

FROM THE PLATONIC CAVE TO MODERN PRISONS: VISION AND DARKNESS IN POLITICAL LITERATURE, CINEMA AND ART OF THE 20TH CENTURY¹

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Abstract || Ever since Plato and until the Enlightenment, light has been associated to Goodness, knowledge and Truth. However, the discourse under which light was regarded as something positive and that associated darkness to ignorance has been reevaluated from the nineteenth century onwards. The emphasis on shadows and obscurity, which emerged during Romanticism, has developed in the political literature, art and film of the twentieth century, when light has been linked to the excesses of reason leading to dehumanization in contemporary societies, and to totalitarianism. Conversely, darkness and blindness, rather than negative conditions, become metaphors of the resistance of the individual when confronted with political oppression. In this article, I explore this new understanding of darkness and blindness in the artworks of Ana Maria Pacheco, Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden*, the film *Garage Olimpo*, directed by Marco Bechis, and José Saramago's novel *Blindness*.

Keywords || Light | Darkness | Blindness | Political Literature | Collectivity | Subjectivity | Art.

0. Introduction: Vision in the Platonic Cave

The sense of sight has been at the centre of Western political, religious and philosophical thought, as well as enjoying a privileged position within artistic and literary creations, since classical antiquity at least. In Ancient Greece, ideas of vision and blindness lay at the heart of numerous myths and formed the basis of philosophy as a system of thought, as well as literature as a discourse that sought to represent and re-imagine reality. Some types of vision were seen as a transgression, often being punished by blindness, as in the case of the mythological figure of Tiresias, who was punished by Athena because he inadvertently saw her naked². When his mother intervened on his behalf, the goddess endowed him with prophetic powers. The idea that physical blindness might go hand in hand with the ability to come into contact with another reality was widely held in Antiquity and later re-emerged in Plato's allegory of the cave, without doubt a foundational narrative of Western thought.

Plato conceives the formation of a philosopher as a voyage towards the eidetic sphere. He postulates the existence of a hierarchical chain of appearances that culminates, at the top, in the perfect reality of forms. The best-known representation of this schema is the allegory of the cave portrayed in *The Republic* (Plato, 1991: 514a-517c). In this episode, Socrates conjures up a scantily lit underworld inhabited by prisoners who observe the shadows of objects projected on the walls. While inside the cave, humans are prevented from seeing the reality that surrounds them, grasping nothing but its pale copies and reflections. An upward ascent is required for the dissipation of darkness and for the coming into the light of truth. At the summit, one finds the ideas that are classified as "what is always the same in all respects" (1991: 484b). Plato's discourse on these entities routinely resorts to metaphors of vision and light, contrasting their luminosity to the obscurity of appearances. Indeed the Ancient Greek term for 'idea', ἰδέα, was the aorist infinitive, ἰδεῖν, of the verb 'to see', εἶδω, which originally meant 'form' or 'the look of a thing, as opposed to its reality'. Furthermore, 'knowledge', εἰδέναι, signified a 'mental perception' that often originated in sight, and 'theory', θεωρία, meant 'seeing' or 'contemplation', among other related meanings. The main idea, governing all others, is the Good, which Plato describes by analogy with the Sun:

[...] que me refería al Sol cuando hablaba del hijo del Bien, que este engendró a su semejanza y que, en el mundo visible, con relación a la vista y a los objetos visibles, es análogo al Bien en el mundo inteligible con relación a la inteligencia y a los objetos inteligibles o pensados. (1963: 508 b-c)

The Good and the Sun are the conditions of possibility for knowing

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1 | Many of the ideas presented in this text were developed in my book *Seeing Politics Otherwise: Vision in Latin American and Iberian Fiction* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2011).

2 | Moshe Barasch explains that there is another version of the story of Tiresias which blames Hera for his blindness. Zeus and Hera were arguing about how much pleasure they experienced in love and asked Tiresias for his opinion. He said that a woman obtained more pleasure than the man, for which Hera, in a fit of rage, turned him blind, while Zeus granted him immortality (2001: 32). Generally speaking, it is believed that Tiresias was blinded by the gods for revealing their secrets in the form of prophecies.

and of seeing, respectively, and, as such, they precede knowledge and sight. Yet, despite the prevalent association of ideas with vision and light in Plato's thought, the passage above makes it clear that the intelligible and the visible occupy two distinct regions. Eidetic luminosity can only be grasped with the eye of the mind, that is, with a trained philosophical intellect. Concrete vision falls short of perceiving ideational objects, or, as Socrates puts it, "I, for my part, am unable to hold that any study makes a soul look upward other than the one that concerns what is and is *invisible*" (1991: 529b, emphasis added). The Platonic standpoint, therefore, involves a distinction between figurative and embodied sight. Limited to appearances, the latter becomes tantamount to intellectual obscurity. At the same time, physical blindness serves here as a prerequisite for entering into the transcendent sphere of ideas, echoing the mythological construction of sightlessness as a condition of possibility for a knowledge that goes beyond what is present in everyday life, as in the case of Tiresias.

