

**An Essay about Dialogue: Intertextual Relations between José Saramago, Pieter Bruegel, and Van Gogh / *Ensaio sobre o diálogo: as relações intertextuais entre José Saramago, Pieter Bruegel e Van Gogh***

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**ABSTRACT**

The objective of this article is to show, based on Bakhtin's theory, how the interdiscursive relations between literature and painting are constructed, specifically in a dialogue between the novel *Blindness*, by José Saramago, and other works of art as the painting *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1568), by Pieter Bruegel, a European Renaissance artist in the 16th century, and *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890), by Van Gogh, a Dutch expressionist artist in the late 19th century. We will also analyze how José Saramago's discourse is constituted in his literary writing by the word of others and how this is characterized as "individual dissonance," the author's style, in the midst of heterodiscursivity, which is inherent to the discourse of the novel, as predicted by Bakhtin.

**KEYWORDS:** Dialogism; Heterodiscursivity; José Saramago; Painting; Literature

**RESUMO**

*O objetivo deste artigo é demonstrar, com base na teoria de Bakhtin, como se constroem as relações interdiscursivas entre literatura e pintura, mais especificamente entre um diálogo contido na obra Ensaio sobre a cegueira, de José Saramago, e outras obras de arte, como a pintura A parábola dos cegos (1568), de Pieter Bruegel, artista do Renascimento europeu do século XVI, e a tela Trigo com corvos (1890), de Van Gogh, artista expressionista holandês do final do século XIX. Analisar-se-á o modo como o discurso de José Saramago na prosa literária se constituiria a partir da palavra de outrem e como isso caracterizaria uma "dissonância individual", o estilo do autor, em meio à heterodiscursividade inerente ao discurso do romance, como previsto por Bakhtin.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Dialogismo; Heterodiscursividade; José Saramago; Pintura; Literatura*

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## Introduction

Leave them: they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.

*Mathew 15:14*

The novel *Blindness*<sup>1</sup> was published by the Portuguese writer José Saramago in 1995. The plot is set in an unnamed city in an unknown country at present times. Its population has been infected by some type of virus that afflicts everyone in the city and makes them gradually blind, taking them to the worst human conditions, in which individuals are prevented from water and food.

In his novel, Saramago creates a parable of a consumerist society, which, according to his point of view, uses reason in the wrong way. In the author's view, twentieth century humans have arrived at the top of technological and scientific development, but use their findings to a unique end: to provide the development of capitalism exclusively based on consumerism.

Saramago sees, in his novel, the blindness of modern humanity, one that does not know how to use their reasoning for humanitarian ends that could, in its turn, really change society. With this book, the author suggests that this possibility is limited to a little group and, for that, it is necessary to get to the lowest level of human condition.

The plot starts in an everyday situation, in which a man is waiting in his car for the traffic lights to get green so that he can continue driving. However, when it finally happens, one of the cars does not move. That is when the problem that will affect almost all the characters in the book starts: the sudden white blindness.

Some drivers have already got out of their cars, prepared to push the stranded vehicle to a spot where it will not hold up the traffic, they beat furiously on the closed windows, the man inside turns his head in the direction, first to one side then the other, he is clearly shouting something, to judge by the movements of his mouth he appears to be repeating some words, not one word but three, as turns out to be the case when someone finally manages to open the door, I am blind (SARAMAGO, 1997, p.2).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> TN: *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* has been translated into English as *Blindness* [SARAMAGO, J. *Blindness*. Translated by Giovanni Pontiero. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1997].

<sup>2</sup> For reference, see footnote 1.

From this moment on, the alleged virus spreads in the city as the characters get in touch with each other. This happens to the car thief, the first blind man's wife, the girl with dark glasses, the little boy with the squint, the old man with the black eyepatch, and the ophthalmologist that was treating them.

Little by little, the phenomenon afflicts most part of the population up to the moment when Government authorities decide to isolate the first sick people in an empty mental hospital. It is interesting to note that this measure, effective at first, becomes inefficient as the time goes by in the story, once the whole city is afflicted by the illness, and the mental hospital is not big enough to shelter everybody. Thus, it is not possible to isolate the sick, for almost everyone in the city is infected with the same virus. Saramago, then, suggests the necessity to do it the other way around: instead of splitting people, gathering them. This manages to happen insofar as the group is constituted around the doctor's wife, the only character that did not go blind.

