

## The Blindness of Meirelles

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**Abstract.** The main idea of this essay is that any successful translation of an artistic masterwork must in some way rescue the whole *poiesis* that sustains the original work as an aesthetic phenomenon. If the translation does not succeed in doing this, it simply fails. What has to be translated is, first of all, not the content, ideas, story, or even formal characteristics, but the tension that brings all of the elements together. This is especially visible when the translation is done from one medium to another, such as when a literary masterpiece is brought to the cinema. Fernando Meirelles's adaptation of José Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* is a failure in this sense.

The movie begins: an extreme close-up into the pinstriped and reflective traffic lights oscillates with another close into blurry cars driving by. This is enough to prove the possibility of expressing visually the texture of an oppressive—if white and symbolic—*blindness*. Even after the frame opens, the angles are still a little slanted, jammed. The cars keep crossing in front of the camera, out of focus, cutting between the scene and the spectators, almost knocking them down. It is a very good start. Unfortunately, the tension generated by the discerning use and subtle selection of cinematographic resources does not last through the end of the movie. It is outstripped by the narrative, or worse, by the content of the narrative, by what the director wants to say, by

the heaviness of a message. The narrative collapses in the exact measure that it loses the opportunity of revealing itself in the same way in which the title of the movie is announced: submerged in a milky reflection that gets unfolded by being reverted, inverted in a slanted, moving surface of glasses and mirrors. And in this context, the original cinematographic resources collapse as well. The bright light that in some passages of Meirelles's *The Constant Gardener* smelled of marketing cliché, superficially embellishing the hardly convincing intimacy of love scenes, is extremely effective here in expressing a blindness that is the excess of vision. The problem is that the tension generated by all the technical resources is insufficient to sustain a narrative that pedagogically and didactically deforms itself into something that the director seems to be condescendingly and horribly forced to say at its expense. The director is betrayed, possibly by himself.

To come back to the pertinence of the resources, there are the audible as well as the visual ones, as the ingenious mix of tires screeching, car horns tooting, and an electronic-chromatic rustling that tracks the unbalanced, helpless spinning of the first blind man—wide-open arms over a vertiginous pedestrian crossing, still at the beginning of the movie. Minutes later, there is the scuffling and whispering unfolding of an iris cleared away in a tactile, plicate mechanism of an unseen peephole. Also unfolded and cleared away, muffled, are the set of curious bells that play along with the husky countertenor voice of the maiden with sunglasses, when she walks towards a love transaction in a hotel room, before she goes blind. There are triangles and buzzers, crackles and swishes. In the middle of the movie, the scene in which a table is erased and redrawn—another example of an outstanding visual resource—unexpectedly resurges; pushing the boy with a thump is a masterly example of an insightful and discerning combination of the director's audible and visual creativity. This is what can be said about the audible effects, but the use of music is entirely different. It does nothing more than punctuate certain points already too formulaic in the narrative, exaggerating their cliché-like character and collapsing into a total nonsensical slush. One example is the melodious and sighing reunion of the first blind man with his wife when she arrives at the hospital. Another example would be the condescending musical moment when the jewels are collected. The actors are also weakly directed, which makes some of the dialogue hardly convincing, not to mention the crying scenes. The first example, and perhaps the most glaring, occurs in the clinic of the physician, where sentences such as “do you think

I'm lying?" and "I know how to get to the hospital" become pathetic due to a lack of inner rhythm. The performances of Julianne Moore, Mark Ruffalo, and Alice Braga are potent, but they do not withstand the implausibility of their own characters, the predictable linearity of the script.

The weakness of the movie becomes patent when it is compared to Saramago's book. The point, however, is not that Saramago's book is aesthetically superior, but that a deficient approach to the text, to Saramago's story, undermines the constitutive elements of the movie itself. The movie comes apart independently of any comparison. There are elements and gaps in the movie the alchemy of which is unfortunate in terms of their fictional plausibility, while in the case of the book, on the contrary, such alchemy is extremely effective. The movie does not succeed in attaining that minimal dimension of autonomy in relation to actuality that would enable it to become something in itself. The movie does not emerge as a work. It would always be possible to opt for a poetical construction completely different from the one exhibited in the book. But the criticism that is made here is that, different or not, the problem is that the chosen construction doesn't work, and perhaps exactly because the movie remains too much attached to the book, but in a terribly ineffective way in terms of its own construction. And this is completely independent from the ingenuity and richness of the resources contrived.