The Platonic connection between luminosity and knowledge prevailed until the Enlightenment, a movement that proposed as its goal the eradication of superstition, of prejudice, and of blind faith, which should be replaced by the universal laws of rationality, that is, by the light of reason. This coming together of light and reason is the root of the word 'enlightenment' in many European languages, including English, French and German. The materialization of this idea was the French Revolution, which, like the philosophical background from which it originated, relied on metaphors of light and vision to enunciate its promise of freedom. An example of this is the Republic, which adopted as one of its symbols the image of Diogenes illuminating his quest for truth with the light of the lamp. The all-seeing Masonic eye placed inside of a triangle and surrounded by rays visually expressed the aspirations of the new movement (Jay, 1994: 94-96).

The Enlightenment project, which sought the emancipation of the individual through reason, and its political consequences, was cast in doubt with the advent of Romanticism, a movement which resurrected themes such as the emotional, the occult and the irrational. German romantic writers such as Herder and Novalis, for example, celebrated the darkness of night and contributed to overthrowing the supremacy of vision, raising in its place the senses of hearing and touch. The fascination of Romanticism with the unconventional, the subterranean and the obscure gained a scientific expression at the beginning of the twentieth century with psychoanalysis, which privileged the unconscious as fundamental to understanding human behaviour.

Post-Romantic philosophy, like psychoanalysis, has inherited a non-homogenous tradition of reflecting on sight in such a way as to favour the shadows dwelling in vision. In his groundbreaking work,

Downcast Eyes, Martin Jay identifies this theoretical shift from an unflinching faith in the promises of vision to a growing pessimism about sight:

Para los años 60 [...] el discurso antiocular-céntrico se convirtió en un rasgo persistente, si bien no siempre coherente o articulado conscientemente, de la tradición intelectual francesa. Instigado por una acusación políticamente causada por las tradiciones intelectuales y las prácticas culturales de la cultura occidental, se acabó por convertir en un ataque frontal, no solo contra el ocular-centrismo sino a menudo también contra la visualidad en cualquiera y cada una de sus formas. (1994: 327-8; traducción propia)

Jay stated that, particularly from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, French philosophy became progressively disenchanting with vision as a means of acquiring knowledge and of relating to others. Drawing on Jay's exhaustive work, I would argue that this development was not limited to French philosophy but has pervaded a great number of reflections on vision. This critique of vision is frequently associated with the formulation of an ethics that resists the reduction of the other to a phenomenon to be appropriated by sight and with a politics that tries to avoid the traps of an all-encompassing gaze that levels and controls everyone in its field of vision. Martin Heidegger was a foundational thinker in his critique of sight in that he recoded vision and the theoreticism it betokens as a deficient mode of understanding things, which should not be extended to the philosophical study of human beings. He suggested hearing as an alternative to the pitfalls of seeing. Along the same lines as Heidegger, Jacques Derrida conceives of the movement of phenomenality as inaccessible to vision, a spectral apparition of something non-apparent that transforms the subject into an object of contemplation. Thinkers such as Heidegger and Derrida share a condemnation of ocularcentrism and a desire to liberate their thoughts from the theorization and objectivization betokened by an excessive faith in vision³. These writers value darkness as a means of resisting the traditionally dominant sight, which appropriates everything within its reach. Further, their emphasis on blindness and darkness signifies an acceptance of human finitude and prompts a recoding of these tropes not as mere negativity and absence of light, but as a possibility for a non-intrusive ethical approach to exteriority, as well as for an inclusive politics.

In what follows, I suggest that this understanding of vision is not only limited to contemporary philosophy, but that it also underlies artistic and literary works. Blindness pervades many works of art that thematize political violence from the start of the twentieth century onwards. This is not surprising given that the waves of aggression perpetrated against dissidents by dictatorial regimes, both on the right and on the left, have led many who lived through these periods

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3 | The terms 'theoreticism' and, later, 'theoreticist' are used in the sense attributed to them by Martin Heidegger and, subsequently, Emmanuel Levinas, in their criticism of Husserl's 'phenomenology', which privileged pure consciousness over practical experience of the world. These philosophers linked 'theoreticism' with a contemplative and detached stance vis-à-vis reality, which went hand in hand with the privileged status that Husserl gave to the sense of sight.

to see them as 'dark times'. Many dictatorships of the twentieth century adopted the heliocentric discourse of the Enlightenment: these governments held as an ideal the complete transparency of society, which should be scrutinized with the vision of political power, penetrating the darkest recesses of the citizen's soul. Reserving for themselves the right to see without being seen, dictatorships of the twentieth century tried to imitate the omnipotence of God, becoming a secular, earthly version of divinity. The metaphorical darkness of these 'dark times' is likened to the literal blindness of countless political prisoners who were often blindfolded, held in solitary confinement, and tortured. Thus the blindness of the prisoners is contrasted with the panoptic vision of the dictatorial regimes. Nevertheless, I argue that the blindness represented in these works of art that responded, either contemporaneously or in retrospect, to these veritable states of emergency was not a phenomenon with purely negative features. In addition to its undeniably debilitating character, lack of vision was often conceived as an empowering condition: as a means of resisting violence, as a place of ethical and political reflection, or as a last refuge for the psychic interiority of the victim. The works I discuss in the rest of this article share a critique directed towards the dream of full visibility as an ethico-political chimera and an understanding of blindness as a possible path to liberating oneself from this illusion forever.

