

ARTIGO

Loss of vision without insight – the globalized city in *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira/Blindness* (2008) by Fernando Meirelles

Perda de visão na cidade globalizada – *Ensaio
sobre a Cegueira* (2008) de Fernando Meirelles

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ABSTRACT: *Blindness* (2008) by Fernando Meirelles used its mode of production as a motive to situate its story in urban spaces that results in fact from an assembled city. Filming *Blindness* took place in Toronto, São Paulo, Osaka and Montevideo. The resulting globalized city blurs the insight in Saramago's novel regarding the limits of individuality by offering a homogeneous worldview that levels socio-economic differences, especially between the north and the south. Losing (clear) sight is in the original text in fact a metaphor for the inability of coping with society's inhumanity. The aim of this article is to study the film by using the concepts of e-motion and indisciplinaryity to reveal that *Blindness* is nothing more than a conventional approach towards a more complex idea on the loss of sight. By producing it for a globalized audience, the blindness is only aesthetically mimiced and thus elimenates Saramago's lucidity regarding the loss of sight of an entire civilization.

KEYWORDS: Brazilian Transnational Production, Assembled City Space, Loss of Sight, Blurred View, Disciplinarity and Indisciplinarity, *Blindness*.

RESUMO: *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (2008) utilizou o seu modo de produção como motivo para situar a sua história em espaços urbanos que resultam de facto de uma cidade montada. A filmagem teve lugar em Toronto, São Paulo, Osaka e Montevideo. A cidade globalizada resultante dilui a percepção na novela de Saramago dos limites da individualidade, oferecendo apenas uma visão homogénea do mundo que nivela as diferenças sócio-económicas, especialmente entre o norte e o sul. A perda de visão é, de facto, no texto original, uma metáfora da incapacidade de lidar com a desumanidade da sociedade. O objetivo deste artigo é estudar o filme utilizando os conceitos de *e-motion* e indisciplinaridade para revelar que a cegueira é abordada de forma convencional. Ao endereçar o filma para um público globalizado, a cegueira é apenas imitada esteticamente, eliminando a lucidez de Saramago relativamente à perda de visão de toda uma civilização.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Filmes transnacionais brasileiros, Espaços urbanos compostos, Visão comprometida, Disciplinaridade e Indisciplinaridade, *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*.

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Introduction

The coproduction mode of *Blindness* inspired its director to situate the story in urban spaces that are assembled as one city. In the film, produced in 2008, Fernando Meirelles edited together a global megalopolis, filmed in Toronto, São Paulo, Osaka and Montevideo. Based on José Saramago's novel, in the film there is a strong relationship between the city spaces and the characters' emotions and, subsequently, their psychological or physical health since an entire city goes blind when infected by what is called the "white disease". The seeing disorder stands in for the inability to cope with or envision society's flaws and inhumanity, within a patriarchal oligarchy or liberal capitalism.

The aim of this article is to analyse how the film discusses the problem of vision within the architectural space of the assembled city by using the notions of "indisciplinarity" (RANCIÈRE, 2006a, p. 9) and "*e-motion*" (BRUNO, 2007, p. 6) as methodological tools. Before I start my analysis, I will briefly explain what I mean by interdisciplinary film, a concept based on Jacques Rancière's neologism that I have introduced as an alternative to the essay film¹. I will also shortly resume Giuliana Bruno's ideas on the relationship between motion and emotion in the filmic space.

Indisciplinary film

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière claims that disciplines are not defined *a priori* by their methods but rather by "constituting an object as an object of thought and as the demonstration of a certain idea of knowledge" (RANCIÈRE, 2006a, p. 5). Considering science, a "war machine against allodoxy", he foregrounds the aesthetic dimension involved: "But what is called allodoxy is, in reality, an aesthetic dissent" (*Ibid*). In the wake of post-structuralism, disciplinary boundaries are seen to hide the fact that their methods consist of storytelling. Since politics and aesthetics are inseparable, Rancière actually accuses the academic disciplines of trying to neutralize everything that breaks away from consent and threatens social balance, everything that puts the distribution of social roles and occupations at risk. In short, everything that aims to restructure what he calls the "distribution of the sensible" (RANCIÈRE. 2004). While Jacques Derrida² would speak of deconstruction, Rancière uses the term "indisciplinarity" to disclose methods' fictionality. Accordingly, any area of knowledge, including the arts, needs to pay attention to the fictions of other disciplines in order to maintain its indisciplinarity (RANCIÈRE, 2006a, p. 11).