What subverts the movie is an immaculate didacticism in a setting in which people will continually step both in their own shit and on deceased people. In relation to this point, Fernando Meirelles shows indeed he is not only creative and discerning but has guts. The movie has passages undeniably disgusting in the best sense. One does not have to be entirely satisfied, however, since Saramago's book—with its feces, deceased people, vomit, snot, and all sort of bad smells and viscosities—could give rise to myriad Pasolinian *Salòs*. Of the five senses, vision and even its absence are not what prevails, but the sense of smell, permanently oppressed by all sorts of stenches. Maybe one cannot see, but it is impossible not to smell that when diffused in such a reeking and genuine miasma any linear, well meant, pedagogic solution is fated to self-putrefaction. No matter if *Blindness*, in terms of dirtiness, seems to favor smut over secretions. It is *Children of Men* rather than *giornate di Sodoma*.

The concept of white blindness as something underlying some sort of benign illumination has a basis in Saramago's book. It can be inferred, for instance, from the passage in which is described the outbreak of blindness in the man who initially helps and then steals the car of the first blind man.

Eyes, turned to the inside, as mirrors, are able to “explicitly show what we were trying to deny with the mouth.” They are “a consciousness with teeth ready to bite” (Saramago 26).<sup>1</sup> Or, as is said later, the blindness is “a luminous glory” (94). However, especially in this latter expression suggested by the narrator, there is a caustic irony. The luminous glory is also feces, because “light and brightness” smell to the physician exactly like shit, when he cannot even clean himself because there is no paper for the toilet towards which he has crawled, groping over a sticky floor (96–7). It is actually a “hideous white tide” (115) of “a frightened horse, a horse with eyes wanting to jump out of their sockets” (131). It is “the eye that refuses to recognize its own absence” (129). It is as well the possibility of returning to a thing-like state, a kind of remission, an eschatological regression that transfigures the symbolic by a process of thing-like specification: “[To] cross the visible skin of things passing into their inner side, into their glowing and irremediable blindness” (65)—this is the desire of the physician’s wife.

The movie lacks this ambiguity, as well as the irony and coldness that articulate and sustain the story in the book, as in the passage in which the narrator confesses that “the grotesque of the spectacle would have made the most sobering observer laugh his head off, it was hilarious, many blind crawling forward, their faces close to the floor like swine” (105). It is this detachment of the narrator that gives to the book the undertone of a parody of itself without which the story proposed by Saramago would be empty. Is it really possible to make a movie out of it? How to create in cinematographic terms the gibe of a narrator who, knowing that the physician’s wife is not blind, treats her as an exemplary model of blindness with “frontal vision” (87)? How to create in cinematographic terms the cynicism of a narrator who jocosely allies himself with the food thieves, characterizing them as “the hand [...] that feeds” (162)? Or who says about the blind making noise in order to distract the attention of the gang of rapists: they “were like lady mourners in a trance” (202)? Or who says about the blind who turn back to see the nude breasts of the physician’s wife that they do so too late, because she had already covered herself with a coat (228)? Or who makes the following comment about the panic unleashed by the discovery that the image of the saint inside the church was also blindfolded: “[O]ne has to be really kind not to burst out laughing in view of this grotesque entanglement of bodies searching for arms to release them and legs to run away” (303)? But no kindness can forgive the director for not realizing that without this lampooning of the narrative in relation to the narrative itself—of the narrator in relation to the spectacle that he himself

depicts—whatever could be saved from the story would be, in the end, as implausible as a Dracula performed by a toothless actor. Such a lampoon could be rescued with resources not much more complicated than the introduction of a narrator, as has been done in some classics of Robert Bresson, and in *Plata quemada*. Meirelles delays the use of this resource until the last minutes of the movie, when he avails himself of the voice of the blindfolded old man, but it is then too late.