1. Blindfolded eyes in art and literature

In literature and art that focuses on events that took place during extreme political circumstances, such as a dictatorship, darkness and blindness are often associated with the use of blindfolds or their extension, the hood. These implements were employed as a palpable sign of the debasement of the prisoners, who find themselves prevented from looking at or identifying those causing them pain. I begin the discussion around vision and blindness in literature and the arts by considering the symbolic weight of the act of covering the eyes in situations of torture and physical violence. I will deal with works that emerged within the context of the wave of right-wing military rule in the Southern Cone of Latin America and in Brazil in the second half of the twentieth century to analyze the ways in which artists, writers and filmmakers responded to these political events in an attempt to resist political violence and keep the memory of victims alive.⁴

The Brazilian artist Ana Maria Pacheco (1943) captures the interdependence of oppressive power, torture and the blindfold in many of her works.⁵ In her paintings and sculptures there is a widespread portrayal of figures with their eyes covered by blindfolds

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4 | According to Idelber Avelar, dictatorships in Latin America served as instruments in the transition made by the countries in the region from a focus on State and national economies to globalized market economies (2003: 21). Totalitarian political systems created in Latin America's Southern Cone and in Brazil, thus seen, share many similarities, including affinities in the methods of repression used to control opposition to these regimes. Torture was common practice against prisoners in Argentina, Chile and Brazil, among other countries.

5 | Ana Maria Pacheco is a sculptor, painter and printmaker born in Goiás, Brazil. After studying art and music and teaching at Goiás University, Pacheco moved to the UK, where she has lived ever since. From 1985 to 1989 she was Head of Fine Art at Norwich School of Art and since then has focused solely on her work as an artist. She has exhibited her work on numerous occasions, particularly in Europe, the United States and Brazil.

and hoods. These usually cover the eyes and faces of victims of torture and mutilation whose limbs, bound with rope, are portrayed as contorted in unnatural positions. However, the absence of sight is not used in a linear fashion to portray the dehumanization of these figures, whose human bodies are so starkly prominent. On the contrary, it is the agents or the spectators of the process that appear bereft of human features, often being represented as animals. The artist appears to suggest that, when victims find themselves with their eyes blindfolded, those around them are the ones who are truly debased.

In Ana Maria Pacheco's work, the individuals portrayed with their eyes or face covered are never alone and their situation is usually contrasted with that of one or a number of characters, who direct their gaze towards them. They assume the position of torturers, who appear either to marvel or delight in the pain of their victims. Looking at Pacheco's artworks, the viewer is compelled to abandon his or her voyeuristic position and to side with the figures with covered eyes and faces in a process of identification that triggers an ethical response to the scenes being depicted.

The print *And They Inherited the Earth I* is structured around a series of dichotomies, the first of which is the opposition between the blindfold that covers the face of the female figure and the animal mask that places an emphasis on the eyes of the male figure. While the victim's face is pointing in the direction of the apparatus of barbed wire, ropes and hooks generating her pain, her torturer watches her intently. The image is ambiguous in terms of the nature of the oppressor's eyes in that they could either be thought of as human eyes, appearing through a slit in the animal mask, or as non-human eyes that form part of the mask, which is suggested by their shape and ferocity. The latter interpretation would imply that the male figure does not have a human face behind its disguise, or that it simply takes on the form of whatever mask it is wearing. Thus, this work of art overturns the traditional connotation that associates the eyes—commonly thought of as the mirrors of the soul—with humanity, relating them instead to the bestial characteristics of the torturer, who appears to lack human features. Many of the individuals depicted in Ana Maria Pacheco's paintings, drawings and prints wear similar masks with animal features that cover either the upper part or the whole face. However, these masks are not always ferocious, but often express dejection or powerlessness. They are not placed there to symbolize completely bestialized humans, but rather to signal that they take on different roles in various circumstances and that their essence lies precisely in their fluid, ever-changing appearance. Therefore, in *And They Inherited the Earth I*, the torturer is not necessarily the embodiment of evil, but can be interpreted as a transient bearer of its brutal mask.

