

Intermedial ecocriticism in *Blindness* by Saramago

Ecocrítica intermediária em *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* de Saramago

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Abstract: This article analyzes pictorial representations of the natural world in *Blindness* (1995), by José Saramago. It covers the moment when an anonymous character describes some paintings he saw in a museum just before he went blind. Some of them are pastorals, suggestive of the lives of the characters before they became blind; but there are also descriptions of paintings that mirror the desperate situation analogous to the situation of the blind people in the asylum. As far as intermedial ecocriticism is concerned, I rely mainly on Jørgen Bruhn's article "Towards an Intermedial Ecocriticism," and when referring to culture, nature, and animals, I count on Raymond Williams' and Greg Garrard's concepts. Claus Clüver and Liliane Louvel become the main voices when analyzing the intermedial references to painting in the literary text.

Keywords: Intermedial ecocriticism. Intermedial references. Literature. Painting.

Resumo: Este artigo analisa representações pictóricas do mundo natural em *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (1995), de José Saramago. Abrange o momento em que um personagem anônimo descreve algumas pinturas que viu em um museu pouco antes de ficar cego. Algumas delas são pastorais, sugestivos da vida dos personagens antes de ficarem cegos; mas, por outro lado, há também descrições picturais que espelham a situação desesperadora análoga à situação dos cegos no manicômio. Em relação à ecocrítica intermediária, utilizamos principalmente as considerações de Jørgen Bruhn no artigo "Towards an Intermedial Ecocriticism", e ao nos referirmos à cultura, natureza e animais, contamos com conceitos de Raymond Williams e Greg Garrard. Claus Clüver e Liliane Louvel tornam-se as principais vozes ao analisarmos as referências intermediárias à pintura no texto literário.

Palavras-chave: Ecocrítica intermediária. Referências intermediárias. Literatura. Pintura.

1 Introduction

In this paper I analyze specific pictorial references in Saramago's novel *Blindness*, in the light of contemporary theoretical perspectives. My approach includes an introduction to the literary text and its tragic context, a selection of passages in which anonymous paintings are described, an intermedial analysis of these paintings, and considerations about the relationship between the paintings and their ecological appeal. Intermedial ecocriticism enters in a tangential way, but it is no less important to mark the move from the Holocene to the Anthropocene phase, considering the subject and the date of the paintings. I will, therefore, describe, analyze, and compare the intermedial references present in the monomedial¹ universe of the novel with a searching look at possible representations of global warming, nature, animals, both in rural tranquility and on the brink of a disaster. I rely on the idea that "the ecological crisis is not a topic restricted to investigation in the natural sciences" alone (BRUHN, 2021, p. 125), and that the specific affordances of the paintings described allow the comparison between them and the subject of the text. The pictorial and verbal narratives become integrated, intertwined, and appeal to our eyesight and imagination; part of this appeal is related to the clear/confused remembrances of these anonymous but real paintings.

José Saramago (1922-2010), renowned Portuguese translator, journalist and writer, winner of the Nobel Prize in 1998, creates in his novel *Blindness* (1995) an inexplicable "white blindness", a "sea of milk" that affects the population of an indefinite place and causes, gradually, chaos in the community. The blind people are taken, by government requirement, to an abandoned asylum, thus being isolated from the other inhabitants of the anonymous city. In this "prison," they face many difficulties, besides their blindness: hunger, lack of hygiene, lack of medicine, lack of information

¹According to Werner Woolf (2012, p. 23), a text refers to another medium through implicit (allusion, evocation, formal imitation, and reproduction) or explicit reference (thematization). He argues that the allusion to one medium (non-dominant media) in another (the dominant media) does not make the latter a plurimedial work.

about the endemics/pandemics due to the impossibility of communicating with the outside world. The diegesis presents itself as a backdrop to expose some of the most poignant human feelings: anguish, violence, revenge, and fear of imminent death.