A glowing example of immaculate, nonsensical didacticism is the speech made by the physician, when he says that he would not mind prostituting his own wife since they were all fated to starve to death. The movie gives here the mistaken impression that the disarray of the whole situation might derive from the lack of some fundamental or basic necessity, which could have been previously and predictably attended to. Meirelles does nothing other than to repeat literally what is written in the corresponding passage of Saramago's book, and yet the departure from Saramago's book, taken as a whole, of its spirit, of the marrow of its text and *poiesis*, couldn't be larger. In an essay published in the newspaper *El País* eight days after the twin towers attack, Saramago says, differently from Nietzsche (for whom the fact that God does not exist would imply that everything is possible), that for him, Saramago, it is rather the case that, God apparently existing, all atrocities can be justified in his name. What is actually common to both Saramago and Nietzsche is the indictment of the nihilism into which one falls when everything becomes possible—be it by God or by the lack of God. Their malaise comes from a liquidation of all values. It could be said that this is exactly one of the main roots of Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*. In the name of survival, everything becomes possible. When the only thing that remains is to survive, we attain the ground of a fundamental necessity, or rather we dissolve the apparently fundamental status of such a necessity, in the name of which is perpetrated a general dissolution of all possible values, exactly because in view of such a necessity everything would become justifiable. The most pressing problem is not simply starving to death, as it would be possible to infer in a hurried reading—not that starving to death is not a problem, but, against any simplistic pedagogy, to be able to satisfy people's hunger and their other few basic necessities is not the solution for the blindness at issue here, especially if one does so at the expense of everything else.

What truly horrifies does not come from something concrete, palpable. When the maiden with sunglasses says, in the movie, "it is not easy knowing

that we have killed someone, like I did,” this is just another example of immaculate, nonsensical didacticism, occasioned by a literal but myopic repetition of the words in the book. The genuine problem is not simply to kill (no matter if this is done with scissors), as the viewer might wrongly conclude, only to leave the cinema edified by the natural goodness of us all (or of some few, among which he certainly includes, besides the maiden with sunglasses, the physician’s wife and probably himself). In the book, when she is reflecting over the fact that she has killed the king of ward one with a scissors, the physician’s wife ends by considering that “it is necessary to kill [...] when what is still alive is already dead” (189). That is, the genuine drama, the tragedy of consciousness does not come from any original purity, from any humanitarian, moral atrophy of the ability to kill. Much on the contrary, tragedy comes from the discovery of a possible state of fuzziness between the alive and the dead, this state of living death, which not only justifies assassination but demands it, as a necessity. One must conclude that what is legitimately pressing here is not the discovery of a natural ground, but the instauration of values, of distinctions and divisions, as the ones between living and dead beings. At the end of the book, the same woman will defend the importance of an order “that wants the dead in their place of the dead and the living in their place of the living, while hens and rabbits feed some and are fed by others” (288). It is the minimal recognition that not everything must be possible and that things must not be taken as equal (even if we are starving to death). And there is no lack of irony in this formulation, mentioning hens and rabbits, to warn about the ambiguity and the transitory character of values, but nothing could be more “fundamental” than the contraposition, concretized in time, of these reversible differences. The movie fails in conveying all this, it fails in conveying the complexity of matters at issue, and we are left with nothing more than the self-edification of the good and pathetic viewer in the armchair of the cinema, an unsuspected specimen of Alex from *Clockwork Orange*, confident in his hunger and natural inability to kill.

When, differently, the director was bold enough to create, to invent a dialogue that was not originally in the book, the outcome is effective: “[M]ay I suck on your nipples? Just a little bit. Here you go.” These expressions, uttered in falsetto, among the guttural roars of a dark brown, blurry orgy constitute one of the most genuine scenes in the movie. Another example of convincing originality emerging in the movie is the character of the king of ward one, the clownish amorality of whom is consummately captured by

Gael García Bernal. It would be mean but fair to consider that the character profited from being killed in the first half of the movie. All the other actors are forced to sustain, from the beginning to the end of the movie, a continuous idealization that in the case of the character performed by Bernal would have been *a priori* impossible. In the book, both the physician and his wife have defects and ambiguities. For instance, they retreat every time they have the opportunity to take a more daring attitude that could reverse the unbearable situation inside the hospital. Very quickly they accept the ruse of having to pay for the food expropriated by the blind of the other ward, and when the physician has the chance of taking hold of the firearm of the thief, he fails, and regrets it (147). The excuse, in this case, is that any abrupt reaction against the thieves could bring the whole situation to an even worse denouement. Or at least it is this that the character says to himself in the book. And it is not much more than the movie is capable of conveying to the viewer. However, there are in the book other signs that the things a character says to himself—and this applies to the case of the physician as well, and his wife—are to a great measure defensive rationalizations, resulting less from an excellence of reasoning and moral purity than from passivity and even laziness. The movie does not explore these ambiguities, and because of this omission it undermines the main characters, the ones who have to maintain intact, from the beginning to the end, their sizeable dose of goodness. It is true that, even in the book, the passivity of the physician's wife is not a mere defect, yet it is not idealized, no matter if it is somewhat heroic. It is "an infinite fatigue, a will to curl around oneself, the eyes [...] turned to inside [...] till they were able to reach and observe the interior of the brain itself, there where the difference between seeing and not seeing is invisible to the simple view" (157–8). There is no didacticism here. There is no easy pedagogy and edifying solace. Passivity is also the possibility already mentioned of salvation as an eschatological retreat, the transfiguration of the symbolic in a thing-like state. Intentionally or not, Saramago flirted here with some kind of Judaic mysticism that is known to be rooted in Portuguese culture since the late middle ages. Hence the concrete essence of things as being something impossible to denominate, as says the maiden with sunglasses: "[I]nside us there is something that has no name, this thing is what we are" (262).

