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## The body-subject in the cultural representations of disability

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## The Body-Subject in the Cultural Representations of Disability

### Ucieleśniony podmiot w kulturowych reprezentacjach niepełnosprawności

As Vergílio Ferreira (2002, p. 43) suggests, there are events that, like disease, bring our attention to the centrality of the body. But those events do not create by themselves that centrality of the body, which is an inescapable fact of existence. Those events carry the conscience of the embodied character of existence. The point presented in this article is that blindness raises the body conscience by means of what can be, according to Leder ((1990, p. 86), defined as dysappearance, a concept referring to one of the ways through which the body becomes conscience. It signifies the increase of body conscience by means of an irregularity, of a loss or excess in its functioning. Although in blindness the body presence gains an extra relevance given a series of situations – such as the scrutiny in other people's eyes or the need of alternative ways to accomplish tasks in presence of social organization normative forms – the author intends to emphasize the importance the body of a blind person assumes as the expression of loss and deprivation, either to reassess the place that this loss occupies in blind peoples' narratives, as to focus on the way dominant representations associate blindness to the presence of a deficit. Therefore, the intention of the text is to rescue the body in blindness by means of a dys-appearance, the appearance of the body given something 'bad', experienced or projected. The cultural narratives through which disabled people's experiences are perceived appear strongly attached to the personal anxieties projected from an 'able-bodied world'. With its specificities, the presented analysis pover the representations of blindness retains a metonymic value to capture how the anguish of corporal transgression partakes in the way other impairments are lived and represented. As a conceptual proposal, the "anguish of corporal transgression" has allowed attributing value to certain suffering experiences in the context of life narratives, and an extra attention to the role that corporal imaginative anxieties can play at the level of cultural representations. In more general terms, it intends to be a contribution to a growing awareness over the ways that bodies and cultures carry 'experiences in the flesh'.

**Keywords:** disability, body-subject, cultural representation

**Słowa kluczowe:** niepełnosprawność, podmiot ucieleśniony, reprezentacje kulturowe

## The 'Appearance' of the Body

Virgílio Ferreira, discussing Michel Foucault's thesis over the recent invention of Man as being the centre of knowledge, stressed that Man was always there, 'he just did not need to know it'. Complementing this idea, the author offers an analogy over which I focus my attention: 'Just as we don't notice an organ before it hurts (...) We do not think about our body while we're healthy. But disease does not invent it (...)' (Ferreira 2002, p. 43). As Vergílio Ferreira's reference suggests, there are events that, like disease, bring our attention to the centrality of the body. But those events do not create by themselves that centrality of the body, which is an inescapable fact of existence. Those events carry the conscience of the embodied character of existence.

That is, precisely, the argument which Drew Leder (1990) holds in *The Absent Body*. This author, departing from an evident phenomenological perspective, seeks to address the absence from the body paradox. Such a paradox departs from the premises that since our bodies are a presence inherent to the living experience they tend to remain in an invisible state throughout almost our entire existences and daily actions. Therefore, during most of the time the body tends not to be brought into conscience, remaining in a kind of unnoticed and un-themed presence. As Leder shows, this absence of the body from the conscience of the subject is only suspended in very peculiar situations: under the scrutiny of other people's attention, during confrontation with one's own corporal image, through a noisy digestion, when in need of urinating, in hunger, in sickness, in pain, etc. That is, the body acquires prominence in experiences forcing it to become present, promoting what the author designates as *heightened body awareness*. My point is that blindness raises the body conscience by means of what Leder designates as *dys-appearance*, a concept referring to one of the ways through which the body becomes conscience. This formulation is explained this way: 'I have used the term "dys-appearance" to refer to the thematization of the body which accompanies dys-function and problematic states' (Leder 1990, p. 86).