The narrator follows this first group of people, who, with the help of the doctor's wife, manages to bond in the mental hospital and tries to survive the pains and sorrows inside and outside that place.

In *Blindness*, Saramago uses intertextuality as a means to stimulate the dialogue between his text and other texts from literary and artistic tradition. Above all, as it will be analyzed further on, he uses it as a creative element of his own literary artistry and of his discourse through the discourse of the other.

## **1 The Dialogic and Intertextual Discourse in José Saramago's Book**

According to Bakhtin,

[...] every extra-artistic prose discourse-in any of its forms, quotidian, rhetorical, scholarly-cannot fail to be oriented toward the "already uttered," the "already known," the "common opinion" and so forth. The dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of *any* discourse (1981, p.279; emphasis in original).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> BAKHTIN, M. Discourse in the Novel. In: BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp.259-422.

Bakhtin (1981)<sup>4</sup> emphasizes that it is impossible for the discourse to be completely detached from the word of the other. Therefore, in these terms, every word emerges as an answer and echo of an already uttered word. That way, any discourse can be considered fundamental, because the word is always in tension with a prior socially-built meaning. However, Bakhtin also considers the possibility of the word to be individual even though it emerges as a refraction of the social environment in which it is full of meaning, and this capacity of reconstruction of meaning of the word of the other is one of the fundamental roles of the prose artist. According to Bakhtin,

[t]he prose artist elevates the social heteroglossia surrounding objects into an image that has finished contours, an image completely shot through with dialogized overtones; he creates artistically calculated nuances on all the fundamental voices and tones of this heteroglossia (1981, pp.278-279).<sup>5</sup>

According to this point of view, the voice of the prose artist stands out as individual as long as other voices and other discourses are embodied. This voice is born from the contrast with other social voices, such as the narrator's and the character's voices, the political and the social context in which the author lives, history and the textual references he embodies. And this can be confirmed when Bakhtin (1981, p.262)<sup>6</sup> affirms that "[t]he novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized."

Such 'diversity of individual voices' has, in Saramago's book, the intertextual or yet interdiscursive relation as a paradigm, in which more than one way of reading and interpreting the literary text and reality are presented to the reader from the intertext as an opening to the pursuit of the other and the distinct discursive perspectives that the other brings. It is necessary to emphasize that Kristeva's concept of intertextuality is inspired by Bakhtin's ideas. According to the author,

In Bakhtin's work, these two axes, which he calls *dialogue* and *ambivalence* are not clearly distinguished. Yet, what appears as a lack of rigor is in fact an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is

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<sup>4</sup> For reference, see footnote 3.

<sup>5</sup> For reference, see footnote 3.

<sup>6</sup> For reference, see footnote 3.

the absorption and transformation of another (KRISTEVA, 1980, p.66; emphasis in original).<sup>7</sup>

Having said that, it is possible to state that the concept of intertextuality emerges from Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, once the intertext refers to the specific materiality of the text, and dialogism, to the interdiscursive relations, as suggested by Fiorin:

The term intertextuality is reserved just for the cases in which the discursive relation is embodied in texts. This means that intertextuality always presupposes interdiscursivity, but the opposite is not true (2006, p.181).<sup>8</sup>

This way, every intertext is constituted of the dialogic relations of discourse, which are always based on the word of the other; however, not all dialogic relations are intertextual.

The dialogic and intertextual discourse in *Blindness* is used for the momentary interruption of the story, which leads to unfamiliarity in the reader's aesthetic fruition. The plot is interrupted at the moment when the interdiscursive relations are woven and vice-versa. This way, Saramago uses the dialogue with other texts in order to create multiple effects: to keep the reader far from the main plot, to give a new meaning to the word of the other, and to rebuild the past according to his point of view as a reader.

This elicits a new text compared with the first/previous text. However, this discourse uses other procedures, such as omission, word inversion and substitution, which are all present both in the plane of re-elaboration of intertextual references and in the semantic and syntactic plane, with phrase and meaning inversions. Moreover, the overlapping of different historic times can be noted and are analyzed, specifically, in an excerpt of *Blindness*.

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<sup>7</sup> KRISTEVA, J. Word, Dialogue, and Novel. In: KRISTEVA, J. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Edited by Leon Roudiez and translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, pp.64-91.

<sup>8</sup> Text in original: "O termo intertextualidade fica reservado apenas para os casos em que a relação discursiva é materializada em textos. Isso significa que a intertextualidade pressupõe sempre uma interdiscursividade, mas que o contrário não é verdadeiro."

