

INDEPENDENCIA



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A interview with Pedro Costa about *Ne change rien*

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: How did *Ne change rien* get started?

PEDRO COSTA: In the same way all my films get started: with an encounter. I met Jeanne [Balibar] at the FID Marseille, in 2003. We found out we had common passions: Lubitsch, Lennon-McCartney, Ray Davies, Howard Hawks, The Velvets, Marilyn Monroe... It turned out Jeanne was in a very tense and very intense point in her life: she was finding the courage to write her first songs and finish recording her first album. But beyond this excitement, I had the feeling she was full of insecurities.

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: What kind of insecurities?

PEDRO COSTA: About her acting «career» – she didn't want to separate cinema and theater and music ; and about contemporary French cinema – which she detests as much from an artistic point of view as, let's say, a political point of view, which led her to turn down more and more films and to focus on theater. I remember talking with her about the degradation of «the environment» of our professional trade. It's a deception that we both have felt, and which, at that time, was weighing on her heavily. After that, I think the experience of my recent films intrigued and interested her; I told her about a few of my 'cooking secrets' in the Fontainhas neighborhood, of the method I tried putting into practice in these films. Jeanne could hold her own with Vanda, Zita, and Pango, no problem... It goes without saying she's one of the actresses I admire most.

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: Can you tell us about Philippe Morel's work? *Ne change rien* is dedicated to him.

PEDRO COSTA: Philippe was the sound engineer on *In Vanda's Room*. He's the one who made me discover *Paramour* [Jeanne Balibar's first album, from 2003]; he was the first one to verbalize a latent desire: «*We have to do something with Jeanne and her music!*» I'll admit that I was very resistant. Not only because I was starting *Colossal Youth*, but because the idea of making a film about music terrified me. As usual, I let time help me figure things out. I started by giving myself a simple test: filming concerts. I was with Philippe up to the point of Brest and Niort, where Jeanne and Rodolphe Burger were in the middle of doing a series of concerts. The shot opening the film with the song «Torture» was one of the first things we shot. I liked the days spent with the group. But I wasn't sure about embarking on a solid and coherent film project. But time went on, and Philippe kept on about it...

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: How much time went by?

PEDRO COSTA: *Ne change rien* spans a period of five years, with intervals lasting several months, between each stage. Inbetween, I made *Colossal Youth*, a few short films, and Jeanne did a lot of theater, another film with Rivette [*Ne touchez pas la hache*, 2007] and all this 'sent messages our way' about the way to structure the film. One day, Jeanne told me she was going to spend a week with Rodolphe and the band to rehearse her second album, *Slalom Dame*. When I decided to meet up with them, I started believing in the film and imagining a form. It was defining the sections that brought about the final edit: the concerts, the demos of the first album, and the moments in which Jeanne performed *La Périchole*, the operetta by Offenbach.

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: Did this film pose new technical problems? Pertaining to sound, for example?

PEDRO COSTA: Nothing that new. For as much as people insist upon the progress made with the high-definition image and digital sound, the fundamental techniques and working methods remain the same. We can't abide demagogues putting down our work. To talk about sound, and just to cite some films about rock music, you'd have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to perceive the abyss that exists between *Cocksucker Blues* by Robert Frank [1972], *One Plus One* by Godard [1968], and the artifices of the film that Scorsese made about the Stones, for example [*Shine a Light*, 2008]. There's no possible comparison! The Frank and Godard films were recorded in mono, whereas Scorsese's is in THX Surround, with dozens of tracks. By this I don't mean you mustn't work stereo sound to its full level of sophistication – Godard is brilliant in that area. What saddens and revolts me is what we're in the process of losing day after day and, worse, what's being imposed upon us: two or three years from now it will be impossible to make a film on black-and-white stock – 16mm is at the point of falling to the wayside – television channels are beginning to refuse anything that's not in the 16:9 format of these saucer-thin plasma screens... The incomparable experience of 35mm projection is in the process of being stolen away from us. As for sound, it's been a long time now that we've lived under the Dolby dictatorship. All this has to do with a supposed economic return – basically, a huge hoax. Of course, I didn't make *Ne change rien* (in black-and-white, in the 1.33:1 aspect ratio, and partially in mono) in reaction to this state of things. A film is never made against what you want it to be. But now that we're talking about it, who knows? Actually, if I'd been allowed to do so, I would have made it entirely in mono. The only thing is I wouldn't have been able to project it in 99% of the theaters, which are under the Dolby monopoly. And I want my films to be able to be projected in Los Angeles, Tokyo, and Lisbon in circumstances identical to those of Scorsese or Tarantino.

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: Mono sound has been rediscovered as being a kind of utopia?