Therefore, *dys-appearance* – whose suffix *dys* the author extracts from the Greek, meaning 'bad' – signifies the increase of body conscience by means of an irregularity, of a loss or excess in its functioning. Although in blindness the body presence gains an extra relevance given a series of situations – such as the scrutiny in other people's eyes or the need of alternative ways to accomplish tasks in presence of social organization normative forms –, I intend to emphasize the importance the body of a blind person assumes as the expression of loss and deprivation, either to reassess the place that this loss occupies in blind peoples' narratives, as to focus on the way dominant representations associate blindness to the pres-

ence of a deficit. Therefore, I intend to rescue the body in blindness by means of a *dys-appearance*, the appearance of the body given something 'bad', experienced or projected.

## Disabling Representations of Blindness

Blindness offers itself to the most diverse metaphorical uses, well represented in art and epistemology: in there blindness is frequently evoked as a polyvalent sign to suggest – given the most diverse narratives and ideas – ignorance, closure, despair, darkness, etc. Yet, when we abandon the abyss of philosophical wonderings to detain ourselves in experiences – of blind people – in which blindness is not a nomadic metaphor but an everlasting sign of 'being-in-the-world', we confront ourselves with what Clifford Geertz (1993, p. 29) referred as the hard surfaces of life: the political and economic realities in which men are immersed everywhere. A critical perspective of western societies, informed by the voices of – so designated – disabled people, confronts us with precious socio-political elaborations where the heavy social marginalization to which they are set is denounced. As a matter of fact, the situation of social exclusion and unequal opportunities emerged to my analysis as the most constraining element in the lives of those deprived of vision in Portugal. This is not to defend the insignificance of cultural heritage – values and connotations crystallized throughout the centuries, well present in the repercussions of the word 'blindness' –, but on the contrary, the cultural descriptions of blindness – and of diverse disabilities, ephemeral as they may be – tend to operate as a powerful stigma which, when casting a shadow over real lives, forces them to a dialogue, to an existential duel – frequently agonistic – with the meaning of blindness.

But, if it is true that the most relevant data concern the identification of positive and capacitating perspectives over blindness – amidst those who know it in the flesh in opposition to all fatalist values falling over disabled people – I wish to argue that the narrowness of that approach can lead us to overlook other dimensions of that experience. I have in mind experiences of deprivation and suffering more directly connected to the 'corporal dimensions of blindness'. That is, experiences of deprivation, eminently phenomenological, which we deeply failed to learn through the filter of cultural constructions and social oppression conditions.

To explore the embodied character of experience implies considering the consequences of this simple fact: our bodies are not only objectified with cultural significances, they are also a condition for our existence in the world and in culture (Csordas 1994). Through our bodies we gain access to the world, and to others. Bodies feel pain, pleasure, suffer disease and violence and, as Judith Butler (1993,

p. xi) argues, nothing of this can be demobilized as mere representation. Therefore, I force myself to echo Bryan Turner (1992, p. 41) when he states: 'To believe that the questions of representation are the only legitimate or interesting scientific questions is to adopt a position of idealism towards the body'. These worries set to demobilize, at turns, a body exclusively understood as the object in which culture inscribes itself, and the uneasy relation with the corporal materialism present in the linguistic idealism of post-structuralism – which Judith Butler recognizes as *somatophobic* – nominal standpoint in which discourses are seen as practices that constitute the objects they talk about (Foucault 1969, p. 67). This problem is ironically addressed by Frederik Jameson (1994, p. 46): 'to do away with the last remnants of nature and with the natural as such is surely the secret dream and longing of all contemporary and postcontemporary, postmodern thought'.

The poststructuralist assertion remains: the significance of bodies and their experiences does not halt at the 'frontiers of skin', but is always beyond. The materiality of bodies – and of our own corporality – is always presented to us embedded in a scheme of intelligibility. Therefore, cultural values in debate over the body do not invent it, but participate instead in its 'materialization', the practice of creation and reiteration by which the body matter gains sense (Butler 1993, p. 14-15). Nevertheless, this seems insufficient when trying to recognize the body as 'the vehicle of being in the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1999, p. 122), as Terence Turner synthesizes (1994, p. 36): 'Foucault's body has no flesh'.