## 2 *The Blind Leading the Blind: Saramago, Bruegel<sup>9</sup> and Matthew*

In the 8th chapter of *Blindness*, the majority of the group that is followed by the reader in the story is already formed: the doctor, the doctor's wife, the girl with dark glasses, the little boy with the squint, and the first blind man's wife. There is only one character to complete the group: the old man with the black eyepatch.

When the old man arrives in the mental hospital, he is taken to the place where the other characters were kept in isolation. Because he was the last one to get blind among those who are already there, he is asked to give them an outline of the main news from the outside world. What resolutions has the government taken in relation to the blindness epidemic? What conclusions have scientists reached? Would there be a cure to white blindness? These are some of the questions the old man with the black eyepatch is asked by his fellow partners.

The old man with the black eyepatch shares with his roommates what he has seen and heard outside the mental hospital up to the moment he got blind. And the narrator starts giving the reader details about how the city and the people are reacting to the increasing epidemic of blindness.

At a certain point, the narrator starts talking about the government's resolution to make families take care of their own blind relatives at home, once there is no place for all of them in the mental hospital. At this moment, the narrator says:

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 and dying together (SARAMAGO, 1997, p.123).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "The greatest of the Flemish sixteenth-century masters of 'genre' was Pieter Bruegel, the Elder (1525?-69). We know little of his life, except that he had been to Italy, like so many northern artists of his time, and that he lived and worked in Antwerp and Brussels, where he painted most of his pictures in the fifteen-sixties [...]" (GOMBRICH, 1995, p.280). [GOMBRICH, E. H. *The Story of Art*. 16. ed. London: Phaidon Press, 1995].

<sup>10</sup> For reference, see footnote 1.

In this excerpt, the narrator calls attention to the fact that it is impossible for blind people to take care of other blind people and for the distress that this situation would cause. To make this idea clear, he refers to a painting, saying that the characters' fate would be the same as the fate of those blind people portrayed in the picture. However, it would be rather impossible for a lay reader to know to which painting the narrator is making reference.

Readers either have to know about that very painting or need to stop reading Saramago's novels in order to search, among other masterpieces in the History of Art, for paintings that are related to blind people.

This excerpt concerns the painting *The Blind Leading the Blind*, 1568, (Appendix A), by the Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel. The artist is famous for having explored the "genre painting." Inspired by scenes of everyday life of peasants and simple, poor people's lives, trying to portray the burlesque life at work and during the villagers' festivities, Bruegel is considered one of the greatest artists in this matter.<sup>11</sup>

When Saramago brings the condition of blind characters in his novel and the blind people in Bruegel's painting together with the utterance "otherwise they would meet the same fate as the blind people in the painting, walking together, falling together and dying together" (1997, p.123),<sup>12</sup> the narrator, as he uses the alternative conjunctive adverb 'otherwise,' momentarily suspends the story that is being told to insert another story, the one featured in Bruegel's work.

In this sense, the narrator uses the dialogical (interdiscursive) discourse, intertextualized, in an original manner, because he interrupts all of the characters' actions to overlap the plot of another work, by another author, at another time and in another setting.

The narrator seems to present, with 'otherwise,' the example that history is cyclical and that it can be repeated. He introduces this possibility of recurrence to his characters and, indirectly, to the reader. The characters either have to be looked after by someone that is able to see or repeat the tragic historical example of the characters of those painting. However, it is important to note that the intertextual and interdiscursive reference is as meaningful as the play with words. In this literary discourse, the story only branches off when the syntactic and semantic construction introduced by the

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<sup>11</sup> For reference, see footnote 9.

<sup>12</sup> For reference, see footnote 1.

conjunctive adverb ‘otherwise’ is used, which presents the reader with another possibility, another way of reading and interpreting Saramago’s text based on Bruegel’s work. This reading effect is possible because of the literary discourse that is based on intertextuality. And this, on its turn, is extremely important, for it is the propellant of this aesthetic effect, able to provide readers with new ways to interpret tradition (Bruegel) and contemporaneity (Saramago). ‘Otherwise’ is used not only to insert and re-elaborate another text of tradition but also to tell another story, one that could be repeated with the characters of *Blindness* or not.