Surprisingly, a contradiction can be noted between this attention to the fictionality of human production of knowledge and the author's writings on film. Since Rancière (2006b) does not effectively challenge the binary opposition established by film studies between fables (dominant narrative film) and "thwarted fables" (modern cinema) even though he accuses

¹ See FERREIRA (2012; 2013).

² See CULLER (1983).

Gilles Deleuze of doing so³, it is worthwhile to take his definition of the aesthetic regime in consideration, since it reveals his focus on fictionality and heterogeneity more clearly.

Using *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert to explain and define the regime's initial moment, the philosopher argues that the book does not bear the traces of its author's intervention, that is his subjectivity, but, rather, of the indifference and passivity of things without will or significance: "The fictionality specific to the aesthetic age is consequently distributed between two poles: the potential of meaning inherent in everything silent and the proliferation of modes of speech and levels of meaning" (RANCIÈRE, 2004, p. 37). In other words, the signifier coexists autonomously with the signified and thus enhances the complexity of meaning. The analysis of literary realism as a heterogeneous fiction leads me to suggest that this 'identity of contraries' (*Ibid.*, p. 24) can equally be considered indisciplinary. In the footsteps of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1996), Rancière is of the opinion that there is no difference between the various disciplines since they only diverge in their fictions/methods: "Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions', that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done" (RANCIÈRE, 2004, p. 37).

When elaborating on the aesthetic regime, the author specifies a number of characteristics that I have used as key indicators for film's indisciplinaryity, *i.e.* its capacity to establish aesthetic dissent by way of a heterogeneous worldview. This worldview retracts from the Aristotelian idea of imitation of action, yet not by means of an anti-Aristotelian impetus that challenges identification, but rather due to an interest in the 'brute' materiality of the objects that have narrative potential in themselves.⁴ In order to analyse a film's indisciplinaryity, I have used these characteristics as methodological tools: the co-presence of temporalities; the in-definition of borders between the reason of facts and the reason of fictions; the suspension of the opposition between the activity of thought and the passivity of sensible matter; and, generally, the re-composition of the landscape of the visible as aesthetic dissent.⁵

The study of assembled city spaces and indisciplinaryity in *Blindness* gains depth when taking into consideration Giuliana Bruno's study of *vedutismo* (BRUNO, 2007, p. 174) with which she questions the centrality of the homogenous space of classical unity. By drawing attention to this pre-cinematic way of organizing narrative space in paintings that take architecture as their topic, she argues that the cinematic apparatus does not necessarily present the world as a totalizing spectacle, but is equally interested in heterogeneous spaces comprised of constantly moving centres. In her complex study of the relation between art, architecture and film she points out the strong relation between emotion and space:

³ See ZARZOSA (2011) for a discussion of Rancière's critique of Deleuze.

⁴ Exploring this heterogeneous potential, the works of art of the aesthetic regime differ from those of earlier artistic rules: the ethical regime of images and the regime of representation. In the same vein, scholars discussing the 'avant-garde' film like Gabriele Jutz (2010), R. Bruce Elder (2008) and A. L. Rees (2011), have questioned authors such as Clement Greenberg (1968) and P. Adams Sitney (1978), who famously defended self-reflexivity and subjectivity as modernism's key characteristics, and foregrounded the relation between materiality and performativity in films from the early 1920s to the present.

⁵ See RANCIÈRE (2004, p. 20-41).