This banality of brutality and evil and its lack of an ontological basis was the subject of Hannah Arendt's reflections on the trial of Otto Eichmann, a high ranking Nazi official who played a key role in carrying out the Holocaust. In her observations, Arendt concludes that atrocities are not perpetrated by psychopaths characterized by abnormality, but are committed by ordinary people who find themselves in the position to do so. Jean Améry, an ex-member of the resistance against the Nazi regime who was tortured after being arrested by the Gestapo in 1943, also makes reference to the motivations of the torturers. Améry agrees with Arendt that the henchmen were not intrinsically sadistic, in a pathological sense. However, he does believe that they were sadists in a philosophical sense, since their goal was "the radical negation of the other" (Améry, 1990: 35). The philosophical sadist wants to nullify other human beings in order to achieve complete sovereignty over them, and therefore resorts to torture, where there is a "total inversion of the social world" predicated on coexistence and mutually imposed limitations (1990: 35). The male figure in *And They Inherited the Earth I* can be seen as an example of this banal evil that Arendt talked about. He seems to derive his cruelty from the mask he is wearing, which implies that beneath this cover, there could be hiding an ordinary person. However, once the mask of violence is put on, the character is transformed into a sadist, whose satisfaction feeds on the suffering and the annihilation of the other. The print suggests that the task transforms the person who performs it and that the ontology of the torturer is both relational and situational.

The contrast between the blindfold that covers the victim's eyes and the open eyes of the oppressor in *And They Inherited the Earth I* is emphasized by the fact that the male figure also carries the light, since he is holding a large lit candle. Luminosity is here associated both with the physical violence inflicted on the suffering woman and with the gaze of the persecutor, which she cannot return. Moreover, light is linked with the hands used by the torturer to cause pain and are, ironically, his only visible human feature besides the general form of his body. Another dichotomous element lies in the representation of the mouths of the two figures. The mouth of the victim seems to replace the eyes in expressing her suffering and it appears to hint at the possibility that she is screaming. The torturer's mouth, on the other hand, has an inhuman outline and the protruding fangs suggest that he is about to roar at or bite the woman. In her work, Ana Maria Pacheco has paid particular attention to the production of the mouths, which contain real teeth, a technical choice that contributes to erasing the distinction between representation and reality (Schelling, 1994: 7). In the multi-figure wooden sculptures entitled *Some Exercise of Power* (1980) and *The Banquet* (1985), where the artist has also represented scenes of torture, the sharp teeth of one of the persecutors suggest that human relationships are

cannibalistic, with the oppressors always devouring the oppressed, a notion supported by the fact that in both sculptures the victims are naked. *The Banquet* takes the analogy even further, since the tortured victim lies on a table and, as is implied by the title, is about to be eaten alive by his torturers. The artist portrays the abolition of otherness by torture as a cannibalistic act in which the difference of the other is consumed and the victim is forced into conformity through the act of digestion.

Viewers of Ana Maria Pacheco's images and sculptures showing suffering bodies find themselves put in an uncomfortable position. The viewer of these works contemplates the blindfolded and hooded victims, as well as their persecutors: positioned outside of the scene, he or she watches others watching those who are suffering and is, therefore, twice removed from the events, which are in turn already mediated through art. What are the consequences of being in this position? The dichotomous nature of many of Pacheco's pieces prompts one to declare one's allegiance and to side with one of the factions represented. In the act of observing, one is called to abandon the position of spectator and to put on a metaphorical blindfold or hood, which will shatter the distance established by the aesthetic contemplation of art and compel one to participate in the experience portrayed. The observer identifies with the impotent and defenceless victims, whose blindfolded eyes, hooded faces and fragile bodies condemn the violent gazes of the figures watching them. Pacheco's paintings, prints and sculptures thus become a site of passage, a threshold that compels the viewer to move through art, beyond art, towards an ethical response to what they are seeing.

In her works, Ana Maria Pacheco portrays torture and suffering as it unfolds. Ariel Dorfman's play, *Death and the Maiden* (1994), on the other hand, centres on the effects of events such as this and explores the individual and social consequences of torture, the possibility of justice and the politics of memory.⁶

The blindfold over the eyes is a central theme in *Death and the Maiden*. Even though the act of covering the eyes is not portrayed at any point during the play, it becomes, in Derrida's terms, the supplement to the rest of the plot. The main character, Paulina Salas, meets a man, Doctor Miranda, whose voice is that of one of the people who tortured her during the regime of the political dictatorship, possibly in Chile. However, she is unable to identify him unequivocally because her eyes were always covered while she was in prison and, for this reason, she has never seen his face. The fact that she has never seen the perpetrators of the atrocities she had to endure means that Paulina is unable to act as a witness against them, a fact which contributes to her inability to process the traumatic events that she had to go through. The play emphasizes her rejection of

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6 | *Death and the Maiden* was written by Ariel Dorfman (1942-) in 1990. The original title of the work was *Scars on the Moon*. The play was first presented to the public in a reading at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London on 30 November 1990. The text was first performed on stage in Santiago de Chile on 10 March 1991.

the impunity created by the blindness imposed upon her during the torture sessions. She imprisons her old persecutor, thus recreating the situation of torture that she experienced. Her husband, Gerardo, who is a lawyer, finds himself tasked with trying to mediate between the torturer and the tortured, introducing judicial proceedings into a relationship that excludes all social grounding.