Auerbach (1991)<sup>13</sup> analyzes Homer’s *Odyssey*, specifically the moment when Ulysses returns home and Eurycleia recognizes him because of a scar on his thigh. Auerbach says that the technique of narrative retardation serves to fit one story into another through memory. By the time the governess discovers the scar on Ulysses’ thigh, the narration of the events being told up to that point is interrupted because the story of the scar itself starts to be told: it occurred during a boar hunt, when Ulysses was young. Auerbach shows that the rupture of the narrative linearity produces an effect of suspense and illuminates the present events that are being told.

If, according to Auerbach (1991),<sup>14</sup> Homer used memory to break the narrative linearity and insert another story through retardation, Saramago used intertextuality as memory to arrange the momentary suspension of storytelling.

As we have already seen, when the narrator vaguely talks about the blind people in the painting, he starts telling another story even though it is similar to his own. This is a story written at another time, in another language – painting – and by another author. The intertextual reference to Bruegel’s work should be not only the recognition of the artist’s painting in Saramago’s text, but also the contribution to the construction of another meaning, both in the painting and in the novel.

Novel and painting tell contemporary men that everyone is bound together in fate – being blind – and that they are not able to realize the cyclical movement in the story, which takes them to self-destruction. Saramago uses intertextuality in order to promote the suspension of his own story to make the reader think about the topics that are discussed in it. This hiatus is made through the dialogue with another language – in

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<sup>13</sup> AUERBACH. E. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> For reference, see footnote 13.



this case, painting – but it also gives the reader other possibilities of reading and interpreting the text.

These little unfoldings create micro-stories, which dialogue mainly with the main plot. By using this discursive path, the author overlaps distinct historical moments. As such, both sixteenth and twentieth centuries appear side by side. Bruegel's and Saramago's blind people seem to have the same fate in spite of the time distance between them. They are two similar stories told in different times. The story is repeated, though not similarly, for the contexts of production in the painting and the novel are unique.

In its turn, Bruegel's painting may also be related to the biblical excerpt of the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus would refer to Pharisees as blind people that were guiding other blind people: "Leave them: they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15:14).<sup>15</sup> This hypothesis must be considered, once the biblical passage seems to be the reference of the image built in the painting of the Dutch artist. However, it is not possible to claim that Bruegel's painting establishes an intertextual relation with the biblical passage. Yet, if this hypothesis is true, it may be claimed that Saramago's literary discourse uses a double image, which would be the interpretation of at least two texts: the painting and the bible.

This way, Saramago's micro-story is constituted as the interpretation of interpretation. That is to say that Saramago interprets Bruegel's painting, which would be an interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew. Thus, Saramago's text shows that reading can be partial and reinterpreted, that is, meanings can change as the past is reconstructed and, according to this view, would never be definitely over.

It is important to mention that the reference to Bruegel's painting by Saramago's narrator is nearly imperceptible to the reader with no previous art knowledge about the 16th century and even to the inattentive reader who, though an art expert as he may be, can read it and not pay attention to the reference. This is evident in the evasive reference of the 'blind people in the painting,' which may prompt questions, such as "Which blind people?" "Which painting?" Afterwards, some more specific evidence is revealed: "walking together, falling together and dying together" (SARAMAGO, 1997, p.123).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> NOVO Testamento trilingue: grego, português e inglês [*Trilingual New Testament: Greek, Portuguese, and English*]. Edited by Luis A. T. Sayão. São Paulo: Vida Nova, 1998, p.44.

<sup>16</sup> For reference, see footnote 1.

However, these elements are still not enough to reveal, in the first reading, the origin of the image. This way, it is always necessary to go back to the text, to re-visit it, to re-read it in order to find other texts in it. This means that reading would also be a process that is always open to multiple possibilities.

According to Vološinov,

The author's utterance, in incorporating the other utterance, brings into play syntactic, stylistic, and compositional norms for its partial assimilation—that is, its adaptation to the syntactic, compositional, and stylistic design of the author's utterance, while preserving (if only in rudimentary form) the initial autonomy (in syntactic, compositional, and stylistic terms) of the reported utterance, which otherwise could not be grasped in full (1986, p.116).<sup>17</sup>

When referring to the painting, the utterance of Saramago's narrator starts with “otherwise,” as it has been stated. The adverb branches off the story, taking in another utterance, though in a very rudimentary form, as it has been mentioned by Vološinov. Bruegel's painting must be considered an utterance, once it is full of meaning and value given by the artist in his time, though it is fragmented in the novel excerpt. According to this view, it is possible to see in the utterance not only a set of written or spoken words, but a set of meanings produced by a subject in his social dialogue with other voices.