Eager for news from the city, the blind characters have for some time relied on the information from those who became blind after them and are brought to the same place. Among the information about what is going on in the city provided by the newcomers, the reports of an anonymous character stand out. This character says he was visiting a museum when he became blind, therefore his last visual memories are images of famous paintings by apparently well-known painters, which he associates to nationalities at first, but ignores specificities, such as titles or names of painters. Most of the pictures described by the blind anonymous character capture the natural world – a field of hay, human beings in a rural area surrounded by animals. The paintings, described in passages of the literary text, are cultural representations of the natural world twice removed from material reality. Some present a harmonious idyllic pastoral landscapes where animals live in a peaceful environment, suggesting a very romantic atmosphere: a horse, at rest, refreshing its hooves and legs in a stream after pulling a hay wagon; some pigs, a peacock, a chicken, and a dog strolling near a nursing mother reclining on a wagon full of hay at end of a working day; but other paintings represent ominous or dangerous situations also involving animals: crows, omens of death, flying over a field of hay; a possible "explosion" of the sun; a half-sunken dog about to lose its life in the muddy ground; and the detail of a horse's head coming out of darkness, with its bulging blind eyes. The pastorals, although ambiguous, can be interpreted as a moment of suspension of the blind people's painful awareness of their condition – remembrances of their lives before they become blind; menacing nature, animals of bad omen or in danger work as a mirror image to the despairing reality the blind characters in the asylum presently live.

Stuart Hall describes cultural representation as “the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” using language, signs and images which stand for or represent things, or as “the ability to describe or imagine” (HALL, 2005, p. 18). According to Jørgen Bruhn, who recovers Rob Nixon’s and Timothy Morton’s concepts, representation

[...] cannot be completely identical to what they represent, and representation is not devoid of performative aspects, so any representations necessarily function on a differentiating scale of higher or lower precision and effect, depending not only on the media products but also on the context in which they are produced and perceived. (BRUHN, 2021, p. 125)

At a certain moment in Saramago’s fictional universe, the blind old man with a black eyepatch suggests that the characters tell what they were looking at when they became blind. He calls it a “game,” and the various narratives told by the blind characters really work as a playful activity for the blind listeners at the asylum and for us, his readers. In the case of the anonymous character who was visiting the museum, his descriptions arouse our curiosity to find out the origin of the paintings he is referring to, but they also make us aware of an impending tragic future.

Bruhn points out the phases of a critical reading of two texts from different academic disciplines: “I argue that it is possible and even necessary to combine two academic disciplines, intermedial studies and ecocriticism, in order to face the challenge of analysing, discussing, and comparing texts” (BRUHN, 2004, p. 119). I add that it is necessary to combine at least two media in order to face the challenge of analyzing, discussing, and comparing texts in intermedial ecocriticism. To investigate the presence of nature as cultural representation, I use Raymond Williams’ and Greg Garrard’s theoretical concepts of culture, nature, and animals, discussed in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* and *Ecocriticism*; to analyze the intermedial references to painting in the literary text, I rely mainly on notions of pictorial description and ekphrasis developed by Liliane

Louvel in “Nuances du pictural”, and by Claus Clüver in “Ekphrasis Reconsidered”.

2 Intermedial Ecocriticism

Jørgen Bruhn establishes, at the beginning of this article “Towards an Intermedial Ecocriticism” how the “mixedness” of two media could be approached:

This distinction is a result of the a priori idea of intermedial studies, namely that all media are medially and modally mixed, which naturally leads to the question of how the a priori mixedness of all media texts may be analytically approached. It is not particularly interesting to simply demonstrate the mixedness of media products; instead, the mixedness needs to be **described and analysed**. From an analytical, pragmatic point of view, the most important dimensions are media integration and media transformation—the transformation dimension is particularly important in intermedial ecocriticism. (BRUHN, 2004, p. 123, my emphasis).

