



# Cristina Vidruțiu

## The Blind Spot

### Utopian and Dystopian Seeds in José Saramago's Novel *Blindness*

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The paper first explores the peculiar symbiosis between utopia and dystopia in José Saramago's novel *Blindness*, by tracing a parallel between the group in the novel and the *brigata* in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*; and second, it analyzes the way this atypical world is translated on the big screen by Fernando Meirelles, using a number of different cinematography techniques.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Plague; José Saramago; Giovanni Boccaccio; *Blindness*; Fernando Meirelles.

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When Fernando Meirelles decided he wanted to shoot the cinematographic version of José Saramago's novel *Blindness*, he knew it would not be an easy job, first of all, because he had to convince the Portuguese writer to give him this opportunity. Along the years, Saramago refused several offers to make a movie out of *Blindness*, because he said he was afraid that fallen in the wrong hands, the message of the novel would be distorted. Finally, he accepted Meirelles's offer, and in 2008, when the movie premiered and Saramago saw it, he cried tears of happiness, saying that watching the adaptation made him as happy as when he finished writing the novel.

With that in mind, we can clearly say that, at least from Saramago's point of view, Meirelles succeeded in making the camera see and show the unseen, and thus to assume the role of storyteller for the viewer. Not only that, but by using a set of well-timed techniques, Meirelles ended up making the viewer constantly "adapt to" and "adopt" the camera lenses' view in understanding the movie.

When Saramago wrote *Blindness*, he did not make a choice between dystopia and utopia; instead, he acknowledged that the



grains of paradise can be found in the midst of hell, confirming what Rebecca Totaro once wrote: “Utopianism took literary form, the main goal of both groups growing out of plague-time.”<sup>1</sup>

For the Portuguese writer, there is never a clear mark between these two areas, as these are always on the move, changing borders, reimagining the world. In Saramago’s novel, dystopia and utopia are permeable to each other and they seem to co-exist in a peculiar form of symbiosis.

From the moment the mysterious blindness epidemic hits the city and all falls apart, the world sets slowly its pace to a new rhythm: that of dystopia, promising a resurrection, in accordance with Elana Gornel’s distinction between apocalyptic-regenerative narratives and post-apocalyptic-death and suffering ridden narratives.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as the infected persons are put into the mental hospital, at gunpoint, under the strict surveillance of the military, on rationalized food, under scanty conditions of living and without any medical supplies, all hell breaks loose, making the fight for survival a day-to-day task for each and every one of those imprisoned. In this context, the dysfunctional “plague-stricken town” fails to become “the utopia of the perfectly governed city,”<sup>3</sup> as seen by Foucault. In fact, it turns out to be quite the opposite.

In the midst of violence, destruction and death, a new chance for life arises, as a small group of people understands the importance of cooperation, organization and leadership. The doctor’s wife, played by Julianne Moore, the only one who sees, coagulates a new form of *brigata* around her, whom she does not lead, as she says, but to whom rather she lends her sight.

In relation to the classical *brigata* from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, the group from Saramago’s *Blindness* seems to be built on complementary principles. But beyond structural differences, it is important to remember the fact that both groups have a

common origin, the outbreak of a disease, and that is to create a structure able to survive and function in the face of the plague.

While the *brigata* from the *Decameron* runs away from the bubonic plague, the new *brigata* from *Blindness* tries to escape the white blindness epidemic. In both cases, the disease is considered a violent event that changes the course of things. But the way each author envisions how people should react to the epidemic is totally different. Both Boccaccio and Saramago agree on the idea of a group, but where, when, how and with whom the group should be formed is seen very differently by the two authors.

Let’s take for example the classical *brigata* from the *Decameron*. This is a group made of young men and women (that have names), formed as soon as the plague sets in Florence, dwelling in the countryside and guided by a set of principles that represent the scientific preventive views of the time regarding the plague: in order to prevent or fight the plague, it is recommended to keep a good sense of humor, to engage in activities like storytelling, dancing, walking, singing, to eat nutritious and rich food, sleep well and retreat in the countryside for the fresh air.