According to Flores (2009, p.100), whose ideas are based on Bakhtin's theory and who ends up reassuring what has been discussed in this article, the utterance is constituted ideologically and socially, verbally and extraverbally, but these features “do not eliminate the possibility for the utterance to be materialized only by non-verbal elements (e.g. a gesture, a facial expression, a painting), once it has a subject, an evaluative expression.”<sup>18</sup> As such, it is important to say that Bruegel's painting, treated rudimentarily by Saramago, is constituted as an utterance, once it expresses the meaning given by a subject in his relation with the world – in this case, Bruegel, a reader of the Gospel of Matthew. And this is utterly accepted if Bakhtin's (1984, p.183)<sup>19</sup> words are

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<sup>17</sup> VOLOŠINOV, V. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

<sup>18</sup> Text in original: “não eliminam a possibilidade de o enunciado materializar-se apenas por elementos não-verbais (por exemplo, um gesto, uma expressão facial, uma obra de arte), desde que tenha sujeito, expressão avaliativa.”

<sup>19</sup> BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated and edited by Caryl Emerson. University of Minnesota: Minneapolis, 1984. p.183.

considered, when he says that “the entire life of language, in any area of its use (in everyday life, in business, scholarship, art, and so forth), is permeated with dialogic relationships.” This means that any and every discourse is produced in dialogism, which is inherent to every utterance process characterized by the social relationships that different subjects establish in time.

We understand that Saramago, who knows that discourse is dynamic, uses intertextuality as an opening element to the other and as an element of interruption of the literary discourse in order to provide the reader with an experience of thinking, depending on his cultural and previous knowledge. We know that multilingualism is inherent to the novel as established by Bakhtin, and this includes plenty of social and historical voices, as well as the dialogic and meaning relationships between languages. This way, there is nothing new in the intertextual (dialogic) relationship between Saramago’s novels and other verbal and non-verbal texts, but in the effect that this causes in the reader’s fruition, which is experienced mainly when the main plot is interrupted and micro-stories are inserted.

It is important not to confuse this aesthetic procedure with literary digression. According to Ceia (2013),<sup>20</sup> digression, in its first definition, is a “secondary discourse that focuses on a topic that is different from the one being discussed.” In Saramago’s intertextual discourse, the movement of digressing from the main plot does not happen because of a change of themes, but because of, first and foremost, the unfolding and development of the theme by the narrator. The theme remains the same; change occurs in time and space. Blindness afflicts both Saramago’s and Bruegel’s characters. The theme is the same in both; change occurs in the context. The narrator does not change the focus of the narrative to muse about philosophical, political or economic issues of his time. He opens an intertextual gap that dialogues with his text at the same time it temporarily interrupts the events that are being told to a greater or smaller extent. In the excerpt previously analyzed, the interruption was brief; however, it can also be long. The paths taken by Saramago’s discourses can be longer or shorter; depending on the situation, they can be more or less interrupted.

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<sup>20</sup> Text in original: “discurso secundário que se concentra num assunto diferente daquele que está a ser tratado.”

### 3 José Saramago and Van Gogh in a Wheatfield

After the narrator describes in detail the situation outside the mental hospital, the old man with the black eyepatch speaks again. He talks with the doctor about the use of the eyepatch instead of a glass eye. After this brief discussion, he decides to suggest a kind of game for everyone to play:

An idea has just occurred to me, said the old man with the black eyepatch, let's play a game to pass the time, How can we play a game if we cannot see what we are playing, asked the wife of the first blind man, Well, not a game exactly, each of us must say what we saw at the moment we blind (SARAMAGO, 1997, p.127).<sup>21</sup>

This game starts with memory activation, once everyone would have to say what they were doing at the time they went blind. The old man with the black eyepatch starts the game:

Give us an example, said the doctor, Certainly, replied the old man with the black eyepatch, I went blind when I was looking at my blind eye, What do you mean, it's very simple, I felt as if the inside of empty orbit were inflamed and I removed the patch to satisfy my curiosity and I just moment I went blind (SARAMAGO, 1997, p.127).<sup>22</sup>

Thus, everyone starts saying what they were doing at the moment they went blind. In most of this passage, the narrative uses the characters' memory: they remember what they had seen and tell it to the others; then, some unknown voice interrupts and starts describing parts of paintings. This specific character was in a museum the moment he went blind. The descriptions of the paintings are better than other people's personal memories because they bring other meanings that are found in the very paintings. A great number of characters report everyday situations when they were afflicted with blindness. The unknown voice, on its turn, is intertextual and full of meaning. He opens the novel's main narrative to other narratives (those about the paintings themselves and their artists) by quoting, for example, Van Gogh:

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<sup>21</sup> For reference, see footnote 1.