Therefore, my aim in this article is not simply to demonstrate the presence of painting and literature, instead I aim at describing and analyzing the result of this presence in media products – how they are integrated, transformed, and suggestive of a denser and somber atmosphere in Saramago’s text, and how they are related to ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism in *Blindness* will make us look at the pastoral tradition, because pictorial descriptions of pastorals appear in Saramago’s text. When writing about it, Greg Garrard says: “[...] the relationship of pastoral and the Judeo-Christian conception of time becomes clear: Genesis 3, the story of Man’s fall, is essentially an elegy of lost pastoral bounty and innocence” (GARRARD, 2004, p. 37), then he quotes Terry Gifford:

What then is this ‘pastoral’ tradition, and what is its significance for environmentalism? Terry Gifford distinguishes three kinds of pastoral: the specifically literary tradition, involving a retreat from the city to the countryside, that originates in ancient Alexandria and becomes a key poetic form in Europe during the Renaissance; more generally, ‘any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the

urban' (1999: 2); and the pejorative sense in which 'pastoral' implies an idealisation of rural life that obscures the realities of labour and hardship. (GARRARD, 2004, p. 33)²

My aesthetic inclination is to read the cultural representations – the peaceful beauty of rural life in the two paintings with country people and animals at ease – positively; however, when I consider Gifford's opinion on pastorals as "an idealization of rural life that obscures realities of labor and hardship," I realize that my initial aesthetic appraisal may be misled. Besides that, Garrard writes: "The ambivalence of pastoral will not be eliminated but rather enhanced by ecocritical readings" (GARRARD, 2004, p. 55). And if I relate this idea to the previous life of the blind people in the asylum, I perceive that Saramago really means that those people were metaphorically blind before they became physically blind. Some people, and here I am talking mostly about unidentified middle-class people in the fictional text, are unable to perceive the chaos in nature, the violent world they live in, because they became indifferent to suffering, violence, and death around them. As an admonishment, Saramago includes an epigraph from the *Books if Exhortations*: "If you can see, look. If you can look, observe."

According to Raymond Williams, there are three meanings for the word culture: first, he describes culture as a process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development; second, as a particular way of life; and third, "a most widespread use: **culture** is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film" (WILLIAMS, 2015, p. 52, emphasis in the original). The pictorial descriptions in Saramago's novel exemplify Williams' three meanings for the word "culture;" the third being an unquestionable mark – painting and literature are part of culture par excellence.

In contrast to culture, Williams says that **nature** is probably the most difficult word in the English language to define:

Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language. It is relatively easy to distinguish three areas of meaning: (i) the

essential quality and character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings. (WILLIAMS, 2015, p. 164-165, emphasis in the original)

When I look at nature through the eyes of an artist, it is difficult not to realize that (1) "the essential quality or character of something" is the same that the artist has perceived and represented; (2) that the artist perceives "the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both" in his/her unique way. Therefore, my attention goes to the third definition of nature – "The material world itself, taken as including or not human beings." I am not looking at the material world in the pictorial descriptions in Saramago's novel, but at an artistic representation of the material world first in painting and then in literature, therefore, as mentioned before, twice removed from material or sensible reality.

Much of our understanding of human identity and our thinking about the living animal reflects – and may even be the rather direct result of – the diverse uses to which the concept of the animal is put in popular culture, regardless of how bizarre or banal some of those uses may seem. [...] Culture shapes our reading of animals just as much as animals shape our reading of culture. (BAKER quoted by GARRARD, 2004, p. 141)

Animals are part of the natural world. When observed and represented by an artist, they assume the position of subjects in cultural analysis. "The study of the relations between animals and humans in the Humanities is split between philosophical consideration of animal rights and cultural analysis of the representation of animals" (GARRARD, 2004, p. 136). The representations of crows, dogs, and horses in the pictorial descriptions by the blind character in Saramago's novel would, therefore, lend themselves to a cultural analysis. In relation to animal rights, no cruelty or punishment is depicted in the paintings – the animals are in apparent harmony with the environment and with human beings; they are at rest. Concerning the horses in the pastorals, on the other hand, I can only imagine that they had been working before –

²The quotations keep the British spelling of words, the text, the North American spelling.

pulling a hay wagon – and when represented, while resting, they are still attached to the wagon, as if they cannot be dissociated from their “purpose in life” – to work, to serve human beings. These pictorial representations are intermedial references in Saramago’s novel and represent a pre-industrial age when animals have not been replaced by machines.