## Blindness as Corporal Transgression

To this dimension of cultural suffering, eminently corporal and not completely understandable in its relation with social elements, I call 'anguish of corporal transgression'. The anguish of corporal transgression refers to the vulnerability in existence due to a body that fails us, that transgresses our references in existence, our references in our way of being-in-the-world. So understood, the anguish of corporal transgression leads us to recognizing dimensions of pain, suffering and existential anxiety where – against crystallized neglect – lived body and emotions acquire a noble status in anthropological and sociological reflections.

In my research with blind people, the centrality of the anguish of corporal transgression emerged from – and allowed to understand – two different phenomenological densities. In the first place, that analytical attention welcomes the experience of people which confront, or have confronted somewhere along their lives, with a gradual or sudden loss of sight. In a second place, the anguish of corporal transgression comes into dialogue with existential and corporal anxieties based in the way in which blindness is perceived in the perspective of 'bodies that can see'.

In the first dimension enunciated above we are summoned to recognize suffering experiences that can be phenomenologically associated with blindness. This approach distances itself, right from the start, from the idealism that could be suggested by an approach limiting itself to explore blindness and its implications only as a correlate of socio-historical conditions.

In fact, as have become apparent from many life histories I recollected and also from sharing some of those experiences, the loss of sight, on account of the importance it holds for those who can make use of it, tends to be received as a cataclysm where significance of blindness and significance of life very often dance together, and the notion of tragedy frequently takes shelter: 'after getting blind all I could think was that it was better to have died than becoming like this' (field-note).

But this evasion from idealism does not offer itself to a reinstatement of the 'narrative of personal tragedy' (Oliver 1990). Far from that. In fact, in many of life histories I came into contact with, suffering most commonly associated to the physical dimension of blindness is completely absent. It is so, in a first instance, because in the lives of people who were born blind an experience of loss is not present. There is not a world that has become impoverished in what can be learnt in it; there are no constraints regarding ways of accomplishing; there is no confrontation with things that became impossible to do. There is not, therefore, the experience of a phenomenological rupture, nor a submission to an imperative metamorphosis of the *modus vivendi*. It is obvious that people who have already been born blind have a notion of the gap separating them from those who can see, a gap updated on a day-to-day basis facing a comparison with others, and in the perception that being able to see facilitates the apprehension of elements from reality and execution of some tasks – elements that cannot be separated from the hegemonic ways of social organization. This was precisely what Víctor<sup>1</sup> told me when I asked him how the notion of deprivation implied by blindness, in a dialogue with the fact that he had never been able to see, operated in him:

*Do you feel deprived of something because you cannot see? Of course I do, from such a simple fact as going out to see a movie, look at a picture, look at someone, there are many things from which we are deprived ... But that does not mean that we cannot live so well as if we had them. What do you miss the most? I cannot say what I miss the most because I had never known anything else, I have always been blind, I have never seen. In a way you get used of doing things.*

As a matter of fact, there were many people referring to me they have not had, up to a certain time in their infancy, any notion of being deprived from something. That was the case of Fernanda which, until she went to school, had the habit of playing on the street with other children: 'I only realised I was different when my friends went to school and I went to a blind people's college'. For those who had been

<sup>1</sup> All names of interviewees are fictitious in order to preserve their identities.

born blind, deprivations from blindness are, therefore, known in relation with experiences of those who can see. This implies that effectiveness of a sensory deficit only arises itself in subjects facing some endeavours they are impeded of doing, which, in most cases, allows for blindness to be welcomed without any drama in particular. For this reason, it is frequent to hear from these people statements representing ways of de-dramatization that may seem excessive for those who had seen or can see. I remember a situation happening in an informal environment with two congenital blind associates: "Look, it is worse for me to be fat than to be blind, but obviously I would like to see, I would like to be able to see my children (...)" ; "I only wish I could see so that I could drive, because at the weekend I get left behind without transportation".