PEDRO COSTA: When you record actors' voices, the sound of the dialogue, whether this be in a film by Spielberg or one by someone else, is always in mono. Ambient sounds, certain noises, and the majority of sound-effects that get added again and again to the final edit are recorded in stereo. Except today, delirium is total: each sound is literally dissected, disemboweled, and then scattered across the maximum number of possible channels. The sound no longer emits just from behind the screen, it comes from the left, from the right, from the back of the theater, from the ceiling down to the floor. And we can already experience it in our houses with «home cinema». The lack of ideas and conviction within the film itself, not to speak of the lack of faith in the spectator's imagination, result in an attempt to really dig into it and conquer it by any means, all the tracks, and all the 'surround-sound-tracks' available. The ridiculous thing is that, now, to recognize the slam of a door or the whistle of wind through the trees, in order to hear these things, we have to turn back to a film by Renoir or by Ford from the '40s. In *Ne change rien*, we attempted to replicate the sound within the space of the screen. In this sense, you could

almost say that it's a film made as much from the point of view of the camera as from the mic. In the final edit, we recentered the sound and attempted, at the same time, to rediscover the energy, the balance, and the concentration of four musicians playing together. Let's make an easy comparison. I still remember some lame guys who were caught up in that Genesis bullshit that you were only allowed to «appreciate», as though by divine edict, big productions. Later on, what a relief being able to put a Buzzcocks cassette into a Walkman... As for mono, and for the sake of calming down the progressives, it's worth going so far as recalling John Lennon's horror, forty years ago, when the producer George Martin did the stereo mix of Sgt. Pepper. «What's this shit?» Lennon asked. «That's not us! We're four people, and we play together — we don't play separately!» It's Lennon who said the word «separate.» A couple weeks ago, McCartney confirmed, «If you want to seriously listen to The Beatles, listen to the mono recordings.»

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: In the run-throughs there's a strange calm, as though the musicians were a bunch of friends coming together undercover. The atmosphere is like that of a thriller – springboarding from this, we forget all about the word «documentary».

PEDRO COSTA: While I was filming them in the studio, with this light between dusk and dawn, I was imagining the story of four people running away from something. like in a Nicholas Ray film. Four people hiding out in a shed in the woods, the beautiful girl singing is calm, the guy on bass with his finger on the trigger, close to blowing up, the «head of the gang» reserved, imposing and sure of himself. And doesn't Rodolph look like Brian Keith in *Nightfall* [Jacques Tourneur, 1957]? So I was seeing them and listening to Jeanne's music as if it was the ideal soundtrack for this film. I think that, in the run-throughs, the musicians turn into characters a little bit.

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: And in the *Périchole* sequences?

PEDRO COSTA: The film is organized into discrete blocks that, in spite of the fact that they're contributing to a unique narration, recount opposing musical moments. It's obvious that Offenbach has nothing to do with pop. Purists will say that, in the representations of *La Périchole*, there's a technical question at stake and another level of concentration. That in rock situations seriousness vanishes. That there's a difference of 'noblesse and class' when we reach the long shot with Jeanne and her musical director. I just don't see these things. Ventura in *Colossal Youth* recited Desnos to Buraca and enters the Gulbenkian Museum without asking permission. In a certain way the appearance of Offenbach in the film is miraculous. But I don't know who helps out what: whether it's pop lending a hand to the operetta, or vice-versa. It's worth noting that Offenbach desired his music to be sung by non-professionals, by saltimbanques. And everything happened, de facto, in the bars of the *bas-fonds* of Paris, inbetween glasses of absinthe and wild dances that strongly bring to mind the pogoing of Sid Vicious and company. And it's from *La Périchole* that Renoir's *The Golden Coach* [1953] is born. Jeanne/Périchole is another version of Camilla (Anna Magnani). I only knew Offenbach through the popularizations of the French cancan; the bohemian scenes in Pigalle and that folklore. I deemed it outside of my scope of work. In the end, this wasn't the case at all: its discovery enriched the film.

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: I'm coming back to rock to talk about an impressive sequence: at one point, Jeanne tells the musicians that she needs a few minutes to concentrate. And the film 'gives her – and lets us see – this span of time, which is precious.

PEDRO COSTA: This sequence lasts nine minutes. All told, it was the most difficult one to construct. Sometimes Jeanne and Rodolphe were going through an agonizing day, so tense and exhausting. But the decision to place it at the beginning was irreversible. For better or for worse, this moment is affirmative and severe: it says that we're not going to see a rock-film, nor a concert-film, still less a 'making of' DVD bonus. You do away with certain been-there-done-that ideas about the way in which music gets treated for the most part in the cinema. It's a way of showing your hand again and plunging your limbs into reality. It's at that moment that the most impatient sort get up and walk out... During one of the screenings at Cannes, I was close to the exit, with Jeanne, and a couple walked by us saying: "It started out so good and it had to turn into that!"

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: There's a sense of permanent dissatisfaction around the work of the musicians in *Ne change rien*, which recalls that of the Straubs in *Où gît votre sourire enfoui* ?. Would you agree with this?

