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## Blinding Lights: the Angst of Present Time in José Saramago

### ABSTRACT

This critical essay aims to develop a reflection about present time and the type of art that it bequeaths to those who inhabit it. Questioning about its depth and its engagement to the relevant issues to the contemporary individual, it is suggested that an aesthetic activity concerned not only to its own time and place, but also to otherness and to the future, could be an alternative to art expressions that are mere escapes from reality. At last, José Saramago's literature is used as a thematic study case of the propositions presented throughout the paper.

Keywords: aesthetics, literature, state of urgency poetics, present time, José Saramago

Se podes olhar, vê. Se podes ver, repara (*Livro dos Conselhos*)

If, as Byung-Chul Han (2015a) indicates in his book *The burnout society*, “Every age has its signature afflictions” (p. 9), then present time's affliction seems to be *anxiety*. Fear was always a companion to humankind, since it started to (want to) understand the world surrounding it. But the angst that oppresses, paralyzes and spreads through all spheres of everyday life, shows itself as the reality of this new millennium, which is now entering its second decade.

Contradictorily, present time is also one of *maximum alienation*. Perhaps as a defense mechanism, one escapes from the world, trying to forget it. There is preference in consuming only what reminds of the positive, the smooth, simple and superficial; the negative, which is wrinkled, complex and deep, is put away (Han, 2018).

About what was referred above as maximum alienation, a detailed explanation is needed, which can be found in words that are worth quoting in length:

We live in dark times, in which great forms of extermination are taking place before our eyes, whether local, national or international; however, we are indifferent to these facts, as we are al-

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ways looking at events with the distance that television and the internet produce and impose on us. We don't get involved; we live the unreality that the profusion of images gives us. We change the subject with great simplicity of gestures and ease of directing and redirecting our attention, we go from the news of a tragic event to a media frivolity, without the slightest ceremony. We are able to be moved by familiar clichés about British royalty, but we are not led to reflect on the violence produced by terror, or on the despair of thousands of refugees around the world, produced by the geopolitical horror generated within the governance of developed nations of the West (Lima, 2019, p. 7).

In order to highlight the situation presented thus far, the words of the Lithuanian philosopher Leonidas Donskis can also be used, when in a conversation with Zygmunt Bauman he comments on the confused and troubled world we live in today, realizing that this “is a world that has long ceased controlling itself (although it obsessively seeks to control individual people), a world that cannot respond to its own dilemmas and lessen the tensions it has sowed” (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, p. 5)

Present time, therefore, is based on a state of constant angst and anxiety, a profound fear of everything and everyone. A state of urgency that blinds humanity with its profusion of images. And, afraid as they are (and have always been), in face of danger people try to escape. Art is thus found as an escape route; but a kind of art that, like those who produce and consume it, also seems to be in crisis.

### **1. Present time and Art**

With a quick search at the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, one can learn that an *emergency* is “a time or state of affairs requiring prompt or decisive action”. In other words, it could be said that it is an exceptional situation that demands exceptional measures, so normality may be restored. And these measures must be performed fast in order to minimize the damage caused; they have a sense of *urgency*.

That being said, it is interesting to think about how emergency and urgency are related; in fact, most people might think that they are perfect synonyms. However, while every emergency comes with an urgency, not every urgency comes with an emergency.

In what might be called *The Society Trilogy* (*Burnout*, *Transparency* and *Palliative*), the South-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han highlights the processes by which present time is experienced on several levels of complexity: from everyday mundane activities, to the global consumption system of neoliberal capitalism, going through the way Art is produced and perceived.

On the one hand, he argues, neoliberal world is the realm of *fear*. Mostly one fears the unknown; but today almost everything that surrounds an adult individual may be included in that category: other people, diseases, taxes, terrorism. In this way, people live in constant fear, not necessarily of the advent of an extraordinary event, an emergency, but in constant readiness to the happening of anything that could bring them pain, i.e., an urgency. So, tormented by the angst that the

platitudes of life itself bring, one lives in something that might be called *a state of urgency*.

On the other hand, Han says that the neoliberal world is also the realm of *like*. This, I believe, can be understood in two ways, both related to the need for *transparency* that present time imposes. The first one mostly concerns how one acts on social networks. The mere act of *liking* a Facebook post, an Instagram picture or a TikTok video is everything that is expected from an individual of today: it is fast, economic, positive and transparent. It is a possibility of showing oneself, of sharing one's deepest thoughts (if they are deep at all) with everyone; all this with minimum effort, which makes one more apt to develop other activities, i.e., to go to work.