<sup>22</sup> For reference, see footnote 1.

The last thing I saw was a painting, A painting, repeated the old man with the black eyepatch, and where was this painting, I had gone to museum, it was a picture of cornfield with crows and cypress trees and a sun that gave the impression of having been made up of the fragments of the others suns, Sounds like a Dutch painter (SARAMAGO, 1997, pp.128-129).<sup>23</sup>

Different from the personal and non-transferable memory of every single character that was there, the unknown character compares his experience, which is also personal, to a dialogic, group scope (in Bakhtin's words) or to an intertextual level (in Kristeva's words) about the human experience. The painting brings more than just the character's point of view about the moment of his going blind, for it comes to the fore verbally redesigned, including its symbolic meaning. Another important feature to be considered is again the uncertainty in relation to references, making the reader responsible for the mission of producing meaning. The sentence "[it] sounds like a Dutch painter" (SARAMAGO, 1997, pp.128-129)<sup>24</sup> used by the old man with the black eyepatch can be not enough to claim that the painting was Van Gogh's. What helps to make it clear that this is the right artist is the description of the painting in the story: the cornfield, the sun, the crows and the cypress trees (Appendix B). And this interpretation is only possible if the reader has the previous knowledge about the Dutch artist's work. Besides, the reference to Van Gogh brings other questions to the critical reader: Why is there this reference to Van Gogh and to his painting exactly? What relation can the painting have with the facts told by the characters in *Blindness*? Is it just a comment? What meaning can be given to the painting in Saramago's novel?

It is interesting to notice that the speech of the unknown character makes a kind of symbiosis with two or more paintings of Van Gogh, belonging to the same period in the artist's work, which coincides with the previous years before the artist's death in Arles, France. As such, the painting aforementioned would pertain to the most serious phase of the disease that afflicted Van Gogh mentally. The paintings predict the disaster in the artist's personal life. Most of them were painted in 1889, and the artist's death was in 1890: "The agony lasted for another fourteen months. In July 1890, Van Gogh put an end to his life" (GOMBRICH, 1995, p.412).<sup>25</sup> The reference to these paintings

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<sup>23</sup> For reference, see footnote 1.

<sup>24</sup> For reference, see footnote 1.

<sup>25</sup> For reference, see footnote 9.

and to others by different artists seems to gradually produce a single, unique meaning, called the announced tragedy. This occurs ironically at the moment when the group is strengthened with the arrival of the old man with the black eyepatch. Thus, the dialogue with Van Gogh's work is not gratuitous: it seems to contribute to the novel's construction of meaning, which also predicts the tragic fate of the characters isolated in the mental hospital. In a certain way, madness also afflicts them in the scarcity of food and water, the sexual harassment experienced by the doctor's wife, and the scatology and decay of the corpses of the people that started dying in that place.

Saramago's intertextual discourse, when it interacts, dialogues with other arts, creates a double of the literary language, once it verbally redesigns other texts in other languages, which are also, in a certain way, the re-elaboration of reality. Therefore, as people start reminiscing, a suggestion given by the old man with the black eyepatch, the voice of the unknown character works as a kind of oracle that would announce, through its artistic memories, the (re)cognition of the past and the prediction of future events reserved to every character in *Blindness*.

According to Paixão (2014),<sup>26</sup> "memory is understood not only as the acquisition of some specific knowledge, but also as the activator of imagination and capacities of interpretation, problematization and reinvention, which work on what is recalled by the subject." As such, by activating the character's memory with fragments of paintings, Saramago works with his own abilities to interpret, problematize and reinvent these texts (paintings). He also activates the reader's similar capacities in relation to his work and the re-signification of these images. Based on his personal experience, the reader can imagine these pieces as isolated images in his discourse. He can even relate them to their original versions (intertextuality) and ultimately problematize them in the novel's plot and in the context in which it is produced. The experience of fruition is personal and non-transferable. However, there can be multiple possibilities of meaning to be produced from Saramago's text towards other texts, towards more than one reading possibility to be considered by the reader.