As a view from the body, film is architecturally bound/ sized to the body, experienced from life, architecture is haptically imaged and mobilized. Architecture is neither a static structure nor simply just built. Like all tangible artefacts, it is actually constructed – imaged – as it is manipulated, ‘handled’ by users’ hands. And like a film, architecture is built as it is constantly negotiated by (e)motions, traversed by the histories both of its inhabitants and its transient dwellers. (...) The fiction of a city develops along the spatial trajectory of its image-movement. Film – the moving-image – travels the same path. Interaction is twofold, for film is architectural narration as much as “the image of the city” lives in the celluloid fiction. (BRUNO, 2007, p. 174).

Thus, Bruno’s interest in the haptic and the negotiation of e-motion in filmic architectures is in tune with Rancière’s idea of the emancipated spectator (RANCIÈRE, 2009). Distancing himself from Brechtian ideas of intellectual perception, both authors insist that the spectator is always cognitively and sensually involved, be it in architecture and film in the case of Bruno or in Rancière’s aesthetic regime that knows no fixed meaning due to the importance attributed to brute materiality. The author’s take on the relation between fictionality, spatial trajectory and the moving-image is useful in an analysis of *Blindness*. Let me now look at it and ask to what extent it develops a heterogeneous spaces that aims to reconfigure our senses and thus the distribution of the sensible.

Blindness

Fernando Meirelles’ *Blindness* is based on José Saramago’s homonymous novel from 1995 that radicalizes the question of losing sight by telling a story about a whole city going blind. While the book is set in an undefined, yet probably Portuguese, city, sometime after 1985 when the first hypermarket was opened in the country, Meirelles’ film sets out to show us a contemporary globalized megalopolis in which people from all over the world are primarily pursuing a materially rewarding life: a Japanese businessman (Yūsuke Iseya) and his yuppie wife (Yoshino Kimura), a local car thief (Don McKellar), a Brazilian call-girl (Alice Braga), a Latino barman (Gael Garcia-Bernal), a wealthy local ophthalmologist (Mark Ruffalo), etc.

Saramago’s famous novel returns to a literary trope which has been employed as an allegory of the limits of human knowledge ever since Sophocles used the myth of Oedipus. Interestingly, however, Oedipus’ blindness has also been associated with the return of the repressed feminine (HEINRICH, 1993, p. 41) and it is not surprising that the Portuguese winner of the Nobel Prize would choose a woman – the ophthalmologist’s wife – to have the only pair of eyes that remain with sight and who watches humanity’s descent into mayhem. She is central to the dense and polyphonic prose with “its flickering of tense and subject so that we glide between first and third person, between stream of consciousness and wry objectivity” (MILLER, 1998). Although it closely follows the fable of the book, the film does not actually accomplish Saramago’s aesthetic originality and resulting dissent.

In tune with the original text, the film starts at the very moment when the flow of urban life is suddenly interrupted. The local man without recognizable profession in the novel has, as a result of the film’s coproduction with Japan, turned into a businessman from the Eastern Asian nation who is suddenly unable to drive his car. He is plunged into what is later called

the “white evil”, a disease that immerses the affected into a brilliant, impenetrable white world without recognizable shapes. What seems to be a Good Samaritan accompanies him home but ends up stealing his car. While the thief first suggests to the upset foreigner that his disease is surely psychosomatic, he quickly develops the same symptoms. The idea is thus introduced that it might somehow be a punishment for immoral deeds, or at least of selfish and self-centred people. While the novel – which in Portuguese is called “Essay on Blindness” – not only reflects on people’s actions, it also has a more heterogeneous outlook on the paradoxes of the human soul. The film, on the other hand, offers a much more moral approach and clearly separates people into essentially good or bad. In both book and film, an expanding circle of victims starts to radiate from the first case by means of the visit to an ophthalmologist. In fact, the patients who are in the doctor’s waiting room will become the doctor’s surrogate family that holds together until the very end.