The other way to think about the neoliberal realm of *like* is, in fact, a direct consequence of addiction to social networks. Capitalism urges people to be efficient and productive, so relations must be efficient too. As it was pointed out, social networks include in its dynamics all that is required from people on this scenario of efficiency and productivity, so they are constantly engaging in acts of comparing themselves with others, in order to reach the success that they have not yet achieved. In other words, the *Other* is just a case of success, a model: people want to be *like* the successful ones that they see on their screens, so they too may be *liked*.

In this positive state, there is a tendency to avoid everything that might look negative: there is an urge to be transparent, without secrets; there is an alienation from the real problems, in a way that there is no escape from the positive, not even inside one's own mind. Even the art that is used to escape from reality's negativity is taken by the need of transparency.

It is an art that no longer worries about a deep impact, a *punctum*, to use Roland Barthes' terminology on photography (Barthes, 2010). If there is a *punctum* on the art that is produced under the state of urgency it is a superficial one, one that does not have enough power to really penetrate the defenses built by fear and linger within the human soul. There is no time for that. As is done on social networks, where people are always switching from one ideal model of success to the next one, today's art perception occurs in a blink of an eye, with the difference that the switch now is from one distraction to the next one.

The preference for the easy and pleasurable that the ephemeral art provides, influenced by a *pornographic* mass culture – in a sense that everything must be shown and that the mere fact of seeing it is enough to give pleasure –, at the same time deprives people of living their own time *erotically* – in a sense that desire comes with discovery, and discovery comes with inquiry, and inquiry comes with mystery –: either they are trying to return to a past that no longer suits them, or they are thinking of a future that never seems to arrive.

But how can one still live within these two realms drowned in perennial states, one of urgency and one of transparency? Because “clearly the human soul requires

realms where it can be at home without the gaze of the Other”, in a sense that the world needs “a certain impermeability”. In fact, a “total illumination would scorch” everyone, “and cause a particular kind of *spiritual burnout*.” After all, people are still human, and “only machines are transparent” (Han, 2015b, p. 3).

However, and fortunately, what can rescue humankind from these doldrums of indifference and transparency is also Art. But a different kind of art. An art that goes beyond mere palliative. An art that truly helps humankind to heal. An art committed to present time. An art that does not just try to escape from the state of urgency, but instead uses it as a creative fuel and as an aesthetic thrust.

## 2. The state of urgency as an aesthetic thrust

As all times are obscure for those who inhabit them, a burden of the human condition, but also a consequence of being part of the substrate of analysis, to Giorgio Agamben the contemporary individual “is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity” and the one “who neither perfectly coincide with [his/her own time] nor adjust [himself/herself] to its demands”. Precisely because of this “disconnection and this anachronism”, the contemporary is “capable, more than others, of perceiving and grasping [his/her] own time” and thus “is able to write by dipping [his/her] pen in the obscurity of the present” (Agamben, 2009, pp. 40–44).

In this matter, it is also interesting to note that “creative individuals”, and artists in particular, “alternate between imagination and fantasy at one end, and a rooted sense of reality at the other”, and both “are needed to break away from the present without losing touch with the past” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 81).

This break away from the present, this attempt to be momentarily apart from reality, is due to what Agamben defines as the need for the contemporary to broadly see his/her own time. However, artists also have the same need to return and share their vision with those who did not (or could not) have the same glimpse:

The type of creation that we have called art since the modern age depends, to a large extent, on the possibility of taking a critical stand in their own society and culture. Only when creative individuals can view their own world from above for a moment, “stay by the river” in Sloterdijk’s (2011) metaphor, can they truly make a difference in their cultures (Gielen, 2015, p. 77).

Contradictorily (once again), an art committed to present time requires a momentary distance between artists and their time. But, to the same extent, it also demands their return, which promotes their connection with the Other. In this sense, in his literary autobiography, Cristovão Tezza (2012) asserts that it is “inescapable: we write because we want to reach the others” (p. 204).

Taking the liberty of expanding Tezza’s concept, it can be said that Art, in general, may be understood as an attempt to express oneself in (and about) the world, reaching the Other in this process. Certain experiences can only be lived through the silent approach to the Other that Art provides, like the banal and brief encounter

that the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz had with a woman in a train wagon. After she leaves, he expresses his sorrow: “I was left behind with the immensity of existing things. A sponge, suffering because it cannot saturate itself; a river, suffering because reflections of clouds and trees are not clouds and trees” (Miłosz, 1988).