On the other hand, the new *brigata* from *Blindness* is complementarily built. First of all, this other group is more heterogeneous. It consists of men and women, young and old, a child and eventually even a dog. Second, the characters do not have names. Third, the group is formed only as the epidemic invades the city and the characters escape the insane asylum, where they were kept. Fourth, the group dwells in the city. Fifth, the members of the group are not able to engage in relaxing activities, nor to have a healthy diet because of the chaotic state of the city, where provisions are scarce and the air is polluted.



Still, despite all the differences between the two *brigata*, there is a moment and, more specifically, a place when the groups resemble each other, when the two groups can be seen as the seeds of utopia. As soon as the group from Saramago's novel escapes the insane asylum and enters the doctor's home, things change.

This new space is defined in opposition to the space of the ward. In here, cleanliness, nice smells, order, food supplies, fresh water and a friendly atmosphere rule, leading to its being called a paradise by the members of the new *brigata*, while the place left behind is called hell. The access to this space of purity is guided by the doctor's wife and her husband, who ask the members of the group to abandon their dirty clothes and wash themselves. Once settled, the new *brigata* can enjoy the provisions and engage in a pleasant way of spending time, much like the merry group from the *Decameron*.

The most striking difference, regarding the way the two groups try to articulate a functional, utopic structure in the midst of plague ridden cities, resides in the way these understand the notion of ruler.

In the *Decameron*, each day has a different patron, which establishes the theme for the stories to be told on that particular time frame. Each of the *brigata*'s members is to rule and each of them is bringing their contribution each day by telling a story. In other words, the power and the responsibilities that come along with it are distributed equally among all members, giving them the chance to assume different roles and to contribute in complementary ways to the good functioning of the group.

In *Blindness*, the one and only leader for the whole period of time is the doctor's wife, mainly because she is the only one that does not lose her eyesight, and thus has the power to make decisions. Her relation to the others is one of great responsibility.

Mainly, she assumes a role similar to that of a mother: she guides the members of the group, she feeds them, she takes care of them, she washes them, and she protects them.

Even though she is in a position whence she might take full advantage of her eyesight and become a tyrannical ruler, she does not do it. Nor does she consider herself a leader, but more of an organizer, a person like the others, who lends her sight to the others. When relating to others, she insists on the idea of community and the power of collaboration. In this case, the power irradiates from the doctor's wife to the others and returns once again to the doctor's wife, as the members of the group see in her a sort of savior.

If we consider the dynamic of the two *brigata* and the relation between these and the diseased environment, we can observe a certain similarity regarding the way these interact and the roles they assume. At first, the groups separate themselves from the chaotic mass of people. Second, they try to coagulate as a functional group. And third, they "contaminate" the world, serving as a functional model in the midst of chaos.

The group's way of functioning as an independent and self-sufficient unit goes from chaotic, non-organized and destructive to defined, organized and regenerative. In biological terms, the functional transition the groups make is similar to that from cancer cells to stem cells. In this equation, the diseased city acts the same way as cancer cells, while the two *brigata* act the same way as stem cells. In both novels, the two groups irradiate life, they fight against disorder and give a solution: a way to organize themselves.

The nature of the diseases present in the two novels has a strong influence on the way the sense of community arises. If in the *Decameron* the bubonic plague allows everyday rules to be broken and the imagination to be set free, giving cathartic powers to the stories, in Saramago's novel, the



white blindness encourages touch as a way to bond with the others.

Meirelles clearly understands the transition from sight to touch, in Saramago's novel, and while adapting the story for the big screen he lays a big emphasis on this aspect.

The camera focuses mainly on parts of the body. It assembles the whole image like a puzzle, trying to make sense of it. It usually starts with the extremities, the feet, or the hands, which usually make a strong sound while touching something else. In fact, the visual image of the movie is constructed by respecting the "contours" left by the sound.

The director superposes the movement of the camera to Saramago's words from the novel: when the first man goes blind, his explanation about what he is experiencing synchronizes with the images the camera shots apparently in a random manner. While saying he is seeing white all around him, the windows of the car where the man is reflect the white light. As the explanation of the character continues, the car goes from light to dark, while crossing a tunnel.

