

Dago Schelin: Vision and Blindness in Film

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Dago Schelin's *Vision and Blindness in Film* not only has a slightly misleading title, but is quite a challenging read. Misleading in that the analysis of vision and blindness depicted in films takes up only 10% of his book if you ignore his detailed analysis of the Brazilian documentary about blindness, *Janela da Alma* (2001). Challenging in that it reflects Schelin's transdisciplinary approach to film studies evoking film theorists such as Vivian Sobchack as well as philosophers from Aristotle through René Descartes to Michel Foucault und Jacques Derrida, but he's most heavily indebted to Ivan Illich. Although there is an underlying historical aspect, ultimately, it is a highly academic, philosophical work, which can be summarized thus: seeing is learned.

Schelin first reviews the way we have understood vision over the centuries with Johannes Kepler's optical revolution ushering in a modernist view of seeing whereby the eye receives information passively in contrast to the pre-renaissance idea of the eyes projecting rays actively to investigate the world. Seeing was in a sense tactile. Post Kepler, Schelin cites the work of Jonathan Crary who postulates that modern thinkers like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Arthur Schopenhauer focussed on "the physiological basis of the senses, thereby turning visual perception into corporal subjectivity [...]. [In their view,] the human body becomes an active producer of the optical

experience" (p.35), which has led to the concept of the embodied viewer.

His next section categorizes types of vision as active, passive, haptic and blind. Passive being a scanning gaze, a tourist eye, a rational vision, which Descartes describes as being unclouded, attentive, without imagination. Modern theorists of vision believe seeing is active, meaning participative as we engage with the medium, "instead of a gaze which consumes images, a gaze which is pleasurable yet not voyeuristic, a contemplative look" (p.77).

Before the advent of modernity, touch was considered the primary sense. Here, touching meant believing. Cinema today is thought of as a watching experience. Schelin subscribes to Laura Marks' theory of 'haptic visuality', a visuality that functions like the sense of touch by triggering physical memories of smell, touch, and taste. He also follows Sobchack's understanding, that all five senses, especially hearing, are interconnected, deriving meaning in combination.

Blind vision refers to what a physiologically blind person 'sees' and can even reproduce in visual media. "Vivacity happens in the mind, triggered by memory or perception" (p.75), the dominant sense being the auditory. Schelin concludes, that "[i]f vision is located in the brain and seeing means being able to create mental visual presentations, then blindness is not necessarily the same as not being able to see" (p.69).

The weakest section in the book is Schelin's overview of how blindness is portrayed in film. To be fair, he does state that his "main objective is to show the exchange between the attained theoretical categorization, the films, and the new questions the films themselves raise" (p.79), so he concentrates on the documentary *Janela da Alma*, as it "epitomizes the essence of the appointed theories" (p.79). He feels that although there are many films dealing with blindness, few deal with seeing. But I would argue that the point of view shot is very much concerned with seeing or what the subject is perceiving. Other than a cursory analysis of how blind people are used in film as a vehicle in the transference of extreme sensation to the audience – usually as their blindness heightens other senses as in *A Patch of Blue* (1965), or as a plot point to place someone in peril (*Wait until Dark* [1967]), or to create a hero (*Daredevil* [2003]) – he doesn't have much to say.

It is true *Janela da Alma* illustrates many of the points he wants to make. The documentary, a mediation on blindness, invisibility and limits of vision, directed by João Jardim and Walter Carvalho, is shot in a talking heads style: blind, or visually impaired,

Brazilian photographers, actresses, artists and even Wim Wenders are interviewed. The sequences between the interviews are deliberately out of focus as if to reproduce myopic vision. And of course, there are the musings of the interviewees themselves regarding their experience of vision/blindness, for example, Wenders prefers to wear glasses because it frames and limits what he sees, or Eugen Bavcar, a blind photographer, who attaches bells to his subjects to enable him to find them for his camera.

Schelin does make his case that seeing is learned, imperceptibly conditioned "by culture, by the physical world, by belief" (p.128) but this is not his own idea. The original aspect of this work is his notion, that you can build what he names a *bridge* between an active, almost pre-Keplerian gaze and film-making.

This book is primarily a philosophical book. From its title, I would have expected a better overview of how sight and blindness are depicted in films and more on the neurology of vision, but it does pose some interesting questions about what seeing is and what seeing means.

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