This way, the fundamental conclusion to be taken is that in many of individual blindness narratives – from people who have been born blind – the urgency of ideas of loss, of tragedy and misfortune are absent while products of the 'corporeal fact' of blindness. We realise from the start, therefore, that the evidence of blindness by no means is connected, automatically, with the anguish of corporal transgression.

In a second place, the experience of phenomenological rupture is likewise in-existent in many of the biographies in which blindness emerges – as happens with some degenerative pathologies – as a slow dusk of many years. I recall in here the grief felt by the Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges, in what his personal experience had similar with many of the life histories I became acquainted with. The writer refers in several moments of his writings – in direct or indirect way – the blindness that came to him, slowly, until he lost his sight by the age of 55.

In a curious tale, Jorge Luis Borges recalls an encounter with himself in a dream; in there the story is told of how, in a garden bench by a river, a dialogue took place between a Borges in his seventies with his young predecessor. A meeting between different epochs of a life in which prophecies and memories are intertwined, and where blindness is peacefully revealed in the elder's voice: "Yes. When you get to my age, you will have lost your eyesight almost completely. You'll still make out the colour yellow and lights and shadows. Don't worry. Gradual blindness is not a tragedy. It's like a slow summer dusk" (Borges 1998b, p. 14). Although Borges have been able to see throughout much of his life, the possibility to foresee blindness and the softness of its arrival have risen to his surface as factors making of such an advent something not tragic at all, as he reiterates somewhere else:

*My case is not especially dramatic. What is dramatic are those who suddenly lose their sight. In my case, that slow nightfall, that slow loss of sight, began when I began to see. It has continued since 1899 without dramatic moments, a slow nightfall that has lasted more than three quarters of a century. (Borges 1998c, p. 289)*

Not being possible to hold generalizations that erase the particular way as events are taken by subjects, the allusion to congenital, or slowly acquired, states of blindness intends to deny any given biographical presence of corporal transgression anguish in the 'lives of blindness'. In fact, as well suggests Borges' thought, the anguish of corporal transgression takes part, essentially, in narratives of a sudden loss of sight, quick or unexpected. It is fundamentally in these stories that we find deep anguish experiences, which largely escape perspectives informed by the conditions of oppression and exclusion.

As verified, the impact from the loss of sight can be totally absent or can be pretty relative/softened in many situations of gradual blindness. Meanwhile, for cases in which the loss of sight happens with no previous notice, in a sudden way, suffering is less relative, as an event where psychological denotations presently associated to the idea of traumatic experiences are fulfilled. In many of the life histories recollected, a substantial suffering directly connected to corporal dimensions of experience was found, associated to experiences of profound deprivation and living rupture, in which the loss of sight arises in fact, subjectively – a corporal subjectivity –, as a personal cataclysm.

Jorge was studying Portuguese-French at the university when, at age 22 and while travelling in a bus, was hit in the right eye by an elbow, which cause a retina detachment. In consequence he lost sight in his right eye. Jorge tells us about the extreme difficulty he had in dealing with that painful moment, which also raised in a great extent the un-motivation that, for other reasons, he already felt towards his field of studies. This contributed for setting himself away completely from academic life, for many years: 'I was kind of lost, not adapting myself to the situation, missing classes, and some years not even attending school'. Only later, 27 years old, he would regain the will to carry on with his studies. But in the year in which he asked to be reinstated – feeling prepared to begin again –, he started having problems with his left eye. He went to an eye specialist and found out that he had a rare disease. According to what he told me, it consists of pathology with genetic origins resulting in an over-production of anti-bodies by the organism, and those anti-bodies prevent circulation in the retina capillaries. Problems originating in there made him become completely blind at the age of 29. Although it is plausible to assumed that Jorge's genetic condition would have led to a loss of sight in both eyes anyway, the journey of his blindness was stained by two really strange events: being involuntarily hit by an elbow in a bus and the discovery of a rare disease. When asked which had been his most difficult moment, Jorge answered:

*I think it was from age 27 onwards, more or less, there were things I really liked doing, I liked drawing, painting (...) and also I had no knowledge of ACAPO Portuguese Association for the Blind, did not knew anything of Braille! Also, perhaps at the time I was not interested, I was so completely out of myself and was not interested.*



For a long period Jorge was unresponsive to the disaster that came to his life. And if it is true that at the time the absence of knowledge about what blind people can do was upon his shoulders, as well as the agonistic incorporation of prejudices spread about blindness, the most pressing fact was, undoubtedly, the impact from the loss of sight, surely magnified by the pleasure he took from visual arts. That impact was painfully experienced, which led Jorge to shut himself from the world for some time:

*At first it was pretty bad (...) really! Pretty much! I have the habit of saying that I stood for 3 years recycling at home, doing nothing. It was after that, by the end of 1999, that I went for rehabilitation in Lisbon, in Nossa Senhora dos Anjos, rehabilitation, to learn the basis of Braille and some other things. Mobility also! Has a teacher in there used to say we have to be reborn. I think now I'm getting along well, more positive. That is right, when one gets blind one really has to forget a great deal of what one leaves behind and face other perspectives, other doors, and not feeling as a martyr, sacrificed, a poor thing as we use to say, I think we need to go on with things knowing we also have capacities.*

The three years Jorge was at home corresponds to a mourning period that people frequently associate to the unexpected arrival of blindness. Also in the case of Jorge it becomes notorious the key-role that Nossa Senhora dos Anjos Rehabilitation Centre performed in many blind people's life histories to which I gained access. Knowledge about blind people alternative capabilities learnt in there should be underlined, as they learn about subjects as wide as Braille, mobility, personal hygiene, cooking, house cleaning, interpersonal communication, etc. Central for that context is also the mutual support between people, mostly to those emerging from dramatic ruptures in their existences following the loss of sight, and that frequently meet other blind people for the first time in that Centre. This sharing environment between people going through initial rehabilitation – having had, or not, similar loss experiences – is also the sharing of a situation of social marginalization which conforms in all aspects with the notion of *Communitas*, in the terms Van Gennep constructs it. For these reasons, in many life histories I recollected, Nossa Senhora dos Anjos Rehabilitation Centre emerges as a beacon for liminality, a privileged place for people having got blind recently proceed to an existential reconstruction, where the idea of a solidarity territory is forged between people walking the same path, searching for learning processes and an acceptance of blindness that enables them for social inclusion – even if it never happens<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Murphy, an anthropologist having done an interesting ethnography of the social experience of his own paraplegia, found in the concept of liminality developed by Victor Turner, a conceptual construction perfectly adequate to define the ambiguous situation experienced by people with disabilities in the American context. The author points out as people with disabilities find themselves suspended in a liminal phase, not being considered neither ill nor healthy, neither dead or completely alive, being destined to live in a conspicuous situation of marginality and social invisibility (Murphy, 1995, p. 153–154). This interpretation of Robert Murphy seems to me deeply appropriated to

When I spoke with Jorge – in 2001 – three years had gone by since he had got totally blind. He was then dating a blind girl he met in ACAPO. To maintain everyday a capacity and will to overcome that situation – as he assumes and I could testify – depends a lot, in his case, of the use of humour to de-dramatize difficulties. He told me that his objective would be to find a job as a telephone operator/receptionist in a hotel – making use of the fluent French he acquired by having migrated when young –, in order to be able to conclude his degree later, when already proficient in Braille. The person I spoke with was obviously someone that had went through profoundly painful experiences, but had also apparent a reconfiguration of his 'living world', substantiated in the fight for projects taking blindness already for a fact. Furthermore, the success of his adaptation to the painful process which he went through is also expressed in the un-problematic way with which he adapted himself to the use of the white walking-stick, and in the way he found to confront daily expressions and prejudices towards blindness.