Intermedial reference is an intermedial category proposed by Irina Rajewsky, which refers, briefly and broadly speaking, to the presence of a second medium within a first one, without changing its materiality. The presence of painting in Saramago’s novel does not change the materiality of the novel. More specific concepts are suggested by other theorists when talking about the presence of painting in literature. Liliane Louvel, in her article entitled “Nuances du pictural” (2001, p. 176-185), presents different degrees of pictorial modulations (*modulations picturales*) in literature, and classifies them as: framed painting effect (*l’effet-tableau*); picturesque view (*la vue pittoresque*); hypotyposis (*l’hypotypose*); living picture (*le tableau vivant*); pictorial description (*la description picturale*); and ekphrasis (*l’ekphrasis*). Most important for my analysis are the two last types: the pictorial description, in which the text is framed and presents the highest degree of saturation before the ekphrasis; and the ekphrasis, a literary exercise that aims to **recreate a work of art**, moving from the visual to the textual. The ekphrasis has the highest degree of pictorial saturation, according to Louvel.³

Massaud Moisés reinforces Louvel’s idea of ekphrasis as a recreation of a work of art when he writes: “Ekphrasis is not, cannot be, mere description. [...] Poetic *ekphrasis* is a **recreation**, as much as an expression, of the effect of a natural landscape on the poet’s sensibility: it is a parallel reality, not his image in a flat mirror. (MOISÉS, 2004, p. 43, my translation and emphasis)⁴.”

³All these *modulations picturales* (Louvel) in a written text are classified as intermedial references by Irina Rajewsky. In her article “Intermediality, intertextuality and ‘remediation’: a literary perspective on intermediality” (Rajewsky 2005: 25), she designates these phenomena, generally speaking – the allusions to one medium in another – as **intermedial references**.

⁴Version in Portuguese: A *ekphrasis* não é, não pode restringir-se a ser, mera descrição. [...] A *ekphrasis* poética é uma recriação, tanto quanto a expressão o efeito de uma paisagem natural

Claus Clüver, in a 1997 paper, defines ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system” (Clüver 1997: 26, my emphasis). Later, he revised his definition, but he does not include in either definition the concept of ekphrasis as a **recreation of a work of art**. It is important to note, however, that he mentions the possibility of representation of a **real or fictional** text. These concepts of ekphrasis – Louvel’s and Clüver’s – were included here because they elucidate the difference between mere description and ekphrasis. The blind character who was at the museum when he became blind, does not recreate paintings, he describes real paintings that deepen the contrast or the meaning of Saramago’s fictional universe. Sometimes he even fuses two paintings in one description. To reconstruct a painting in another medium, requires creativity, keen memory, and lucidity, characteristics that are not present in Saramago’s universe of blind, confused, lost characters in the asylum. He writes:

The worst thing is that whole families, especially the smaller ones, rapidly became families of blind people, leaving no one who could guide and look after them, nor protect sighted neighbours from them, and it was clear that these blind people, however caring a father, mother or child they might be, could not take care of each other, otherwise they would meet the same fate as the blind people in the painting, walking together, falling together, dying together. (SARAMAGO, 1997, p. 123)

The *status quo* of the anonymous city of Saramago’s fictional universe in *Blindness* is one of public calamity, caused by the sudden white blindness that affects all people inadvertently. To the people in the anonymous city, the narrator associates a reference to an untitled painting. It is probably one of Pieter Bruegel’s masterpieces, *De Parabel der Blinden* [*The Parable of the Blind*, 1568], inspired in the Bible (Matthew 15:14; Luke 6:39). The painting shows, in a descending diagonal perspective, a row of six blind people who are connected by sticks or by placing their hand on the shoulder of the blind man in front. The first

sobre a sensibilidade do poeta: é uma realidade paralela, não a sua imagem num espelho plano. (Moisés 2004: 43, emphasis of the author)

blind man, the one who leads all the others, has just fallen to the ground; the second is falling, letting the basket with collected alms fly; the third begins to lose his balance, which can be seen by the position of his feet; the fourth, fifth and sixth are still unaware of the imminent and inevitable fall. All the blind people have their faces turned up to the sky and their whitish eyes open as if pleading for mercy. At the start of epidemics/pandemics, the first blind man infects his wife, the girl with the dark glasses infects the doctor and all his patients in the waiting room, and they infect the city. It is an allusion to the row of blind men falling in Brueghel's painting. Very similar to the contamination of Covid-19 from the end of 2019 onwards.