The text's open ending suggests that neither the main character Paulina nor Chilean society as a whole will be able to find a completely satisfactory solution to the dilemma.⁷ The giant mirror that comes down in front of the stage at the moment when Paulina is about to decide whether or not to kill the person who she believes was her torturer seems to leave the decision in the hands of the audience, who are forced to look at their own reflection. The audience is called on to participate in the judgement of Doctor Miranda and to reach their own verdict as to what is the best outcome of the play. The audience metonymically represents the whole of society (in Chile), who will have to decide how to confront their past. The flashing lights that light up some members of the audience among the crowd suggest that each person will have a different opinion as to what is the best path to follow. The end of the theatrical performance does not coincide with a consensus being reached. However, the presence of Gerardo and Paulina in a concert hall signals that, despite political differences, they will have no choice but to share a common public space with their former adversaries.

In *Death and the Maiden*, the male characters continually refer to the scars left on Paulina by the traumatic events she experienced as hysteria or madness. Doctor Miranda is understandably anxious to characterize the protagonist as mentally unbalanced, since this would discredit the accusations she has levelled against him: "I do not know you, madam. I have never seen you before in my life. But I can tell you this: you are extremely ill" (Dorfman, 1994: 21). However, Paulina's husband also accuses her of being mad:

Paulina: Es él.

Gerardo: ¿Quién?

Paulina: Es el médico. [...]

Gerardo: Pero si tú estabas [...] Me dijiste que pasaste los dos meses...

Paulina: Con los ojos vendados, sí. Pero aún podía oír... todo

Gerardo: Estás enferma.

Paulina: No estoy enferma

Gerardo: Estás enferma.

Paulina: Entonces estoy enferma. Pero puedo estar enferma y reconocer una voz. (1992: 38-9)

Gerardo does not accept the validity of Paulina's accusations against Doctor Miranda. The fact that she identifies her former torturer by his voice, his skin and his smell is rejected by her husband, who

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7 | In the play, it is unclear whether Paulina kills Doctor Miranda or not. Scene 1 of Act 3 ends when she is about to shoot him, and when he reappears in the last scene he is enveloped in a "phantasmagoric light", which suggests that he could be real or he could be a figment of Paulina's imagination (46).

therefore concludes that she is mad.

In this passage, Gerardo juxtaposes his wife's madness and the fact that she had her eyes blindfolded. Foucault (*Madness and Civilization*, 1988) shows that this connection between blindness and madness stretches back at least to the Middle Ages, when the loss of reason was usually related, metaphorically, to the inability to see.⁸ In Dorfman's text, Paulina's madness is associated with blindness not only through the blindfold over her eyes, but also through shadows and darkness. As stated in the play's stage directions, the protagonist makes her first appearance in semi-darkness, illuminated only by moonlight (1994: 1). One of the reasons that Paulina remembers her former torturer is that the darkness of the night recreates the blindness she experienced when she was blindfolded in prison. The darkness that surrounds the protagonist suggests that the torturer was not able to completely penetrate her psychic interiority. She never revealed any information about her political activities, nor did she give away the name of her partner, who later became her husband (1994: 21). Thus, the blindfold, often used as a means of degrading prisoners, can simultaneously represent resistance in the face of the oppressor's unflinching eye. This opacity is what prevents Paulina's complete annihilation in the torture chamber.

The most profound difference between Dorfman's text and the cinema adaptation of the same name by Roman Polanski (1994) is that the film contains no ambiguities, ending with Doctor Miranda's confession about his past as a torturer.⁹ While the film does explore some of the issues pertaining to legality and justice already present in the play, most critics agree that it depoliticizes the plot of the drama.¹⁰

In contrast, the film *Garage Olimpo* (1999), which also focuses on a period of dictatorship, this time in Argentina, is more successful in expressing the interweaving of the public and private spheres in a situation of political violence. In this film, the blindfold contrasts with the translucency of the State's authority and is presented as a site of ambiguity, signifying both the unlimited power of the oppressors and the desire of the prisoners to hide themselves away from their gaze.

Garage Olimpo, a film by Marco Bechis, centres on the abduction, imprisonment and torture of members of the left-wing resistance to Argentina's military dictatorship (1976-83), a period during which the country was governed by a succession of right-wing military juntas. The protagonist, María (Antonella Acosta) is taken from her home by the military police and put in a prison cell made to look like a garage. Once inside the shadowy atmosphere of the prison, she is blindfolded and warned by one of the guards that she must not try to see what is going on around her. "This is a world of sound to you. From now on, you're not going to see again, never again. And if you see anything,

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8 | Foucault describes the connection between blindness and madness in the following way: "Blindness: one of the words which comes closest to the essence of classical madness. It refers to that night of quasi-sleep which surrounds the images of madness, giving them, in their solitude, an invisible sovereignty [...]" (1988: 105-6).

9 | The production of a film script of the play *Death and the Maiden* was a collaborative project undertaken by Dorfman and Roman Polanski.

