the concrete buildings of Lisbon in which Leão toils. The house of lava is an affirmation of the colonial origins of the immigrants who have built the cities of Portugal and a memory of their home. Therefore, it also suggests that even within these haunted spaces a life is lived. The final image of the film is a woman's feet passing across the threshold of one of these houses. It is an image which contains the entire project of cannibal cinema, to make the silent walls speak, of destructive history and of everyday passions, which are impossibly intermingled and can never be separated.

### **Epilogue**

*Casa* exemplifies the cannibalistic power of the cinematic medium, which does not objectify or exploit, but rather is transfigured by its encounter with the history and continuing legacy of colonialism. Costa's cannibal cinema draws on the history of cinema, not merely as a reference point, but in order to actively transfigure the original source material. In this sense cannibal cinema feeds on the history of cinema allowing us to reconsider hidden elements within canonical works such as Rossellini's *Stromboli* and Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie*. Secondly, cannibalism operates at the level of method in that Costa's approach to filmmaking is attentive to the people and place of Cape Verde through his use of non-actors and his improvisational filmmaking method. In doing so Costa draws on the stories of the inhabitants of Cape Verde who were involved in the making of the film. But instead of being swallowed and commodified by the camera the residents of Cape Verde metaphorically cannibalise the film, derailing the original script and leading the film into new and unexpected territory. Essential to this is the thin line between fiction and documentary, which is constantly blurred in *Casa*, and which underscores a more general disruption of existing aesthetic paradigms within cannibalistic cinematic practise. Finally, cannibalism is a formal strategy which transforms these stories and experiences into a cinematic work and becomes a way of approaching cinema as a form. It allows *Casa* to excavate the colonial legacy of the island while simultaneously elevating storytelling to a form of resistance and an impetus for cinematic creation.

The year after the completion of filming the volcano erupted, covering the island and completely transforming the landscape. This event can be understood in two ways. Firstly, the destructive and dangerous forces of colonisation continue to wreak havoc over the lives of colonised peoples. So-called natural disasters disproportionately effect the poor and marginalised of the former colonies. This is undoubtedly the case and Costa has spent next 20 years continuing to develop a cannibal cinema with the immigrants of Cape Verde living in Lisbon. But there is another conclusion to be drawn from the unstable geology of the earth. The

eruption suggests that the landscape is not fixed, nature itself is a dynamic force. Far from serving as a marker of reification, naturalising unequal social relations and suggesting that impoverishment is merely the way of the world, the volcanic activity present in *Casa* says the opposite. If even that which appears unshakeable and unchangeable, the very earth itself, is in fact subject to transformation, then perhaps the history which appears to weigh down upon us can one day be overcome. Overcome not in the sense of being forgotten or expelled but made to serve a new purpose, in the hands of the poor and impoverished whose power of storytelling elevates this volcanic instability into a legend. Until then cannibal cinema will continue to make houses out of lava, to craft films from the fragments of ruinous colonial time, unable and unwilling to forget, creating new legends and new stories with which to destroy and remake the world.

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Thomas Moran is currently completing his PHD at Monash University on the work of Pedro Costa and the notion of the death of cinema. He completed his MPhil at the University of Adelaide on the cinema of Chinese director Jia Zhangke. His research interests include world cinema, the politics of science fiction and the Dionysian impulse in contemporary art.

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**Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> Editor's note: Translated titles appear italicised in citations with the year of release. Films are listed alphabetically in the references by director.