3 References to paintings in the literary text *Blindness*

The anonymous narrator includes the description of Bruegel's painting quoted above; soon after, on pages 128 to 131, there are references to the paintings described by a blind anonymous character. These descriptions are motivated by the old man-with-the-black-eyepatch's proposal. When he arrives at the asylum, he tells those that are in the Doctor's camerata how blindness is advancing over the city. He says,

That's how things are out there, the old man with the black eyepatch concluded his account, and I don't know everything, I can only speak of what I was able to see with my own eyes, here he broke off, paused and corrected himself. Not with my eyes, because I only had one. (SARAMAGO, 1997, p. 126)

Then follows the old man's proposal to play "a game": each blind person in that camerata would tell exactly what he/she was watching when he/she became blind, a proposal accepted by all. The doctor speaks first; then the doctor's wife; the first blind man; the wife of the first blind man; the doctor's secretary; the druggist; and the girl with dark glasses. Then the old man goes on: "Has everyone told their last story of the time they saw, asked the old man with the black blindfold? I'll tell you mine, if there's no one else, said

the unknown voice, If there is, he'll speak next, say so" (SARAMAGO, 1997, p. 130). An unknown voice then speaks:

The last thing I saw was a painting, A painting, repeated the old man with the back eyepatch, and where was this painting, I had gone to the museum, it was a picture of a cornfield with crows and cypress trees and a sun that gave the impression of having been made up of fragments of other suns, Sounds like a Dutch painter, I think it was... (SARAMAGO, 1997, p. 128-129, my emphasis)⁵

The hint that the painter was Dutch helps us to recognize the painting *Korenveld met kraaien [Wheat Field with Crows, 1890]*, by Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), one of his last paintings, if not the last, before his suicide.

A description of another painting follows – a reference to *El perro semihundido [The Semi-Sunken Dog, 1819]*, by Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828), a Spanish painter.

I think it was, but there was a drowning **dog** in it, already just submerged, poor creature, In that case it must be by a Spanish painter, before him no other painter had ever painted a **dog** in that situation, after him no other painter had the courage to try. (SARAMAGO, 1997, p. 129, my emphasis)

Next the blind man makes a reference to *The Hay Wain (1821)*, by John Constable (1776-1837), with a possible fusion with another painting, *La charette ou Le retour de la fenaison [The Wagon of Hay or The Return of the Hay Crop, 1641]*, by the French Louis le Nain (c.1603–1648).

Probably, and there was a cart laden with hay, drawn by **horses** and crossing a stream. Was there a house on the left, Yes, then it was an English painter, Could be, but I don't think so, because there was a woman as well with a child in her arms, Mothers and children are too common in painting, True, I've noticed...

⁵Here I mention only the description of paintings in which nature and animals are represented.

(SARAMAGO, 1997, p. 129, my emphasis)⁶

The character mentions two more paintings, but from *The Hay Wain* on his description becomes less and less precise, suggesting the fusion of at least two paintings. After this reference there is no further mention of the painters' nationality.

The last description refers probably to the painting *Nightmare* (1781), by the Anglo-Swiss painter Johann Heinrich Füssli (1741-1825):

And a **horse** stricken with terror, With its eyes about to pop out of their sockets, Exactly, Horses are like that, and what other pictures were there in your painting, Alas, I never managed to find out, I went blind just as I was looking at the horse. (SARAMAGO, 1997, p. 129, my emphasis)

These intermedial references to paintings in Saramago's work can be considered pictorial descriptions, according to Louvel, ekphrasis according to Clüver. To classify them as pictorial description seems to be more appropriate, because the verbal passages do not recreate works of art, they are simple descriptions of the works. The references to paintings in *Blindness* do not change the medium of the target text, the verbal one, but they change the atmosphere of the fictional universe, in an ambiguous way, for a short period – offering a moment of tragic relief and, at the same time, enhancing the meaning of the blind characters' terrible situation.