10 | In an interview with David Thompson, Polanski states that, even though one imagines that Doctor Miranda is guilty, his guilt is never spelled out in the play. The filmmaker believes that the film needed to convey a stronger sense of closure: "[...] I had a clear idea that something was amiss with the end of the play. I felt there was no third act, and I knew that would have to be fixed [...]. It doesn't give an answer to a whodunit, which the play seems to be for its first three quarters" (1995: 8).

I'm going to gouge your eyes out with a spoon." At various points in the film the prisoners are ordered to put on a blindfold, and the torturers claim that this tactic is used to protect their own identities. In fact, the blindfold only seems to be used when the prisoners are alone or when they are being moved between different locations within the prison. The discrepancy between the blindfold's supposed function and its actual use in the film leads the viewer to conclude that its only purpose is to deprives the detainees of their spatial awareness, thus accentuating their feelings of powerlessness. The guards are aware that all of the victims are going to be assassinated and so will not be able to reveal the identities of their torturers. The imposition of the blindfold over the eyes and the order not to take it off is, therefore, a trick, designed to accentuate the unlimited authority of the persecutors.

In Marco Bechis' film, the act of ripping the blindfold from the prisoners' eyes is represented as a moment of extreme violence. The act of uncovering the eyes is almost raised to the level of stripping someone naked, thus the victims find themselves completely exposed in front of their persecutors. As one of her fellow prisoners says to María: "The eyes are the problem. You can't pretend with your eyes, they know. That's why they're always looking at your eyes, to see if you're lying." By removing the blindfold from their eyes, the guards are trying to show the torture victims that they cannot hide behind it, that it cannot protect them from the torturers' implacable gaze.

Despite the negative connotations of the blindfold, the film highlights the fact that on many occasions the prisoners use it when they do not have to. The film shows numerous shots of María sitting alone and immobile in her dirty cell with her eyes covered. She is usually filmed from a high angle, as though the viewers were being invited to observe her from a privileged position and, through this denaturalized stance, to become conscious of their role as spectators. María's choice to cover her eyes while alone could indicate that she gains a certain degree of comfort from blindness, which prevents her from seeing the misery that surrounds her, and that she experiences some feeling of protection, albeit fleeting, thanks to the blindfold.

One of the most disturbing scenes in the film is when María is in her cell, while a man is being tortured in an adjacent room to the sound of loud pop music playing on the radio, which masks his screaming. María is alone and begins to write on the wall with her bare fingers. The sequence begins with a medium-long shot with the camera filming her directly from behind, which is immediately followed by a cut to a wide and slightly elevated shot, showing her whole body focused on the act of writing. The protagonist cannot see what she is writing, and the symbols she forms with her fingers will not remain for others to read. The incongruity of María's action,

which seems to reproduce blindness on a number of levels, is the way the protagonist expresses the absurdity of torture. Locked in her cell, prevented from defending herself or from helping her fellow prisoners, María realizes that words have lost their meaning and that she is only able to respond to the situation with blind, invisible letters through a testimony that can neither be written nor read.

In *Death and the Maiden* and *Garage Olimpo*, as well as the works by Ana Maria Pacheco, the blindfold and hood are characterized by ambiguity, in that the blindness that these produce is often utilized by the prisoners themselves. The act of covering one's eyes seems to protect the victims' psychic interiority from the scrutiny of their persecutors and from the implacable gaze of the political power that has imprisoned them.

Similarly, we find another example of the possibility of rethinking darkness and blindness in contemporary artistic creation in José Saramago's novel *Blindness* in which the loss of sight is not associated with the blindfold, but is portrayed as an epidemic.

2. Blindness by José Saramago: a rewriting of the Enlightenment project?

The numerous commentaries on Saramago's 1995 novel *Blindness* seem to converge in their interpretation of the inability to see as being emblematic of the absence of reason. The sudden plague of white blindness that befalls an unidentified region is frequently explained as a figment of the imagination representing the irrational organization of contemporary society in which inequality prevails. Saramago's own comments on *Blindness* seem to confirm this reading of the novel as a condemnation of the irrationality that exists in social relations. In an interview with Carlos Reis, the author states: "and it is that indifference in relation to the other [...that...] I cannot understand, and it is one of my great torments. *Blindness* plays a role in the expression of this torment" (Reis, 1998: 150; author's own translation). According to the writer, disrespect for the other is incompatible with the definition of humans as rational beings. In other words, Saramago considers that reason stands for an acknowledgement of the other's rights, including the right to be different. If one does not make good use of reason, if one mistreats others, one must be blind. *Blindness* would then simply be a way of representing this ideal in a literal form.

If the conjunction of reason and human emancipation is presented in *Blindness* as the exact opposite of irrational blindness, it follows that the novel should be read as a defence of Enlightenment reason: the solution to real and metaphorical blindness as represented in

the novel would seem to be the brilliant light of reason. This is what the characters in the text and those who read the story must keep in mind.