Even in stories strongly scarred by painful periods of grief due to the experience of blindness we become acquainted to the capacity people have to personal reconstruction. The irony is to understand that this renewed will for living under new terms frequently has to confront with the fatalist values visiting the social experience of blind people.

Therefore, while exploring the transgression implied in a body that 'fails', and 'steals' references about the means of being in this world, we are far from sanctioning the hegemonic naturalisation of inability and misfortune. What in fact this analytical attention concedes us is the density of experiences that are simultaneously emotional, corporal and social. In my research realizing that has allowed me to learn and value the way by which individuals support, suffer and deal with experiences of radical rupture in their sensorial relation to the world. Thus, attention given to worlds of suffering through corporal experience and their phenomenological modalities take us closer to the words of Arthur Kleinman (1992, p. 191) when he says:

*(...) the challenge is to describe the processual elaboration of the undergoing, the enduring, the bearing of pain (or loss or other tribulation) in the vital flow of intersubjective engagements in a particular local world.*

In that sense, exploring certain experiences through the anguish of corporal transgression aims to evade the danger of ignoring the subjective experiences of

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characterize the present situation of disabled people, and blind people, in the Portuguese context, particularly its conspicuous situation of exclusion and social invisibility. We are, therefore, facing a liminality that, unlike what the concept supposes in the analysis of social passages, is not inter-structural, and not even anti-structural, but which, on the contrary, is structurally defined as the crystallized social marginality disabled people.

corporal suffering through a perspective exclusively centred on the conditions of social marginalisation.

As a wider concept, the anguish of corporal transgression bows itself to the centrality that corporal experiences uphold in the significance of existence, and in the construction of references by which the world acquires sense. This premise, also valid to more trivial experiences, gains further relevance under the light of itineraries marked by limit experiences, experiences of phenomenological references' loss where it becomes dramatically evident how existence draws from foundations given through bodies. Inquiring amongst blind people this has become manifest especially in sudden inflicted blindness narratives. In those cases, the most elucidating enunciation tells us about how death was desired one day. Therefore, the anguish of transgression welcomes subjective experiences of loss and corporal vulnerability, at the same time it upholds that our ontological references are built – and likewise can be lost – through our bodies.

## Thinking Bodies: Empathic Projections of Blindness

*To be a consciousness or rather to be an experience is to hold inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be with them instead of being beside them.* (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. 142)

In the Poem *Musée de Beaux Arts*, W.H. Auden (1994, p. 13) thinks about the possible relations that we can establish with someone's suffering. Particularly, Auden rescues to his verses the *Fall of Icarus*, the painting of Pieter Brueghel. In there the fall and suffering of the bird-man is represented, whose disaster shares the canvas with a farmer that peacefully works on his land, giving his back to the tragedy:

*In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure. (...)* (Auden 2003, p. 88)

The poetic recall of Auden, as suggests David Morris (1998), while dealing with the relation between suffering and indifference, does not criticise the aversion to suffering, understood as a moral failure. The poet's text denotes, on the contrary, mostly the distancing to suffering as a product of a different structural position inevitably occupied by the 'non-sufferer'. Setting from this inevitable distancing emphasised by Auden's text, Morris suggests that subjects' different structural positions may imply a permanent separation in what concerns the suffering

of others. In that sense, as the *Fall of Icarus* suggests, the world of those who suffer is branded by the spectrum of that suffering's 'solitude'.

The path I intend to follow with the *Fall of Icarus* brings us to the body, and to embodied existence, as a structural position permanently separating us from certain suffering experiences. In fact, somatic suffering is only a particular expression of structural positions, necessarily diverse, separating subject's corporal existences. Nevertheless, the suffering theme gains pertinence here, because I intend to deal with the way as blindness is thought about as pain, loss and incapacity from a different structural position. While not denying nuances and idiosyncrasies from all experiences, I will detain myself over the implications of the terms people use to think about blindness as a totally distinct structural position: from bodies that are able to see. This means I will strive to recognise the cultural relevance of the terms through which the otherness of blindness is constituted, as a projection stemming from corporal experiences deeply embedded in vision. I will touch, by those means, a dimension which I consider relevant in the production and perpetuation of hegemonic constructions – fatalist and incapacitating – about blindness.