4 Possible dialogues

Before going into the major dialogue of this paper – intermedial references and ecocriticism – it is worth mentioning that there are many possible dialogues in the novel, one of them being medical sciences versus common scientific knowledge: the doctor's voice in the novel stands for the voice of medical science. No other character in the novel, nor

any common reader knows that sudden white blindness does not exist. Readers without medical knowledge would question if that condition is included in medical literature. Therefore, before the doctor became blind, in his office, while attending the girl with dark glasses, he says that this symptom is not described in medical books, and later he contacts a colleague to comment about the strange medical condition he saw. The colleague does not know either what white blindness might be, like the first doctor. Therefore, the reader knows that this condition – being affected by a sudden white blindness – is not registered in medical books or known by medical doctors. Another possible dialogue is between those born blind or people who have been blind for a long time and those who had become suddenly blind, which also involves medical knowledge. The suddenly blind characters do not know what to do and what to expect. Among the last group of blind men who are brought to the asylum and are under the leadership of the blind man with a gun, there is one blind man, called by the narrator as the blind accountant who uses a braille machine to control the food left outside the door of the asylum and to register the goods asked in exchange for food.

After some minutes, the doctor began to hear the unmistakable sound of punching paper, which he immediately identified, there nearby was someone writing in the braille alphabet [...] So there was a **normal blind person** just like all those people who was once referred to as being blind [...] They were certainly lucky, not only had they won a clerk in the raffle, they could also use him as a guide, a blind person with experience as a blind person is something else, **he's worth his weight in gold**. (SARAMAGO, 1997, p. 146, my emphasis)

Now, after this detour, let's return to the main topic of this paper. In the first two references – to Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows*, and to Goya's *The Half-Sunken Dog*, there is a suggestion that good, and evil are part of the "reality" of the fictional universe. The stunning yellow of the wheat field, symbolic of abundance, cut by paths in red and green tones, contrasts with the blue sky with thick brushstrokes of

⁶The unknown voice then describes the paintings *La última cena* (*Last Supper*, 1495-1498), by Leonardo da Vinci, *Nascita di Venere* (*The Birth of Venus*, 1482-1485), by Sandro Boticelli (c. 1445-1510) and *Les Sabines* (*The Rape of the Sabine Women*, 1799), by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825).

black paint and the overflight of crows, sinister figures symbolic of death.

Wheatfield with Crows is the only work in which the artist used vigorous brushstrokes under a very turbulent sky. Van Gogh had a great respect for the forces of nature and had already included similar skies in several of his works, but not to such an extent. The presence of crows, a bird that is associated with death, with the accentuating contrast of the yellow wheat field, give rise to numerous interpretations... (<https://arteeartistas.com.br/campo-de-trigo-com-corvos-vincent-van-gogh>, my translation)

The crows' symbolic suggestion that those blind people will probably experience an even more sinister future, becomes a frightening prediction and a fictitious "reality". Hunger, violence, and death are consequences of the attitudes of the blind man with a gun who begins to control the food and to make selfish and cruel demands for its distribution. As time passes by and a greater number of people is brought to the asylum, the situation deteriorates more and more and becomes unbearable.

"A sun that gave the idea of having been made with bits of other suns" possibly predicts, by the multiple images of light and heat, or even of the explosion of the sun into several suns, the destruction of earth by global warming. The effects of the ecological crisis, which he [Bob Nixon] usually terms "slow violence," is "a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing across a range of temporal scales" (GARRARD, 2021, p. 124). Besides that, the dark intensity of the sky that surrounds the "suns" and is about to close in on them suggests the destruction which would follow global warming, it predicts darkness and death. All these indications of a changing natural world are linked to the lives of the characters in *Blindness*. Affected by sudden, inexplicable blindness, they have been separated from their families, cloistered in darkness and neglect, suffering and imminent death.