To consider *Blindness* as an allegorical tale that calls out to rationality in a society increasingly dominated by a lack of reason is certainly one possible way of interpreting the novel. However, this reading is not free from problems. Firstly, positing a universal reason that presupposes the infinite replication of the same structure in multiple instantiations contradicts the author's imperative of respect for individual differences. Furthermore, this approach to reason would imply the existence of a totalizing truth shared by all. Finally, this disembodied notion of rationality contrasts with the omnipresent physicality presented in the novel. Admitting the interpretive paradoxes will be the starting point for rethinking the correlation between blindness and irrationality in Saramago's novel.

One of the peculiarities of the plague of blindness described in *Blindness* is that its cause is a luminous whiteness. Blindness is usually described as darkness, that is to say, as a complete absence of colour. This darkness is limited to erasing the appearance of beings and things, but leaves their essence unchanged. In contrast, the affliction portrayed in the novel is a vortex that draws and absorbs beings and things into nothingness, in that they are rendered doubly invisible: neither observed nor experienced. In the end, the blind themselves run the risk of being dispersed into the vacuum of light: "[...] they fade into the surrounding light, and it is the light which does not allow them to see" (Saramago, 2005: 258). Their determining trait is the light that prevents them from seeing.

By describing blindness as an excess of brightness, the novel does not allow a straightforward linkage between the plague and irrationality. The coupling of the inability to see with light, traditionally associated with rationality and the Enlightenment, breaks the interpretation of vision in *Blindness* as synonymous with emancipation. The novel postulates the existence of two kinds of light, or two modalities of the rational, namely, the rationality of the blind and that of those who can see. This proliferation of light, both real and figurative, seems to indicate a split within reason itself, which is one of the defining features of modernity inaugurated by the Enlightenment.¹¹

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have identified the inherent contradictions in the development of the Enlightenment. According to these thinkers, this movement, which aspired to liberate human beings from their shackles, has led to a catastrophe, in other words, to the advent of Nazism in Germany. From this aporia, they conclude that "the not merely theoretical but practical tendency toward self-destruction has been inherent in rationality from the first, not only

NOTES

11 | In his interview with Baptista-Bastos, Saramago describes *Blindness* as a text that questions the nature of human reason: "My purpose in this book, is to question myself and my readers about our rationality, whether we are objectively rational. And if the thing we call reason really deserves that name. And if it deserves it, whether we use reason rationally, in a fair way, as a defence of life. [...] And what I want in *Blindness* is precisely to ask myself what is reason for us?" (1996: 65; author's own translation). Saramago departs from a pre-defined notion of rationality. His novel could be read as a collation of different approaches to the question of what reason is.

in the present phase when it is emerging nakedly” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: xix). These authors locate the beginning of the Enlightenment in mythology, from which concepts emerged as abstract units, thus marking the separation between subject and object (2002: 11). This development led, ultimately, to the objectification of relationships between human beings, both with other individuals and with themselves (2002: 21). Significantly, these authors link the mass culture brought about by enlightened reason to blindness (2002: 28). Yet, in spite of their critique of the Enlightenment’s totalizing and reifying blow, Adorno and Horkheimer believe that society cannot dispense with it. It is up to enlightened reason to reflect on itself and its multiple manifestations, since only through reflection can totalitarian rationality be destroyed.

The interpretation of reason advanced by Adorno and Horkheimer helps us understand the notion of rationality running through Saramago’s novel. In line with the ideas expressed by these German thinkers, the novel suggests that there exist multiple forms of rationality, which can either lead to a totalizing universality, predicated on sameness, or open a path to the establishment of more ethical social relations¹². In the novel, the inability to see triggers a process of reflection in some of the main characters, which leads them to reevaluate the principles that have guided their lives up to that point and to appreciate the importance of sharing and the rewards of a communal life. Consequently, in the text, blindness does not represent irrationality, but instead reveals the paradoxes of reason itself, in the same way that the whiteness of the blinding light encompasses all colours and, metonymically, all possibilities.

The blindness portrayed in the novel can be understood both as a result of and as a key to struggling with the impossibility of reconstructing an enlightened subject endowed with autonomy and based on the rational ideal. Saramago’s narrative seeks an alternative to this problem of sovereign subjectivity that emerged from the Enlightenment in the construction of a collective subject.

Some of the characters in the narrative shape a common subjectivity based on their social interactions. These individuals, who meet each other in the asylum, share only the condition of not being able to see, the consequences of this, and the suffering it causes. The group’s founding moment coincides with a worsening of conditions within the asylum. When another group takes possession of the food and demands payment for its continuing supply, this community, led by the wife of the doctor, invokes the “sacred principle of collective property” and draws on the Marxist notion of justice: “We shall all give up what we’ve got and hand over everything, said the doctor, And what about those who have nothing to give, asked the pharmacist’s assistant, They will eat whatever the others decide to give them, as the saying

NOTES

12 | In an interview with Carlos Reis, Saramago recognizes that there are different manifestations of reason. The novelist acknowledges that rationality can encompass both oppression and respect for the other: “[...] even doctrines that we could easily define as irrational, are all of them a product of reason”. (1996: 149; author’s own translation). According to Saramago, there is no necessary connection between reason and ethics, which makes it all the more pressing for the former to be guided by the latter, as he states in his diary: “If ethics does not govern reason, reason with despise ethics” (1996: 147; author’s own translation).

rightly goes, from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” (Saramago, 2005: 134). In this passage we see the transition from a possessive individualism to a respect for collective property that has to be understood in the context of Saramago’s Marxism. Here, one is bearing witness to the transformation of a group of people, brought together by chance, into a single collective subject, the owner of its own judgements and principles of action.