Such an approach implies diving straight into the embodied experience, recognising the body as a relevant subject of knowledge and producer of culture. The centrality of suffering elaborated here, contrary to the representation of Icarus, is not as much about the solitude of the subject's suffering experience, but about the projection of corporal transgression as a means of 'communicating' with somebody else's suffering. I argue, therefore, that this imaginative and corporal projection draws from the dominating cultural values being held about blindness – largely distinct from experiences and voices of blind people. I hold that hegemonic values associated to blindness are due not only to cultural values and historical legacies – and to a systematic marginalization of disabled people's voices (Martins, 2006) – but also to existential anxieties, corporally informed, which some conditions tend to favour. In this sense I consider that the tragedy associated with blindness is intertwined with the ways people use their bodies to 'simulate' blindness. Conclusions stemming from such an empathic relation are wisely hinted by José Saramago (1995, p. 15), when referring to one of the characters of *Blindness*:

*Like most people, he had often played as a child at pretending to be blind, and, after keeping his eyes closed for five minutes, he had reached the conclusion that blindness, undoubtedly a terrible affliction, might still be relatively bearable if the unfortunate victim had retained sufficient memory, not just of the colours, but also of forms and planes, surfaces and shapes, assuming of course, that this one was not born blind.*

The possibility of 'being in the other' – by way of imaginative projections in which the body itself is transformed into a 'test-tube' for blindness – is what works

in order that hegemonic conceptions of blindness can be, in some measure, the product of anxieties with which it is empathically perceived. I will strive to give relevance to that sensory experimentalism which blindness calls to bodies whose construction in this world is eminently visual. In this epistemological movement, contrary to Cartesian positivist ideals, we consider bodies the ones who think; the ones who produce knowledge and culture through our emotions and visceral anxieties. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999, p. 93) conciliate us with that perspective, being authors who instructively rescued the importance of the body and emotions into to the field of cognitive sciences:

*As embodied imaginative creatures, we never were separated or divorced from reality in the first place. What always made science possible is our embodiment, not our transcendence of it, and our imagination, not our avoidance of it.*

The assertion, wisely held by the authors, that we think from the flesh, and that we give flesh to concepts by the use of metaphors and imagination, leads us precisely to the recognition of corporal imaginative projections as a means for the producing meaning about other structural positions. That is, as a means for empathic relations with other bodies.

As a matter of fact, although the visual centrism in which we live has a strong socio-historical connotation, vision tends to be a crucial sense for those who can make use of it, either in daily activities as in the construction of a surrounding world. As a consequence, the imaginary projection of blindness through a body 'living visually' tends to create something from ideas of sensory prison and inability. In this sense, the anguish of corporal transgression is not only something experienced by someone that becomes blind in a given moment of life, but is also known through empathic corporal transgressions by which blindness is 'brought home'. Lindsay French (1994) refers precisely to this. Starting from ethnographical work conducted in a refugees' camp located in the Cambodia-Thailand border, she seeks to analyse the 'local moral worlds' in which experiences of many former soldiers who were amputated – by anti-personnel mines, widely spread during war years – are inserted. In that analysis effort, French elaborates what I consider an instructive articulation between the undeniable cultural immersion of corporal difference apprehension, and the pertinence with which the assumption of the body as producer of meaning can assume. The author expresses in this sense the eminent place occupied in social interactions with amputated people, personal anxieties being raised through the projection of amputation in our own body:

*We respond viscerally to the spectre of amputation: it challenges our own sense of body integrity, and conjures up the nightmares of our own dismemberment. We feel an instinctive sympathetic identification with the amputee by virtue of our own embodied being, but our identification frightens us; thus we are drawn toward and repelled by amputees simultaneously, both feeling and afraid to feel that we are (or could be) 'just like them'. (French, 1994, p. 73–74)*