According to its moralist take, the film’s opening sequences focus on the cold and distanced behaviour between the people who populate the contemporary city. When the businessman cannot drive, people get impatient and honk their horns. Not surprisingly, he does not trust the man who brings him home and urges him to leave his apartment. In contrast to the novel, the wife of the car thief refuses to help him. The young prostitute is abandoned in both media by her client in the hotel room when she suddenly goes blind and is then escorted naked from the hotel. Among these rather selfish and unfriendly characters, the wife of the ophthalmologist (Julianne Moore) is from the start of a caring nature and her conviction that she will not get infected seems to be related to her kind behaviour. The book is much more speculative about her difference, while the film leaves no doubt about her outstanding humanity. Among the people who will become close to her – the Japanese couple and the prostitute – there is also a little boy and an elderly man (Danny Glover) with a cataract. The latter enunciates in voice-over the details of the pandemic dimension of the disease and the scientists’ and politicians’ helplessness.

Our perception is constructed by means of voice-over narration, camera point of view and spatial relations. Hence, *Blindness* always tells the story from the outside and plays only eventually with what it might be like to be infected by the milky white blindness. By means of overexposure and loss of focus the spectator is briefly immersed in the sensation of loss of vision. This occurs for the first time when the Japanese businessman leaves his car for his apartment and starts stumbling around. The camera takes its distance and the images become blurred, as if we were experiencing the same visual loss and sense of direction as the character. However, due to the distance of the camera, we actually remain remote from his experience and also far from identifying with him (Figure 1).

While the novel constantly offers insights into the stream of consciousness of the different characters and thus constructs a polyphony of voices that destabilize a homogeneous perspective on the situation, the film does not propose equivalent audio-visual means through which to express the deconstruction of a single story. The moments when we approach the loss of sight are too short to be disturbing and the camera quickly recovers its focus so that we can follow the evolution of the plot.

It shows us how an alarmed and Orwellian government quickly takes precautions to stop the epidemic and transfers the blind to a defunct mental asylum. Since social status is



Figure 1 – Photograms of *Blindness* (2008): blurred vision
Source: O2 Filmes

of little interest, the ophthalmologist is the first to be hurried into an ambulance in order to be taken into quarantine. When other characters arrive, they have been stripped bare of their individuality and present themselves as numbers. The only character that is again singled out is the doctor's wife. She did not want to be left behind and lied that she just lost her sight. Even though a key figure in the struggle for survival that will take place in the asylum, she too will be faced with one of the foremost preoccupations of Saramago's novel: how quickly the façade of civilization crumbles. In fact, she will see her husband be unfaithful with the young prostitute and become herself victim of a collective rape.

In the film these are mainly plot points that do not transpose the book's explorations of the thoughts and feelings that accompany this drift towards catastrophe. The different wards

of the institution rapidly engage in an uneven battle, which the film reduces to a conflict between worse and better people. One ward is led by the bartender who – an addition in the film – was the former pimp of the young call-girl and is now determined to impose his will and take advantage of the others. He installs his authoritarian reign by means of a revolver and the schooled perception of a blind man (Maury Chaykin). Whereas the group around the doctor and his wife still tries to maintain civility and establish some sort of routine and order, the second group reveals the brute side of human nature and a Darwinian approach towards coping with the scarce resources, refusal of medical help that costs a life, deteriorating hygiene and emotional conflicts.

It is a rather predictable binary opposition of human conduct in crises that leaves no room for the much more complex battle described in the novel. Neither vision nor principles can prevent nine women from the doctor's ward being raped in exchange for food once everybody is starving. When one of them gets killed, the doctor's wife gives up on her caring and motherly nature and murders the gang's leader with a scissor. In the book her decision is conscious. She does not act out of selfishness or cruelty, but with the purpose to change the rules. She even threatens to kill one of the men from the ward each night, if they do not give out food. In the film, we see a stunning psychological interpretation by Julianne Moore who despairs and feels guilty. Nevertheless, this approach alters completely the idea of the book where the doctor's wife is an allegory of human conduct – in a positive reinterpretation of Oedipus she is the compassionate one who feels and therefore sees – and not a person horrified by her act. The murder is not a moral question but a reality that cannot be avoided under the circumstances. What is more, the Breugelian and almost surrealist crusade between the two wards in the novel, turns into a Hollywood showdown in the film. I agree with A.O. Scott (2008, p. E8) that Meirelles takes advantage of the horror, instead of engaging the spectator with the gloomy despair of the blind: "And he is not above exploiting both the comical and the horrific aspects of their condition, punctuating scenes of cruelty and dread with moments of grimly funny slapstick."

