

PATRÍCIA VIEIRA

Seeing Politics Otherwise

Vision in Latin American and
Iberian Fiction

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Introduction: Shadows of Vision

Abre-me sonho
Para a loucura a tenebrosa porta,
Que a treva é menos negra que esta luz.

Fernando Pessoa, *Fausto*¹

Blindness runs like an invisible thread through many twentieth-century Latin American and Iberian literary and cultural creations thematizing political violence.² This is, perhaps, not surprising, given that the waves of aggression perpetrated against dissidents by the dictatorial regime of Francisco Franco in Spain (1939–75), the Estado Novo in Portugal (1933–74) and in Brazil (1937–45), and the military dictatorships in Brazil (1964–85), Chile (1973–90), and Argentina (1976–83), to name but a few, led many of those who lived through the periods in question to experience them as ‘dark times.’ The metaphorical darkness of the situation was paralleled by the literal blindness of countless political prisoners who were often blindfolded, held in solitary confinement, and tortured. Nevertheless, the blindness featured in the 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 locus of resistance to violence, as a site of ethical and political reflection, or as the last refuge for the psychic interiority of the victim. If the ability to see were to be regained after the end of the historical nightmares, then blindness would be entrusted with the task of reconstituting a vision

that would no longer yearn for absolute visibility, but would welcome shadows and obscurity in its midst.

A consideration of the positive connotations of blindness in literature, art, and film, or, at least, of its ambiguous nature, is, at the same time, a rejoinder to the theological, philosophical, and political traditions of the West, where heliocentric discourses have been predominant. Despite their reliance on obscurity and secrecy, twentieth-century dictatorships may be construed as the crowning moments of this heliocentric tendency, since their opaqueness is the underside of a desire for the sheer transparency of the social body, for a totalitarian, all-encompassing vision capable of penetrating even the darkest recesses of the citizens' souls. Dictatorial regimes, thus, attempted to recapture the status of the European absolutist monarchs, who also claimed full control over society. But in order to do so, they had to compensate for the loss of legitimation of the political order that previously hinged upon a direct link between the institution of kingship and God. By reserving for themselves the asymmetrical right to see without being seen, dictatorships imitated the omnipotence of divinity, thus becoming a secular, earthly replacement for the former theological deity, a condition that substantiated their claim to unlimited power.³

From the perspective of the oppressive ideology enthralled with vision, the blindness of the victims concretely expresses their disempowerment, so that even their bodies are stripped of their minimal capacities. Yet, as an alternative narrative would intimate, lack of sight may be re-coded by those who are thrown into darkness in terms of an 'enabling violation,' in the words of Gayatri Spivak. Not only do dissidents counteract the secrecy of dictatorships with an equally clandestine political activity of the underground, but also, based on such experiences, they fashion themselves otherwise. Even where blindness stands for the dismemberment of a past mold of subjectivity, it turns into a condition of possibility for the subjects' self-remaking, a re-creation of a new, positive identity on the ruins of its shattered predecessor. Whether the works discussed in this book challenge an existing political regime, or conjoin the wish to denounce aggression with a desire to keep the memory of past brutality alive, or, again, reduce totalitarian governments to serving as a point of reference for violent practices that continue to go on in democratic societies, they are united in their goal to imagine and, perhaps, call forth an alternative form of subjectivity. Let some of its features be sketched already: this will be a finite, mortal, and vulnerable subject devoid of any illusions of transcendence; one born

in and through blindness and no longer clamouring for a totalizing, unitary vision; one who is both deeply personal and intensely political. Aside from the blinded protagonists of the novels, films, plays, and other works of art discussed here, these characteristics would apply to those collective subjectivities that could germinate in post-dictatorship societies under the injunction to recollect what is, precisely, unrepresentable: the horror and darkness of a recent period in their history. Rather obliquely, then, the narratives and the images I analyse below diagnose the permutations of collective blindness through the individual characters who turn this traditional signifier of absence into a fertile resource.