Personal anxieties raised by a sympathetic and visceral relation with someone else's body – that spectrum of one's own dismemberment – are precisely what is interesting to notice. The empathic identification with someone else's body is, therefore, one of the mechanisms by which different structural positions engage with each other. And, as Lindsey French tells us regarding amputees, the creation of a visceral identification with someone else's body gives rise to the idea that in fact we apprehend the experience of the other. But that construction, inevitably out of context, is also an elaboration that wrongly persuades us that it is possible to understand, for instance, the corporal terms of an injury experience such as losing a leg. This elaboration of meaning is linked to the 'thinking body' but also to imaginative faculties implicated in 'bringing home' somebody else's corporal experience. Therefore, to allege the anguish of corporal transgression relevance is to uphold the creative possibilities for the 'tragic significance' resulting from empathic imagination about a sensory and phenomenological dissolution as blindness is. In fact, as Lakoff and Johnson tell us, we constantly use imaginative projections to gain access to someone else's experiences:

*A major function of the embodied mind is empathic. From birth we have the capacity to imitate others, to vividly imagine being another person, doing what that person does, experiencing what that person experiences. The capacity for imaginative projection is a vital cognitive faculty. Experimentally, it is a form of 'transcendence'. Through it, one can experience something akin to 'getting out of our bodies' – yet it is very much a bodily capacity (...). There is nothing mystical about it. Is what we do when we imitate. Yet this most common of experiences is a form of 'transcendence', a form of **being in the other**. (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 565, emphasis in the original)*

The role played by anxious imagination of blindness kept insinuating throughout my empirical work: in histories that blind people told me and in the observation of social interactions. Likewise, when talking with others about the theme of my research, frequently blindness raised considerations frequently expressing personal relations with the spectrum of that condition, not being uncommon sentences like: 'I do not know how they can do it', 'I think I would rather kill myself' etc.

This projective imaginations produce anxieties about blindness that not only inform on personal pre-conceptions, but are also mobilized for cultural representations linked to the social reality of blind people. The question is that such an imagination allows capturing something from the eventual impact of a sudden loss of sight but fails, on the other hand, to understanding how someone's life can slowly be reconstructed in new terms without sight; it fails in apprehend the adaptation allowed by blindness, which comes gradually throughout the years; and, finally, it fails in conceiving a world without loss of someone who has already been born blind.

The imaginative incorporation of blindness gives access to the transgression implied in experiences of sudden loss of sight, given immediate connexions established with a visually informed sensory existence. But, precisely for that reason, also tends to sustain a premonition of blindness given through a deficit prism, and through a drastic rupture with an eminently visual world. Blindness, anxiously conceived in the bodies of those who have sight, is an imaginative elaboration in which intractability of corporal experience becomes obvious. In fact, the magnification of the theme of suffering emerges as the most important product of the blindness experiences' 'empathic overcome'. What is produced is, in fact, a partial and erroneous empathic identification. The existential rupture suggested by this empathy – which is also exported to social significances – takes part in the reproduction of prevailing cultural representations, in terms far distant from the complex and heterogeneous experiences that blind people experience in their personal life histories.

Thus, I would argue that the cultural narratives through which disabled people's experiences are perceived appear strongly attached to the personal anxieties projected from an 'able-bodied world'. With its specificities, the analysis here undertaken over the representations of blindness retains a metonymic value to capture how the anguish of corporal transgression partakes in the way other impairments are lived and represented. As a conceptual proposal, the "anguish of corporal transgression" has allowed attributing value to certain suffering experiences in the context of life narratives, and an extra attention to the role that corporal imaginative anxieties can play at the level of cultural representations. In more general terms, it intends to be a contribution to a growing awareness over the ways that bodies and cultures carry 'experiences in the flesh'.

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