Just before a war breaks out in the film another woman takes action and sets the rapists' ward on fire. Fleeing to the yard, they discover that the soldiers have already left and that the city has become an abandoned place of looting. The director now intercuts scenes filmed in São Paulo and in Toronto for the following sequence, which shows how the small group around the doctor's wife reach the city centre and look for food. When they leave the asylum, they walk over a bridge, which was at the time under construction in Brazil's biggest city. The skyline behind it looks from a distance similar to any globalized metropolis since it depicts the new financial district around Avenida Faria Lima. But once they reach the city centre we see images taken in Toronto, recognizable in terms of architecture but even more so because cables are still above ground in most parts of São Paulo. Even though several areas and buildings in São Paulo's central districts have been object of reconstruction and improvements, areas around the "School Yard" (Pátio do Colégio), where the city was founded, turn at night into an open-air asylum for the homeless. It is rather ironic that the film would shoot the scenes of people squatting in the centre of the wealthier Canada (Figure 2).

Fernando Meirelles constructs his assembled city not by adding disparate images together but by merging distinct socio-economic spaces into one. The film actually hides the existing urban differences between São Paulo, Toronto or Montevideo. The diverse cities are fitted



Figure 2: Photographs of *Blindness* (2008): city spaces

Source: O2 Filmes

together into one high-tech town since the director mainly shot what is now common to all major urban spaces around the globe: heavy traffic, five star hotels, top of the line clinics, apartments filled with the latest designer furniture, and so on (Figure 3).

As a result the film with American movie stars not only links the epidemic to our globalized and post-industrial world with its consumer culture and lack of values, but makes the homogenously constructed city accessible to the first world film it is marketed to, without taking into consideration the abysmal dissimilarities that still exist between the Brazilian, Canadian and Uruguayan urban landscapes. The uncountable scars in the Brazilian megalopolis – a result of real estate speculation and social injustice – are of no interest to the film. It is too concerned in developing a biased perspective of humanity – there are those who will always be blind and others that will learn and be able to catch sight of human nature’s limitations –, than to take social differences into consideration.

I do not think that Saramago’s original text is to blame.⁶ His allegory gives hints why the fiction of a progressive modern society suddenly enters into turmoil, and he does so through a polyphony of perspectives, thoughts and images that take their cue from Western civilizations’ tales and imaginary, such as the already mentioned Pieter Breughel, Surrealism, but also the Old Testament, the *Odyssey* and so forth. The film tells the book’s story but by translating it into conventional realism. As a matter of fact, while Meirelles sets out to show us the crumbling façade of civilization from Saramago’s novel, he ends up constructing two

⁶ In contrast to my opinion, A.O. Scott believes that the film is based on a “lofty, ideologically defended humanism”. Even though he does not like the movie much, he still thinks it to be superior to its source: “*Blindness*” is not a great film, mainly because it can’t transcend – and, indeed, lays bare – the intellectual flimsiness of its source. But it is, nonetheless, full of examples of what good filmmaking looks like.” (*Ibid.*).