In a sense, Miłosz’s sorrow is everyone’s sorrow; and even if it is not yet, someday it might be. Having this in mind, it also can be said that there is no Art without the Other, because “a culture is only viable when it is based on shared meanings” (Gielen, 2015, p. 89). On the other hand, there is the Other without Art; only this is a sadder one, since Art is also a way of living better (Todorov, 2009, p. 94).

Art, therefore, is one of the ways that the individuals find to try to change a reality that no longer satisfies them. In order to point out the flaws and angst, or to make their corrections and modifications, reality itself is used by them as a starting point for the journey on which the author and the Other will embark, because reality is all they both have. In this way, artists “used and are still using the ‘common culture’ that surrounds them. (...) [They] mix this common culture with their own more or less idiosyncratic ideas and then feed back into the same culture” (Gielen, 2015, p. 67).

“My art, if I may say so, was born as a construction of objects that directly imitated the real world, which, in this *simulacrum*, could be controlled”. These words, again by Cristovão Tezza (2012, p. 33), describe the goal for artistic activity: to have control over an emptiness that leaves a hole which cannot be filled with mere reality.

Instead of simply escaping from the state of urgency and falling into the maximum alienation of the shallow and the ephemeral that was pointed out by Byung-Chul Han, artists truly committed to their time use their fears and angst as an impulse to produce their art:

Imagination as an escape or compensation, as a prize of pleasure, is exercised by every single one of the human beings. Some, however, externalize their imagination, inscribe themselves in objects exposed to the perception of other people. This is the artistic way of exercising imagination and making up for what is lacking in the world. (...) Inventing another, fuller world or highlighting the gaps in the one we live in are two ways of complaining about the lack (Perrone-Moisés, 1990, pp. 104–105).

As, “regularly, the path of fiction is chosen to point out problematic deviations in reality” (Gielen, 2015, p. 94), artists, through narrative products that, at times, “show us a world even more terrible than the one already so unsatisfactory that surrounds us”, provide an experience where “the dissatisfaction caused by the lack can be read even more clearly”. In the end, to make clear “what is wrong, to make it perceptible and generalized to the point of becoming unbearable, is still to suggest, indirectly, what should be and it is not” (Perrone-Moisés, 1990, p. 104).

Whether to show how it really is, or to imagine how it should be, the world is always used as a basis for comparison in Art. In it, one resists or escapes from the state of urgency in which present time is built upon. But, also in Art, the world is found, reflected in the Other and echoing in the self.

### 3. Saramago and the blinding lights

In this context, it might be argued that few 20<sup>th</sup> century artists were more involved with their own times than the Portuguese writer José Saramago. Born in 1922, he witnessed the most important events of the century, and used them to compose his almost 40 books.

Knowing that to write is to travel to the *future*, and that to read is a travel to the *past*, in his writing, Saramago seems to comprehend two different instances of the illusion called *present*: his own and the reader's. In this way, in a mix of history and fantasy, of reality and lyricism, he builds stories that are timeless. At the same sense that they speak of events that happened in a not-so-distant past, they also speak about things that might happen in a not-so-distant future.

When Saramago published *A jangada de pedra* [The stone raft], in 1986, three of his previous novels (all written during the 1980's) had already made his name known in Portugal. If in *Levantado do chão* [Raised from the ground], *Memo-rial do convento* [Baltasar and Blimunda] and *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis* [The year of the death of Ricardo Reis] Saramago used the history of Portugal to talk about, for example, the struggles that the Portuguese people faced during the dictatorship that lasted more than 40 years, in *A jangada de pedra* he used an extraordinary event (but not an impossible one, at least to an open mind) to talk about the struggles that every human being of the planet was facing at the end of the Cold War.

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, uncertainties about the future (if there ever was a future at all) made people live in a constant state of urgency. And, although the neoliberal characteristics were still rising, Saramago could capture the fear and angst that emanated from his time and was able to predict that they were not ephemeral, that they would linger for future generations.

Almost 10 years later, Saramago writes what must be his most known novel: *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* [Blindness] (2011b). In 1995, uncertainties about a nuclear war were starting to fade, but were being replaced by uncertainties about where the ways of the future were going to lead humankind. Another shift was taking place: from the analogical world to the digital one. Technology was growing at a vertiginous pace, so fast that there was no time to think about it clearly. Some would say that the new millennium would be, finally, Heaven on Earth; while others could not sleep at night worrying about the loneliness in the world.

In the middle of all this, Saramago writes a story about a disease, a silent but striking one, that very soon is spreading through a whole city, maybe even the whole country or, why not, the whole world. The white blindness that takes place

in his book allows Saramago to once more talk about how frail and lost humanity is, no matter where or when it is.