The collective subject that emerges from the group formed by the protagonists in *Blindness* develops further in the second part of the novel after they have abandoned the sanatorium and are wandering the streets of the city looking for shelter and food. When they arrive at the doctor’s house, they share a meal. The narrator says: “Though meagre rations were all this little group had, yet it ended up as a family feast, one of those rare feasts where what belongs to one, belongs to everybody” (2005: 236). This common manner of dealing with events is not perceived as one choice among many. The circumstances triggered by the plague of blindness lead the group to the realization that this is the only way to survive: “Let’s get back to the matter we were discussing, said the doctor’s wife, if we stay together we might manage to survive, if we separate we shall be swallowed up by the masses and destroyed” (2005: 242). The blindness makes the characters understand that the idea of an autonomous individual is a fiction. The extreme situation fictionalized in Saramago’s text only accentuates this fact, which should be evident even under normal circumstances, namely, that the collective is a fundamental principle in the organization of a just society.

Alfonso Lingis has described collective subjectivity as “a community of those who have nothing in common”. For Lingis, to have nothing in common is to be utterly different from the other person, but also, in the spirit of Heideggerian philosophy, to have the same destiny as the other, namely, to be a mortal, finite being. Such a community has been described by Jacques Derrida as “a link of affinity, suffering, and hope, [...] without common belonging to a class. [...] a kind of counterconjunction, in the (theoretical and practical) critique of the state of international law, the concepts of the State and nation” (Lingis, 1994: 85-6). Similar to the communities outlined by Lingis and Derrida, the members of the group formed in Saramago’s text construct a subjective alliance. This collective avoids the perils of individualism and transcendental rationality. While through subjectivity, the group accommodates multiplicity and functions through a permanent displacement of power, whose erratic trajectories pass through the bodies of each of the blind people, with no unified nucleus.

In *Blindness*, the character of the doctor’s wife introduces an asymmetry within the community of blind people, as the old man indicates when he describes her as: “a kind of natural leader, a

king with eyes in the land of the blind” (Saramago, 2005: 242). The doctor’s wife recognizes that the exceptional nature of her ability to see puts her in a position of authority. However, she does not use these circumstances to her benefit. She considers her ability to see what others cannot as a curse rather than a blessing and, at a number of points throughout the novel, expresses her desire to become blind like the rest of the population: “She serenely wished that she, too, could turn blind, penetrate the visible skin of things and pass to their inner side, to their dazzling and irremediable blindness” (2005: 56). To turn blind is here described as a trajectory that moves from the sphere of appearances to that of the heart of things. This can be read as a more intimate relationship with the world, since the division between subject and object, primarily thought of as a visual construction, collapses as the blind person penetrates to the changing nucleus of things. While many of those who lose their vision are unable to understand the liberating possibilities inherent in blindness, the doctor’s wife becomes a “natural leader” as long as she is able to grasp this potential. She understands that her companions’ blindness, which, to an extent, becomes her own blindness, was a necessary step in the process of rejecting individualism and creating community ties.

The blindness marks the intersection between reason and the absence of reason, and constitutes the concrete and metaphorical event through which emerges a collective subjectivity. The community that forms in the novel is a group without nucleus, composed of the dispossessed who have only blindness as their shared characteristic.

In this essay, we set out to explore the relationship between blindness, ethics and politics illustrated in many artistic and literary works that deal with abuses of political power. While the ability to see has been associated with a reflection on ethical relations and socio-political organizations from Greco-Roman antiquity until the contemporary age, late modernity has questioned the traditional prevalence of sight as a fundamental means of getting closer to reality and has denounced this tendency to turn to vision as something that has contributed to the formation of an oppressive subject that fights to dominate and possess its object. The philosophy of the twentieth century often characterizes blindness as a way of denouncing this totalizing gaze and as a starting point for forging a subjectivity grounded in ethics and that has the potential to form the basis of a new form of government.

The artistic and literary works we have explored are imbued with the philosophical discourses of late modernity in relation to the absence of vision, utilizing the trope of blindness in their call to the emergence of a new political subject. The political subject portrayed in *Death and the Maiden*, in the works of Ana Maria Pacheco and

in *Garage Olimpo* is the divided subject, with its eyes blindfolded, which has been destroyed by torture and, consequently, never finds piece within itself. In Saramago's *Blindness*, the subject of political action is the collective, dispossessed subject, a community whose members have nothing in common and whose union was prompted by blindness. It is this new subjectivity that the works of literature, art and cinema discussed above propose as a fundamental basis on which to build a more just political environment.

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