The description of social and political phenomena in terms of physical impediments and illnesses such as blindness is fairly common both in everyday language and in literature. In her work *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag points out that epidemics, for instance, are a common figure for disorder and illness imagery is often employed in the characterization of a corrupt, unjust or repressive society (72).⁴ Sontag condemns this overmedicalization of the body politic and defines her study as an attempt to free illness and those who suffer its effects from metaphorical thinking (4). Building upon Sontag's work, Naomi Schor's essay 'Blindness as Metaphor' delineates a different approach to imagery related to disease. Whereas Sontag criticizes the use of allusions to illness, Schor argues that images such as the metaphor of blindness are inevitable. She proceeds to propose a reversal of values where lack of sight and other physical constraints would no longer be interpreted negatively, since deprivation is the general condition of the human body (83). The impossible ideal of plentitude would, therefore, be replaced by a language that stresses the productive aspects of limitations, defining the very being of the human.

In the wake of Schor's study, I put forth a generative concept of blindness that reverses the pernicious aspirations to transcendence of individual and collective subjects. The works I discuss in the following pages share a critique of the dream of full visibility as a potentially reifying ethico-political chimera and an understanding of blindness as a possible path to break free from this illusion. In chapter 1 I trace the interrelation between vision, ethics, and politics from classical Antiquity to the twentieth century, and discuss the connection between the literary and philosophical tropes of seeing and blindness, as well as the turn to the other in ethics, coupled with the denunciation of social and political oppression. Whereas in ancient Greek and early Chris-

tian texts, and all the way until the Enlightenment, sight and light were perceived as ambiguous, in that they were simultaneously valued as a model for knowledge as well as a metaphor for political emancipation, and denigrated as a source of distraction from the work of the mind. Romantic and post-Romantic thought have accused vision of a reductionist approach to the object of the gaze and praised darkness and blindness as a liberation from the tyranny of an all-seeing totalizing eye.

The twentieth century has witnessed a proliferation of texts, films, and artworks that echo philosophical discourses on vision and where blindness, in one form or another, appears intertwined with a critique of the violent practices of dictatorships. In the next three sections of this study, I concentrate on literary, cinematic, and artistic productions on this topic from Latin America and from Portugal. In chapter 2 I focus on the deprivation of vision caused by darkness or smoke, as depicted in novelist Graciliano Ramos's *Memórias do Cárcere* (*Memoirs of Prison* 1953), an autobiographical account of the author's imprisonment during the regime of Getúlio Vargas in Brazil. Graciliano portrays darkness as a mechanism used by the police to dehumanize prisoners, who are reduced to a state of semi-animality. In the text, the protagonist resorts to writing, in the form of notes he takes on the various events he goes through, as a way to escape the debasement brought about by incarceration, but he soon finds himself trapped between the fragmentation of the I in the dire prison circumstances in which he finds himself and the desire for self-expression translated into the creation of his autobiographical sketches.⁵

Chapter 3 deals with another prevalent topos of blindness, namely, the blindfold related to the systematic use of torture by dictatorial political systems. I begin with a discussion of the work of Brazilian artist Ana Maria Pacheco, where hooded and blindfolded figures are frequently represented in a situation of torture or mutilation, often tainted with religious undertones. Subsequently, I analyse the figure of the blindfold in Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden* (1990). The blindness caused by the eye cover goes hand in hand in the text with the invisibility of the psychological scars left by torture. Yet the blindfold has an ambiguous role since it prevents the tortured from seeing their henchmen but, in turn, constitutes a barrier for the perpetrators of atrocities, making it more difficult for them to penetrate their victims' interiority. I end the chapter with an interpretation of the use of the blindfold in the films *Garaje Olimpo* (*Garage Olimpo*, 1999), directed by Marco Bechis,

and Bruno Barreto's *O que é isso Companheiro?* (*Four Days in September*, 1997), two cinematic productions that focus on periods of dictatorial government in Argentina and Brazil, respectively.

In chapter 4 I address the issue of blindness as a societal phenomenon in José Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (*Blindness*, 1995). The inability to see appears in the novel as an illness that contaminates a whole state and the authorities do not hesitate to employ repressive methods in order to contain the spread of the disease. The narrator's critique of these mechanisms goes hand in hand with his belief in the emancipative potential of human solidarity. In the narrative, the plague of blindness becomes a necessary step in rendering the main characters conscious of their political allegiances and in their realization that only a collective subject can hope to create a more just society. I end with a reflection on subjectivity in the artworks analysed in this book and by sketching out the figure of a reader who grounds her or his interpretations in both the seen and the unseen.