Figure 3: Photograms of *Blindness* (2008): high-tech globalized city spaces
Source: O2 Filmes

other fictional frontages; first, by using the ophthalmologist and his wife as moral heroes of a predictable plot, and, second, by suggesting that Brazil's financial capital faces the same civilizational dilemmas as other first world nations.⁷

The film's disclosure proves both points. The doctor's wife leads them to their comfortable modernist house (the doctor in the novel lives in a simple apartment block). Returned to this civilized surrounding with a modern kitchen and extensive bookshelves, there is a promise that their experiencing and subsequent comprehension of human nature's most brutal behaviour will make them see again. After the women showered in the rain, got a night of rest and are settling in for breakfast, the Japanese businessman regains his sight. When this happens, the camera fully assumes his point of view – he looks at the coffee being poured into his white milk, looks at the doctor's wife, encounters his wife – and we are invited to identify with his joy and share his excitement almost physically by moving around with him through the apartment (Figure 4).

⁷ Undoubtedly, the separation into first, second and third world has become obsolete. Still, it would be interesting to know how an adaptation to a developing economy, haunted by oligarchy would look like.



Figure 4: Photograms of *Blindness* (2008): regaining sight

Source: O2 Filmes

The last sequence at the ophthalmologist's home reveals how strongly the film remains close not only to a dominant narrative structure but also to the aesthetics related to it. Saramago is much less affirmative. What is troubling at the end of the book is exactly how society will restructure itself after everybody in the apartment but also around them – they hear cries of joy from the apartment below and in the streets – regains their vision. Human consciousness is much more troubled and cannot free itself that easily from all that it has lived through and participated in: treason, murder, theft, battles over food, etc. The novel offers no comfort at the end, as the film does. It requests us to speculate constantly on the reason why the doctor's wife retains her sight, but also – more generally – on human behaviour in society, as Andrew Miller notes:

Clearly it is useful for Saramago to have at least one pair of eyes still seeing, but as both readers and characters begin to suspect that the blindness has as much to do with a pathology of consciousness as with any failure of retina or lens, we are invited to speculate on her exclusion, as indeed we are invited, sometimes teasingly, to speculate on every aspect of this fascinating novel. (MILLER, 1998).

This finds no audio-visual equivalent in Meirelles' film. There is no heterogeneity of perspectives. In *Blindness* we see barbaric behaviour, which is shocking, but it does not make us see anything in a different way. There is no aesthetic of dissent and, consequently, no intent to redistribute the sensible. Focused on its plot, the film thus keeps the blindness metaphor simple. Instead of making the audience experience feelings of discomfort and doubt, it plays with our sight and with different genre conventions to keep us at a not too painful distance. Fernando Meirelles quickly relieves us from the pathology of consciousness.

Conclusion

I would suggest that the filmmaker' aesthetic approach towards the loss of sight develops a conventional perspective on how to engage its spectators into civilizational neurosis. Fernando Meirelles turns the allegory of humankind's limited insight into a coproduction with international film stars that follows the rules of dominant narrative cinema. There are, as mentioned, shots that show the blurring sight of the characters but they are not of a metaphorical nature. They simply pass the sensation of lack of vision and getting blind through loss of focus and overexposure, but recover their focus in order to keep on telling a homogeneous fiction. As spectators we do not experience anything we have not seen or felt before. Accordingly, apart from staging what would happen in a worst-case scenario of a pandemic of "white evil", the film does not explore the limits of human reasoning that the novel offers to us as a mind-game of imagination.

With regard to the city space, *Blindness* remains within the frontiers of a homogeneous worldview by levelling the socio-economic differences of the coproducing countries and film sets. The globalized audience the film is marketed for is told a story about blindness and the possibility of recovering vision after a moment of crisis. But it only mimics blindness and shows that humans are all barbaric – but to varying degrees – in a way that we have already seen too often in films and other media. In conclusion, Fernando Meirelles remains within a disciplinary take on the post-industrial nations without transcoding Saramago's allegory on the limits of individualistic fiction. The possibilities of negotiating e-motions offered by the production mode and the assembled city spaces are lost, since the heterogeneity and indisciplinaryity that they suggest are not explored. Accordingly, the fictionality of the globalized city space is reaffirmed and not challenged. Emancipated spectators might envision this lack of insight.

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