This transgression between white and black or black and white will repeatedly appear in Meirelles's movie, becoming a sort of visual rhythm, sewing together the pieces of the puzzle: from the street in the broad daylight to the tunnel, from the black wall of the kitchen to the light in the kitchen, from day to night, switching on and off lights or headlights, moving from the street to the dark van.

The visual rhythm of the movie is accompanied by a specific sound, which has the role of highlighting the proportions of the blindness epidemic. Each new case of blindness is signaled by a sound, similar to that of hitting a piece of crystal, while a white light invades the image.

The movie's images suffer a reconversion once blindness is installed: the image is chopped, there is a lot of zooming, the eyes of the characters are outside of the

frame, the extremities become the main focus and the sound guides the way to assembling the whole picture. As the epidemic progresses, the fight between the image and the white color is repeatedly staged in the movie: sometimes the image surfaces slowly from under a sea of white; at other times the image fades away, erasing itself in order to let the white invade it.

Meirelles's movie is very resourceful when it comes to the seeing-not seeing dynamic. The director accurately and instinctively senses the variety of intermediate nuances raised by this battle. This is why the movie is a kaleidoscope of reflections and transparencies.

The car, the hotel and home windows and mirrors, the sun glasses, a glass elevator, an aluminum tea pot, a glass table – all mirror the characters, insisting on the importance of the point of view of the camera and, implicitly, of the audience.

The insane asylum, where Saramago's characters are segregated, is made to look like a labyrinth of mirrors. When entering it, the doctor's wife is reflected many times in the glass of the windows, thus insisting both on the fragmented image and the multiple images of self. The screen of one of the TVs in the asylum, showing an official talking about the benefits of isolation, reflects the ward, thus superposing the official version of the disease with the unofficial version of the disease.

The eye of the viewer is left to wander. Often, the characters are seen through a wall of glass: the doctor and his wife are watched through the glass walls of the living room, the health secretary through the glass walls of the hall, the girl with the sun glasses through the glass walls of the elevator, the first blind man through the windows of his car, the doctor's secretary through the glass walls of the office, the doctor's wife through the windows of the ambulance. This gives the



viewer the impression of transparency, but at the same time it reminds him there is a boundary that he will not be able to cross.

Saramago's interpretation of the novel, that "Blindness is a metaphor for the blindness of human reason,"<sup>4</sup> is reflected visually in the movie by focusing on the eye that no longer sees, and that is seen through a series of mediums built in order to exercise sight, like peepholes, lenses or glasses.

The novel highlights a disruptive logic: the characters "see, without seeing," unlike Homer or Tiresias, who "don't see, but see." Following this logic of the dysfunctional eye, blurred images, close-ups and zooming become a way of moving through the movie, a red line that connects all the dots and forms the big picture. The repeated out-of-focus images force the audience to readjust sight many times during the movie, thus creating a strong interdependent connection between the eye of the viewer and the camera telling the story.

Following the same line, Saramago also questions the classic view on the relation between white and black. Atypical blindness is white, not black, as usual, giving, at least in the beginning, the impression that this disease is a noble one. Still, this presumption is rapidly dismantled when, for example, one of the characters "sailing" on a sea of white is appalled by the awful smells around him, rising from the dirty and chaotic city.

By becoming physically blind, Saramago's characters are forced to become aware of and to overcome their rational blind spot, which prevents them from truly understanding the essence of the world and of the self. One blindness enlightens the other. One blindness serves the other. Only when they cannot see the physical world do they turn their eyes onto themselves, to the meaning of things. As soon as they learn how to live peacefully with the others in this new position, their sight comes back, in order to let them fully see the better place they have

created, by connecting harmoniously the two gazes, targeted at the world and at themselves.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Totaro, *Suffering in Paradise: The Bubonic Plague in English Literature from More to Milton*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 2005, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Elana Gomel, "The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body", *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 4, "Literature and Apocalypse," Winter 2000, p. 405-433.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995, p. 197-198.

<sup>4</sup> Donzelina Barroso, "Jose Saramago: The art of fiction CLV", *The Paris Review*, No. 149, Winter 1998, p. 70.