Many textual and extra-textual conflicting universes converge when Bruegel's and Van Gogh's paintings are put together, for example. The moment when the

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<sup>26</sup> Text in original: "a memória é entendida como retenção de um dado conhecimento, mas também como activadora da imaginação e das capacidades de interpretação, problematização e reinvenção, as quais actuam sobre o que é recordado pelo sujeito."

paintings were produced, the meaning of these works when they became famous and the meaning of these paintings to Saramago when his novel was written are some of these elements.

## Considerations

When referring to *The Blind Leading the Blind* and to *A Wheatfield with Cypresses* and/or *Wheatfield with Crows*, Saramago predicts the end of a cycle, a phase, a historical process. This converges either to the fate of Bruegel's characters, who, because they are blind, could all fall into a grave, or to the own fate of the artist (Van Gogh), who would not be able to face reality. And everything dialogues with the tragedy of the characters in the novel and with the historical context that Saramago lives, whose alienation and bureaucracy in life through the means of production and consumption of contemporariness could make human beings blind, moving towards the depletion of natural resources and his own death.<sup>27</sup> What also draws out attention is the compositional aspect of the painting that contributes to the production of this meaning, such as its light and hot colors (like yellow and orange), the outlined perspective whose paths lead characters (Bruegel's blind people) to the grave and the encounter with death, the spectator of Van Gogh's painting as well as the crows that face the uncertainty set in the darkness of the background night, and still the paths that bifurcate, leading people to the need to make choices before the uncertainties of life.

In short, José Saramago's voice as a fiction writer echoes from his choices as a reader when he combines other voices, other discourses, other languages in his novel, which may contribute or not to the production of a common meaning of his text with other texts. This meaning, in this view, can and should only be pursued and interpreted by the reader of his novels.

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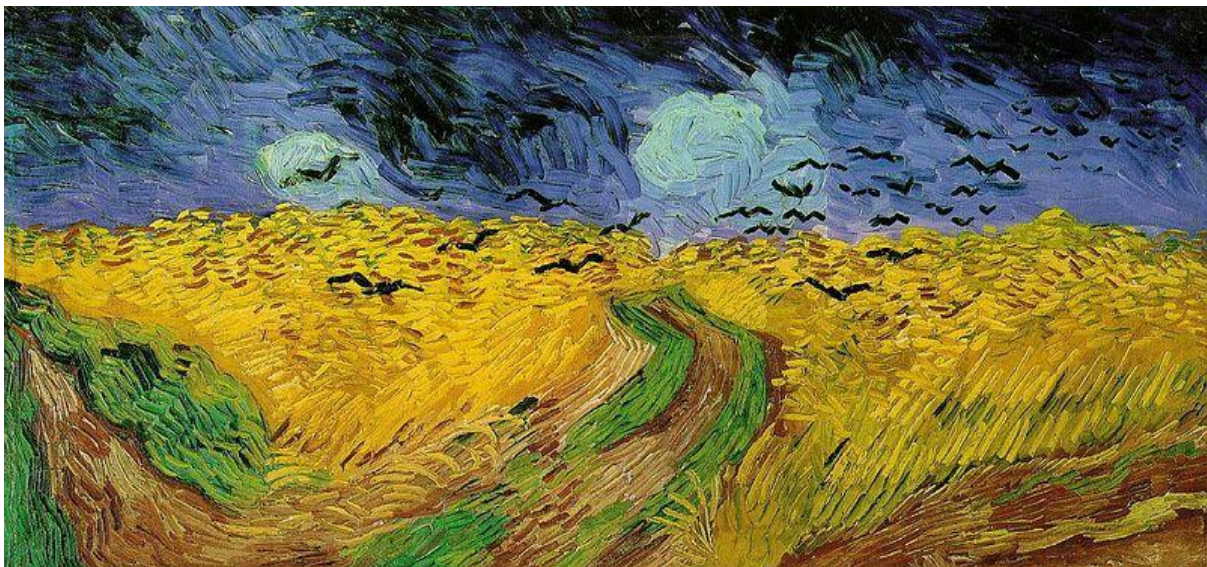
<sup>27</sup> EAGLETON, T. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1997. In this book, Eagleton discusses the influences of the system of production and consumption of the capitalist society in the form and content of literary works.

APPENDIX A



*The Blind Leading the Blind*, Pieter Bruegel, the Elder, 1568

APPENDIX B



*Wheatfield with Crows*, Van Gogh, 1890.



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