The new millennium arrived, and in 2004, now a Nobel laureate, Saramago returned to the work that made him known to the whole world. *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* [Seeing] (2021c) takes place a couple of years after the events of the white blindness. Again, another improbable (but not impossible) situation is the starter to a series of existential questionings that maybe were within people the whole time and they did not realize. Fear, now, was not about *where* one was going, but *how* one would be when got there. The angst was not about a war, nor about the speed of change, but about the institutions that were being created along the way.

Only one year later, Saramago published one of his last and most powerful books. In *As intermitências da morte* [Death at intervals] (2021a), he comes with another state of emergency, maybe the most bizarre one: Death decides to take a vacation. Again, an extraordinary event seems to happen in an unnamed city, with unnamed people, which makes the story something universal.

Saramago may not have lived the age of Instagram and TikTok, since he died in 2010, but he certainly had a wider view of what kind of future was being prepared for humankind, based mostly on what he saw and heard along the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He witnessed a process that Czesław Miłosz calls *disintegration*, and that can be defined as the “sudden crumbling of all current notions and criteria”, when the order in which people are used to live might cease to exist. This, Miłosz adds, “is a rare occurrence and is characteristic only of the most stormy periods in history” (Miłosz, 1983, p. 81).

In these particular states of emergency that lead a human collectivity towards disintegration, “whether that be war, the rule of terror, or natural catastrophe”, Miłosz says that a “hierarchy of needs is built into the very fabric of reality”. In such a way that “to satisfy hunger is more important than finding food that suits one’s taste; the simplest act of human kindness toward a fellow being acquires more importance than any refinement of the mind” (Miłosz, 1983, pp. 79–80). I believe that this process of human disintegration described by Miłosz is exactly what is found in Saramago’s books, especially in those mentioned above. What if the Iberian Peninsula drifted across the Atlantic Ocean? What if everyone went blind? What if no one went to vote? What if Death decided to take a vacation? Perhaps these and other absurdities have been thought of before; the difference between those who thought them and José Saramago is that the latter not only thought them, but materialized his absurdities.

These exceptional and fantastic situations, exercises of imagination taken to the ultimate consequences, are clear manifestations of states of emergency (but which bring, between the lines, the state of urgency that we are experiencing today), and reflect the world that Saramago saw in the past, was seeing in the present, and imagined that could be seen in the future.

In these four stories people gradually are losing something that makes them human: identity, perception, autonomy, finitude. However, during the process, through reflection and self-knowledge they start to discover and understand what really means to be human.

Therefore, the *quadrivium* of loss presented by Saramago is an attempt by the Portuguese author to make people learn how to live with their angst and fears, warning them to not be blinded by the excess of light, to not be imprisoned by the excess of freedom, to not be dehumanized by the excess of humanization.

#### 4. Final remarks

Art, and also Literature, are silent but eloquent witnesses of History and Life. Through them, if one is truly committed, one is capable of expressing the inexpressible, of seeing what cannot be seen, of feeling what one did even know that was possible to be felt. Through Art, one may really live and not just survive.

With both feet planted on uncertain ground (one in the present of his time, the other in the imagined future), through relative situations, José Saramago gives voice to absolute truths. Through the juxtaposition of words, abstractions are thus concretized: Life, Beauty, Love and Art seem to be as simple as Nature itself.

Saramago's intention never seems to have been just to tell a story, but to transform human beings (those he portrays and those who read him). Many of his characters do not have names, but predicates, in such a way that any names might be put on them.

In a world where the "greedy consumption of images makes it impossible to close the eyes" (Han, 2018, p. 39), Saramago's writing seems to have the same effect as Franz Kafka intended with his own: to create stories that are ways of closing the eyes, or at least to make them "turned inwards, more, more, more, until they could reach and observe inside her own brain, there where the difference between seeing and not seeing is invisible to the naked eye" (Saramago, 2021a, p. 158).

As the words that open this essay advise, as well as when they open Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*, if one has eyes to see, one must look; and if one has the possibility to look, then one has to pay attention, to observe. Thus, to escape the blinding lights of present time, one must escape from the obvious, from the transparent; one must think and reflect about what is seen.

When reading Saramago's books, one does not look just outside, towards the lights that blind, but also inside, turning inwards, discovering oneself as a human being. In each written word, in each comma replaced by a short breath, in each unsaid name, in each plot of mysterious origin, through his state of urgency poetics, Saramago seems to still live and continue his magical attempt to remember what it is to be human.



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