

DAGO SCHELIN

VISION AND BLINDNESS IN FILM



BÜCHNER

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Dago Schelin is a Brazilian-German filmmaker/musician. After receiving his B.A. in Languages (Portuguese and English), as well as a B.A. in Popular Music in Brazil, Dago Schelin was awarded DAAD scholarships for his M.A. studies in Media Production and his PhD in Media Studies. Among other publications, Dago Schelin has edited and co-authored a book on the interdisciplinarity of cinema called »Cinema Invites Other Gazes«. Currently, Dago Schelin is a researcher at Philipps-University Marburg.

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Dago Schelin

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Foreword

Aesthetic Dimensions of Blindness and Vision

Dago Schelin's reflections on blindness and vision aim at the central configurations of film, which appears as a medium which can return to pre-modern concepts of vision. Starting from a discussion of pre-Keplerian notions of visuality, Dago Schelin explores these forms in order to find an aesthetic model to research into contemporary film narratives and images. The reference to Ivan Illich, who – coincidentally? – has taught and researched in Marburg as well, provides a deeper understanding of pre-modern concepts of vision, since his idea of an active gaze bridges the historic gap between the modern, technological versions of vision and the older, bodily notions of the eye.

For Dago Schelin, film is the privileged medium to experiment with vision and in each case it is an artistic experiment which picks up science in order to explore the aesthetic dimensions of vision. In his understanding, vision comes very close to blindness, which is not conceptualized as the counterpart to vision, but as its pre-condition. Since there is blindness, we can understand vision. Against this background he investigates into the narratives and visual sketches of a variety of films. Pivotal are two films about blindness and vision, Derek Jarman's *BLUE* (1993) and João Jardim's and Walter Carvalho's *JANELA DA ALMA* (2001), both of which voice the conditions of seeing. Filmmaker and painter Derek Jarman's *BLUE* is a compassionate and sometimes ironic investigation of his becoming blind from the HIV infection, Jardim's and Carvalho's documentary fathoms the conditions of seeing on the basis of blindness. This film and the way it is approached here understands blindness as a primordial way of seeing.

Besides being an academic dissertation and thus the entrance ticket into academic life, Dago Schelin's study is foremost a highly philosophical treatise on the conditions and different aspects of seeing in general. Film figures as the privileged medium to dive into the artistic complexity and expressions of seeing, since images can be delivered and individual perceptions can be documented. In its essayistic and philosophical approach this book transcends the close boundaries of academic research into a wide philosophical treatise of historic and artistic forms of seeing.

Prof. Dr. Angela Krewani

1 Theories of Vision

1.1 Introduction

The macro-question throughout this study encompasses many facets of what it means to see. Dialectics of vision will intersect with the role that film plays in representing sight (and blindness). To introduce the theme, I shall first take the route of visual studies by locating the sense of seeing within a history of regimes, the strongest of which appears to be that of vision (Jay, »Scopic Regimes of Modernity« 28). I shall then present the broader current state of research on visibility. From the various alternatives, I will specify which ones I aim to follow. The reader will soon notice that I take a transdisciplinary approach to my questions, from a historical perspective that ranges from the optics of ancient Greece all the way to current phenomenology-driven film theories. In-between this scope, I shall firstly undertake a historical analysis of the gaze, secondly, make film-specific analyses, then, reflectively return to a more critical approach, but incorporated with the films and filmic concepts of vision.

Throughout my thesis there runs an address to the concept that Ivan Illich labels »active gaze« (»Guarding the Eye« 47–61), a kind of seeing that contrasts to his understanding of present-day visualities. My intention is, starting from Illich, to develop concepts of vision that can be applied to film, more specifically to films that deal with sight and sightlessness. First, the films to be analyzed are taken diegetically, as if existing within themselves, providing meaning through both their character portrayal and their aesthetic representation of the sense of vision (or lack thereof). Then, by approaching film extra-

diegetically, I will bring up and discuss the relationships and dynamics between film and spectator.

Within more modern theories of vision I will rely on Jonathan Crary's groundwork, in which he argues for a historicity that takes into account the roll of the 19th century observer (understood by him as an embodied one) in contrast to prior analogies. From another angle, I approach this embodiment through Laura U. Marks' theory of haptic visuality.

Thus, a critical-historical approach to vision combined with a categorization of phenomenological aspects of watching film, along with the analysis of key films, shall lead me to Jardim and Carvalho's *JANELA DA ALMA* (2001), a movie that epitomizes the epistemological implications of vision within and even beyond film.

In conclusion, I shall propose that there is a link between a pre-Keplerian ontology of vision and the activity of filmmaking, bringing us back to Illich's active gaze. By including the filmmaker in the equation, I intend to show that this intersection makes it possible to explore an uncharted territory: the ontology of vision.

I have found little scholarly material that deals with the ontology of vision and even less that poses a new ontological approach. Current studies in media seem to give preeminence to the epistemological implications of new (digital) technology. Classic film theory remains very focused on the psychoanalytical and formalistic realm. Phenomenologists following Merleau-Ponty give precedence to the body in order to derive meaning. Hence, there still seems to be enough space for exploring the metaphysics of visuality.

My impending claim for vision's ontological value was inspired by the question of what it means for something to be, a naïve ambition triggered by my first readings of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. In it, Heidegger expresses this aspiration right from the outset:

Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word ›being? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*. But are we nowadays

even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression ›Being? Not at all. So first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question. (*Being and Time* 19)

By engaging with Ivan Illich's historical approach to the ethics of the gaze, it seemed a natural step to question the fundamental nature of vision, its connection to the world, and specifically to film. Even though I realize that the term ontology has the potential to behave like Pandora's box, it seems to me the best (and less travelled) route to envision the dynamic relationship between creator, art, and subject. My proposition follows the Platonic school of thought, firstly by daring to reengage with the absurd question of whether rays travel from the eye to the object for vision to occur. I am interested in the relation of these so-called rays to other beings. Visual rays might not be an actual physical phenomenon but may be considered a historical (accidental) feature that manifests in a practice, the result of which »subsists« in a contingent form in the gaze (Morewedge and Avicenna 112).

My point, to be expounded in the first and in the last chapters, is that the relationship between film, filmmaker, and spectator bears traces of another way of being that dates back to pre-Keplerian notions of optics. My most risky claim will be that this tenuous relationship is an ontological remnant of an outdated, outmoded scientific theory, namely, the extramission theory, the dismissal of which might exclude the possibility of experience. In the end, one need not believe in emanations from the eyes, literally, but one should also not discard the entire premise in the name of foolproof science. In doing so, one would forsake its philosophical status. Therefore, I propose that a phenomenology of the gaze in conjunction with a critical approach to histories of visibility – culminating in cinema – will secure a better understanding of this ontology of vision.