

COLORED PLATES

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According to Paul Verlaine, the collection of prose poems by Arthur Rimbaud published under the title *Illuminations* was to have been subtitled “colored plates.” Commenting on this phrase, Jean-Luc Steinmetz remarks that each of the texts functions, for the reader, as “a true hypnotic scene moving before one’s gaze (and in one’s hearing),” and that the term “illuminations” thus designates a style suited to “a perception of the text truly conceived for the gaze.”¹ If we consider the shots of *In Vanda's Room* to be similar to such plates, we are bound to ask: “Who is looking?” This question becomes complex in view of the conception and history of the film and the manner of its production, all of which problematize the traditional position of the author as someone who stands apart from the scenes and the people of a film in order to view and contemplate them. It is not difficult to reach the different conclusion that Vanda herself is the one who is “seeing” *In Vanda's Room*, since it is she who constantly directs the attention of the viewer to the objects she concerns herself with, and it is she who controls the mood of scenes by imposing her own mood of restless tolerance, or through the ritual aggressiveness she adopts in her dialogues with Zita.

1. Jean-Luc Steinmetz, “Présentation,” in Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2010). My translation.

Sometimes the presence of a gaze is emphasized by the fact that the people do not dominate the frame; that is, the frame is not made into the obedient instrument of the actors’ self-presentation but stands as a kind of measure. Nevertheless, the frame is hospitable. It receives the people (inversion of the original gesture of the film, the actors inviting the filmmaker into their homes). The very title *In Vanda's Room* announces the metaphor by which the image aligns with the filmic space. For much of the time anyway, the film is Vanda’s room, itself hospitable to visitors, as we see, and we are in the room as we are in the film.

Within the frame, the performance of life attains completion. Gestures are hard and exact; they begin and end: so the film is not, like “everything in life, sort of unfinished” (to quote Viveca Lindfors in Joseph Losey’s *The Damned*). The flow of energy across the dialogue is dazzling, in part because of the constant interruptions that make it necessary for the actors to keep starting again. No doubt the richness of the dialogue is also the result of the work on the frame: in particular, the distribution of speakers between on-screen and off-screen space. All the scenes are built on a principle of admitting or willing their own destruction. Sometimes the shot (which is always fixed) makes movement, or shapes it, by setting up a contrast: Nhurro in the foreground, Vanda in bed in the background at right; she looks up; he looks into the space past the camera. She is relatively subdued but still has that mercurial sharpness that distinguishes her; he is ironic, reflective, fatalistic. She retains

her basic pragmatism, but, under the influence of his finality, she wavers a little; it is easy for her to be influenced by him because they both share the same reality, where the bottom can always drop out. Finally, the scene is dissolved, dismissed, when Vanda leaves the frame.

The boundaries of the space surrounding the actors are both infinitely far and too close. If the farness—sensed through the interplay of speech, gesture, and gaze that creates what Manny Farber calls “the psychological space of the actors” in cinema—belongs to the spiritual dimension of the film, the closeness is part of its social problem: the soundtrack constantly reinforces our sense of the smallness of the living quarters, the proximity of everything, by suggesting with its collection of voices off, sounds of demolition, music, television, that the people of the film live too close together and that their walls are too thin. Despite all this, the presence of the camera rarely seems oppressive: the camera does not disappear, but it grants the characters an expansive range of modes of self-presentation. The actors' occupancy of space can be intimate, quiet, and calm, or boisterously performative, or taut and fretful—and the camera can find the appropriate framing and placement for each mood without seeming to exert a foreign pressure.

The total space of the film, its imaginary space, is affected by the characters' telling of stories that point to the larger real space, threatening and unpredictable, of Lisbon. Some stories are told at length, others are only alluded to; all are situated in the shifting zone around the horizon of the film, adding to our awareness of changing directionality and frames of reference, of inclusions and exclusions; and each story becomes part of the imaginary register the film composes. The emblem of this register is Vanda's phone book, which is not merely, like ordinary phone books, an index of names, numbers, and places, but a chronicle of accumulated time.

While the lack of internal narrative causality heightens the infinity of *In Vanda's Room*, all the characters are subject to the overriding causality, from which there is no appeal, represented by the imminent destruction of Fontainhas. With our sense of this, as provoked throughout the film by the images and sounds of the ongoing demolition and by the characters' responses to their displacement, the filmic space of *In Vanda's Room* comes into direct contact with the capitalist imperatives and government directives that shape urban and architectural space. Because this real space is condemned to vanish, the scenes that are filmed in it assume a quality that is not dependent on physical, material, geographical reality and that has to do with the feelings and obsessions of the characters. The space we see is the space they see and experience. Because of their imaginative (and also practical) investment in it, space itself becomes gestural: it reaches, points, displays, closes itself off while also joining up with the emptiness and the silence that the whole film conveys.

Of course we are wary of attributing too many powers to the colored plates of cinema. One feels instinctively that it would be too much to claim, for example, that the innocence we feel belongs essentially to Vanda, Zita, Nhurro, and the others is something that is conferred on them by Pedro Costa's film. Since they are people whose real lives overlap with their presentations in the film, whatever qualities we perceive them to have, we must assume that they also carry around with them outside the film. On the other hand, innocence is not a quality in the same way that quickness to anger, cleanliness, methodical thinking, generosity, and so forth are. People are not innocent in the real world; they are innocent in a world of ideas. So if we feel that the characters in *In Vanda's Room* are innocent, this means that the film has been able to make us see them as existing in that other world.

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