PEDRO COSTA: But Jeanne, Rodolphe, Marc, and all the other musicians are people as serious as Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. And they're not there to put on a show. I already knew what I was getting into: hard work, lots of rehearsing, anxiety... I've already heard it said that this film was an abstract film. In the end, maybe... But what's filmed here is very concrete. I think, however, that what unites this film with *Où gît...* isn't its documentary side about work – it's its secret aspect, its fiction aspect. In both films, we try to go a little further than the simple curious and complicit gaze fixed upon the work of certain artists; even in the case of Danièle and Jean-Marie, beyond the tenacity and the effort, there's always an additional something that can really be a prime contribution toward 'the thing taking.' This might be a hidden smile. If there was no mystery, this tension, there wouldn't be any documentary. I always had faith in that additional something that can expand and transform itself into fiction. For example, even in this film, a couple forms – Jeanne, Rodolphe – and, little by little, it establishes itself out of alliances and solitudes. But more than any of my other films, it's through the sound, through the

silence, and through the music that relationships, geography, and time get constructed. I basically had the very strong desire to make another film 'outside of time' and spatially vertiginous. Black-and-white obviously helped a lot. It was a decision late-in-the-game, during the editing, an open secret... I used to detest the 'light shows' at concerts – put on by the technicians in the theaters. As a general rule, whether it be for Stevie Wonder or for Jeanne, lighting in rock is haphazard and the colors always wind up loaded with cheap psychology. I shot the colors with miniDV. One day, I turned the saturation button on the display – and we had a couple surprises: we discovered Jeanne's body, mouth, veins, wrinkles, nerves... A new sensuality showed up – and, in the end, one determining factor: this film hadn't announced itself as such. We never told ourselves we were in the process of making a feature. There were no contracts. Nothing.

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: What were the logistics of the production?

PEDRO COSTA: Not making any sacrifices. No waste or inflation. *Ne change rien* cost a hundred thousand euros. It's a co-production, mostly Portuguese, between Sociedade Óptica Técnica, who received fifty thousand euros from the ICA, Cinematrix in Tokyo who paid for the shoot in Japan, and Red Star Cinema, a French society, that covered post-production. Not so bad for a film of 95 minutes, on 35mm, with an authentic black-and-white negative, and Dolby Digital sound. A pittance of the budget of any Portuguese feature. In fact, I had the proof of the absurdity and corruption of the times we're living in when, upon starting, I tried finding five thousand additional euros in Portugal. I went to request the money from an important man in the private sector. «*My friend, you must be kidding! That is not an interesting amount.*» He told me to go home and redo a budget for fifty thousand euros. I repeated to him that I only needed five thousand. I never heard any more. That's Portuguese cinema for you. It's fallen into inept hands that devise sketchy pretenses and throw money at films of no merit and even less connection to anything else around them. We have no theaters, our single laboratory is on its last legs, but we won the Palme d'Or [for a short film in 2009 – João Salaviza's *Arena*]. We're living somewhere between robbery and schizophrenia. As for *Ne change rien*, it's gonna play in theaters in seven countries. And I'm not talking about Belize, or the Republic of Kyrgyzstan.

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: Does Jeanne Balibar extend a lineage of female characters in your films?

PEDRO COSTA: *Ne change rien* is a film with many love songs... verses, poems, and lyrics about the torture of passion and the torments of romantic solitude. It would maybe be easier to say that in these old songs we're talking about there's the history of the women I've already filmed: Isabel de Castro, Isabel Ruth, and Edith Scob. Lullabies that could have been written by Clara in *O sangue*. Other ones that could have been, I won't say sung, but hummed – with an ironic smile on the lips – by Vanda Duarte in her little room. Jeanne told me: «*This film is a lot more than a portrait of me.*» It's a portrait of many different women. Women or ghosts of women who had to belong to me, that I had to idealize through the means of the cinema and, in this film, through the force of the music. Or, maybe, I'm the ghost... When Jeanne saw *Ne change rien* for the first time, you might say she discovered herself. And, at the same time, she made a remark that I was always at her side. I've never used a zoom lens in my life. I was able to, and wanted to, feel her breathing. Exactly the same as what happened with Vanda, in any case. During the shoot of *In Vanda's Room*, she often asked me, "But when are we starting?" I was already filming her for six months.

FRANCISCO FERREIRA: You've stated that *Ne change rien* was constructed like an album. Let's end on pop: what's your all-time Top 10?

PEDRO COSTA: In no particular order: *Innervisions* by Stevie Wonder. *Rubber Soul* by The Beatles. *Voodoo* by D'Angelo. *Something Else* by The Kinks. *Metal Box* by P.I.L. *Chairs Missing* by Wire. *Off the Wall* by Michael Jackson. *Small Faces* by Small Faces. *What's Going On* by Marvin Gaye. The last one... I wouldn't know what to say.

Conducted by Francisco Ferreira in November of 2009. The French text of the interview (translated from the Portuguese) by Daniel Dos Santos and Karina Barros was translated into English for this page by Craig Keller.