The escape from the quarantine hospital after the fire, with the disappearance of the guards and the unavoidably lampooned and thus excellent "we are free," propels the movie beyond the collapse that one wishes would finally

end it. This expression, “we are free,” is not voiced as a simple cliché but rather as a hyper-cliché, not merely implausible but completely nonsensical in that world of nuts, and thus, accordingly, plausible. It is only this hyper-cliché that enables the narrative to recover its breath and go on towards an end that is, unfortunately, more and more broken. In this effective scene of the “we are free,” the camera once more moves from the perspective of a claustrophobic frame—a crack—opening onto the city’s wreckage, remindful, among other things, of the lampooned and apocalyptic atmosphere of classics such as Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*. In this freed scenario, the “eat something” said to the physician by his wife after the struggle to save the grocery bags in the store stops being the easy sign of some basic necessity that it would be possible to predictably satisfy, and becomes something concrete in the categorical poverty of what one meagerly owns, in a positive void of meaning in which the word “necessity” is as meaningless as a wrested piece of salami, or as half of a cereal bar coming apart between one’s teeth. It is a scene strong enough to capture all the irony lacking in the others—a perfect if not superior version in film of the written joke that it is possible to “heighten” the “perfume of a tough bread loaf” to the state of “the very essence of life” (227).

It is not bread, however, but water that gains primacy at the end of the narrative. In the book it even has an explicit religious character, as when the three women washing are presented as “three graces” and the narrator speaks of “soul” and “God” (265–7). Here indeed it appears that something lyrical is demanded, maybe even something basic, and definitely fundamental, but that would only be annulled by all the accumulated dirtiness, till then impossible to eliminate. According to the book, there is no water in the pipes; it is impossible to get clean. One can change dirty clothes for clean ones, but there is no way to wash, except when the rain comes. We are in the opposite situation in relation to the one at the hospital, in which one would do anything, plunge into the most ignoble and stinking dough, just for a loaf of bread. This water is not a necessity that compels, but something that frees one from everything that he or she was forced to stand in the name of an alleged necessity. In this sense, water really is a *grace*. It is also, one should not forget, cold water, water that makes one tremble, and which one cannot stand for very long. In the movie, however, independently from its temperature, all grace is lost, because there is beneath it the romantic imperative (in a Rousseauian sense) that there are fundamental necessities that would linearly crown the lyric core of some kind of noble humanism, which would be necessary to



rescue by all means, even when the paid price does not make up for what is lost. We are then cheered with whispers, a Bach cantata melody, and “this is your home now too,” “there is nothing like clean water,” “human family and a dog.” It would be possible to respond to the toast by complaining, among other things, that the terrier of the movie, no matter its wire hair, does not convey any ambiguity as does the one in the book, “a harsh and intractable dog when it has not to wipe out tears” (230). One could as well be nostalgic of hyenas “with shrunken rumps,” and hens “crazily happy” eating (possibly human) meat (237). To be entirely fair, one has to admit that in this final deception of the narrative, the creator of which lacked non-seeing eyes, another great insight occurred, proving that we are still before the director of *Cidade de Deus*, a masterpiece. Saramago was able to include, in the last pages of his story, and in an almost paradoxical way, the writer himself, balanced in a subtle asymmetry between writing and reading. Exactly the same paradox is reproduced in the movie, when the physician takes *pictures*, and in a way that is even more in accordance with this *blindness* that, after all, seemed to be the subject of them both.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The translations are mine.

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