In Goya's *The Semi-Sunken Dog*, the observer is also faced with a desperate moment, when a dog is

apparently being swallowed by a swampy ground, on the verge of losing its life, such as the blind people are sinking in the muddy, filthy floor of the asylum. Considering that the dog is man's loyal friend, its sinking seems to suggest that loyalty among living creatures is coming to an end. Loyalty, one of the greatest qualities that should prevail in the world, is really disappearing in Saramago's world, especially after the arrival of the group led by the man with a gun and the blind accountant. They show excessive selfishness and cruelty – they go from the withholding of food to the rape of women.

The 15 paintings called *Black Paintings* (1819-1823), by Goya, one of them being *The Semi-Sunken Dog*, have a very peculiar history: they were painted on the stucco of the walls of Vila del Sordo. After the mansion was sold, the 14 remaining paintings were photographed and then removed from the walls by an artist and restorer. In the photograph of this painting, two birds are flying freely in the sky – the direction of the dog's gaze – and a small part of the animal's body can be seen above the top of the ravine. These details are not in the restoration. The original title, *El perro*, does not really indicate that the dog is sinking, it may just indicate that he is at a lower level than the ravine that hides most of his body. His pleading gaze towards the sky, however, whether in the painting or in the photo, resembles that of the blind men in Bruegel's painting. The perception of the dog's imminent death, as described by the anonymous character, however, makes the meaning of the painting and text much more dramatic.

After these two ominous paintings, the character describes a pastoral he saw, *The Hay Wain*. There is a house to the left, a stream where the horses pulling the wagon rest, a dog by the margin of the stream looking at the wagon in the middle of it, directing our gaze. The painting depicts a rural scene from the East Bergholt region where Constable was born, famous for its beauty. The house retains, to this day, the name of the owner at the time – Willy Lott's Chalet –, and both the little house and the stretch of river are listed as historical heritage, away from the industrial centers and uproar in time and space. Goya's

deafness, as well Vila del Sordo former owner's and Willy Lott's deafness, whose chalet was immortalized in Constable's painting, are suggestive of the loss of one of people's senses, or perhaps of our own metaphorical blindness and deafness. Even in pastorals, man's kindness seems to have a limit – the horses in Constable's painting are not free to stop and drink from the stream. The horses are attached to their wagon, which is the burden they must carry. The wagon in this painting is not full of hay as in the description – it is empty, ready to receive the hay that is being mowed a little further on. It seems that the anonymous character's memory is no longer entirely clear, as he also describes a woman with a child on her lap, who is not present in Constable's painting. In the painting *The Hay Wagon* or *The Return of the Hay Harvest*, by the French Louis le Nain, the wagon is full of hay, and, in the foreground, a seated woman holds a small child in her arms, while some pigs, a peacock, a chicken, and a dog stand nearby. They all seem to be in harmony, but some of the animals – the pigs and the chicken – will be killed by the hands of those who caress them. According to Adauto Novaes, since Plato, several authors have argued that sensitive knowledge is vague, confused, and inadequate and that

Sensible reality can never produce knowledge because sensible things are at the same time dissimilar, many and multiple in themselves. He who lets himself be seduced only by the senses must take the risks of uncertainty or lose himself in what he sees. The senses, like the passions, disturb the soul, and without temperance, lead to vice and madness. The man who contemplates is absorbed by what he contemplates. For this reason, Plato invites us to distrust perception, drives and the whims of the body. (NOVAES, 1997, p. 10, my translation)⁷

⁷Version in Portuguese: A realidade sensível jamais pode produzir um saber porque as coisas sensíveis são ao mesmo tempo dissemelhantes, muitas e múltiplas nelas mesmas. Aquele que se deixa seduzir apenas pelos sentidos deve assumir os riscos da incerteza ou perder-se naquilo que vê. Os sentidos, como as paixões, perturbam a alma e sem temperança, conduzem ao vício e à loucura. O homem que contempla é absorvido pelo que contempla. Por essa razão, Platão nos convida a desconfiar da percepção, das pulsões e dos caprichos do corpo. (NOVAES, 1997, p. 10)

The details of Constable's paintings – the hay wagon and the horses – bring a freshness to the moment by being in the middle of the stream, by representing people and animals outdoors. Blind characters are experiencing the opposite in the asylum: confinement, hunger, chaos, filth, and death, which can, by contrast with the freshness of Constable's painting, seem even more poignant. The expansion, the beauty of nature, the tranquility, and harmony, implicit in the rural vision, sharpen our senses and repel the contrasting "landscape" in *Blindness*. Broadly speaking, it is harmony, liberty colliding with chaos and imprisonment. But not necessarily will the reader perceive how the animals, including human beings in the painting and in the asylum, are in danger and may meet sudden death or the destruction of life on earth. Besides that, the pastorals' supposed harmony may hide, as Garrard points out, the relentless cruelty of human beings towards animals and other people.

Easing the tension of the rape scene, a description of pure beauty, the reference to Venus in *The Birth of Venus*, by Botticelli, seems to point to the rebirth of women, after the blind man with a gun is killed. The painting depicts the prudish gesture of Venus covering her breasts with one hand and holding her long red hair over her pubis with the other. Finally, the women of the asylum have the domain of their bodies again. The doctor's wife, the only person who can see, manages to murder the evil leader with the scissors she brought from home after her group was raped. Therefore, the murder of the blind man with the gun allows the first movement towards returning to a "possible stability" and a "harmonious existence." The blind characters from the doctor's camerata, free from oppression and from the guards who are apparently blind or dead can leave the asylum. When they leave, however, total chaos rules in the city – abandoned to fate, the blind and the dead are dispersed throughout the city, cars with open doors are parked in all directions, scrawny animals are roaming around – a city marked by blindness, famine, filth, and death, like the asylum. And this vision leads us to the description of the painting of a battle, mentioned by the

anonymous blind man, and to which I associate *The Sabine girls*, by David, with women and children killed along with men and soldiers.

At the end of *Blindness*, the painting *Nightmare*, by Füssli, also known as Fuseli, closes this cycle of intermedial references where paintings are put together and mixed to form a huge verbal canvas, described by the anonymous blind man. Nothing more appropriate than ending this cycle with the image – a detail of the painting – of the horse's head "With its eyes wanting to pop out of its sockets," large and whitish. In this painting, a sleeping girl is visited by an incubus, a demon sitting in her womb, while her head is hanging off the bed, with an ambiguous facial expression, showing agony and surrender. There are several versions of this painting by Füssli, but even when the perspective is totally opposite or vertical, the blind, bulging eyes of the horse's head are the most impressive element of the canvas. Within the darkness of the painting, the beauty of the girl's body, covered and molded by white robes, where the demon sits, is quite impressive, but the bulging, whitish eyes of the animal snatch and hold the observer's gaze. The visitation of the incubus, a figure from folklore, to the sleeping girl weakens its impact because of the horse's head. It is she, the "mare of the night," who carries the demon that enters the girl's dream world and steals her vital energy. But the picture also points to the near future, to an awakening after the nightmare, the nightmare being the sudden white blindness and the awakening being the moment when Saramago's blind characters gradually begin to see. The allegory comes to an end.

5 Final remarks

The paintings described bring another medium into the fictional universe of Saramago's *Blindness* – they are intermedial references. Following the writer's technique, the director Luiz Fernando Meirelles, in the film *Blindness*, an adaptation of the novel, also makes use of famous paintings, some included in the text and others not, to establish, even if unconsciously, a link between the images projected on the screen and the

spectator's cultural heritage (REICHMANN; MENEZHINI 2009, p. 169-175). If this relationship is not perceived or if the spectator is unaware of the paintings evoked, there will still be an aesthetic appreciation of both Saramago's text and Meirelles' film. This appreciation will not, however, have the same density that it has for those who, upon perceiving the pictorial suggestions "travel" imaginatively to another artistic universe, part of the cultural heritage of humanity. Whether these references are classified as allusions, evocations, descriptions, ekphrasis, they suggest a dialogue between two different media – in this case, literature, and painting, and predict a somber universe where pandemics and death prevail. Global warming and other destructive elements, a contrast to the idyllic pastorals, become a warning to all men and women, to those who see, but do not look; those who look, but do not observe.

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