

Blindness: Mapping the Invisible

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Abstract

How do visually impaired people *produce* a map? What does spatial invisibility *mean*? Can blindness suggest a new way to 'look' and map the invisible? Starting from an original concept of 'mapping', intended as a creative investigation and a practice of space, this article addresses the question of vision and (in)visibility in a political and artistic milieu. Firstly, it *brings to light* the results of some interviews at the Royal National Institute of Blind People in London. By researching this particular approach to the human habitat, it tries to depict the 'uncanny' resources that constitute a 'vision beyond sight'. Secondly, it shows the social effects of our metaphorical 'blindness'. Through the study of the indigenous uprising in the Indian Red Corridor, it demonstrates the human and environmental costs of what Paul Virilio calls the 'production of disappearance'. The production of space, indeed, entails a struggle around geopolitical, economical, ethnical and sexual *thresholds of vision*. Finally, in the conclusion, this short essay puts into play these field analyses to *map* a new kind of vision: a 'critical eye' able to indicate a way through the forest of the *state of exception*.

Keywords: Blindness, mapping, invisibility, exception, threshold.

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Ceguera: mirar lo invisible

Resumen

¿Cómo hacen las personas con discapacidad visual para ‘recrear’ su alrededor? ¿Qué significa ‘invisibilidad espacial’? ¿De qué manera la ceguera nos ofrece una nueva forma de ‘mirar lo invisible’? A partir de un concepto original de ‘mapear’, entendido como una práctica y una investigación creativa del espacio, este artículo se interroga sobre la cuestión de la visión y de la (in)visibilidad en un marco artístico y político. En primer lugar, el artículo *saca a la luz* los resultados de algunas entrevistas hechas en el Royal National Institute of Blind People de Londres. A través de una investigación sobre esta particular relación con el hábitat humano, intenta dar una imagen de los extraordinarios recursos que trae aparejados el tener una ‘visión más allá de la vista’. En segundo lugar, muestra las consecuencias sociales de nuestra metafórica ‘ceguera’. Mediante el estudio de la revuelta indígena en Franja Roja, en el Este de la India, demuestra los costos humanos y ambientales de lo que Paul Virilio llama la ‘producción de desaparición’. La construcción del espacio, en efecto, implica una lucha sobre los límites geopolíticos, económicos, étnicos y sexuales de la visión. Finalmente, en la conclusión, este breve ensayo pone en juego estos análisis para ‘mapear’ un nuevo tipo de visión: un ‘ojo crítico’ capaz de indicar una salida a través de nuestro *estado de excepción*.

Palabras clave: ceguera, mapear, invisibilidad, excepción, límite.



Figure 1. *Blind Massage Project* (Carney, 2007)
Source: Taken from <http://petermcarney.com/blind/?cat=42>

[Another] goal of the critique is to raise the level of debate and engagement in the cultural and artistic sectors – the vital media of social expression – where a narcissistic blindness to the violence of current conditions is still the norm. Yet a further realm that urgently needs exploration is the matrix of interlinguistic exchange and the crisscrossing vectors of translation, beyond the common currency of imperial English. Other possible worlds will only be articulated by a multitude of tongues, speaking the relations of the scales in their own words and in the words of strangers: intimate, urban, national, continental, global, all overspilling their idiosyncratic dictions. Geopoetics is the revelry of Babel.
(Holmes, 2008)

Introduction

O Cego ergueu as mãos diante dos olhos, moveu-as, Nada, é como se estivesse no meio de um nevoeiro, é como se tivesse caído num mar de leite [...].
José Saramago, *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*

*I met people who were born blind. Who had never seen.
I asked them what their image of beauty was.
Green is beautiful. Because every time I like something, I'm told it's green.
Grass is green, trees, leaves, nature too... I like to dress in green.*
Sophie Calle, *The blind*, 1986: Excerpts

The project of the video '*Blindness: Mapping the Invisible*' departs from three basic questions: how do visually impaired people produce a map? What does 'spatial invisibility' mean? Can blindness suggest a new way to 'look' and map the 'invisible'? 'Mapping' is intended here as an ongoing investigation of lines, territories and forces which unfolds virtualities and connections apt to perform and actualize new *agencements*. This practice of 'unbelonging location' is constantly in the process of being formed, deconstructed and re-arranged. By showing the social milieux and the mental emplacements in new ways, the agency of mapping engages also a change in perceptual semiotics, pregnant with philosophical significance and political potential (Corner, 1999).¹ The links between visibility, space and subjectivity foster the visual dimension of geography—a theory of navigational principles and an arena of topographical layers of meaning. Consequently, if we understand visual culture as a critical and creative activity that opens up a fan of multiform productions and power relations, *blindness*—as the alleged negative of vision—may offer us an *unheimliche* insight into the ambivalent world of visualities. Moreover, as we live in an age of rushing images, the slow and careful pace of a blind is the pre-eminent condition for mapping a radical shift in our social and spacial perception. Starting from these premises, the following commentary of the

video “Blindness: Mapping the Invisible” (produced by the Author, 2011. Available at Goldsmiths University) sets the above-cited problematics in three different fields of reference.

The video² is composed by some introductory clips from Meirelles’ film, *Blindness*, an interview with two visually impaired people recorded at the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), parts of Avi Lewis’ interview with the Indian writer and political activist Arundhati Roy on Al Jazeera’s program, *Fault Lines*³, and the conclusion of Jorge Luis Borges’ lecture, *La ceguera* (Blindness).⁴ Each one of these parts designates an embodied problematic, a place or critical activity that charts a geophilosophy of mapping beyond the mainstream vision. Following the illuminating example of Saramago’s *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (1995), the issues of blindness, (in) visibility and space are played out both on an actual and a metaphorical level. This amounts to saying that, in order to disclose the knowledge concealed in them, we have to drift away from our traditional perceptions and undertake the never-ending *παίδεία* of mapping a new vision.

The View of the Blind

Chegara mesmo ao ponto de pensar que a escuridão em que os cegos viviam não era, afinal, senão a simples ausência da luz, que o que chamamos cegueira era algo que se limitava a cobrir a aparência dos seres e das coisas, deixando-os intactos por trás do seu véu negro.
José Saramago, *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*

Fish fascinate me. I can't say why. They don't make any noise, they're nothing, I don't really care about them. It's their evolution in the water that pleases me, the idea that they are not connected to anything. Sometimes, I find myself standing for minutes at a time in front of an aquarium. Standing like an imbecile. Because it's beautiful, that's all.
Sophie Calle, *The blind*, 1986: excerpts

Is there a vision beyond sight? The supremacy of sight over the other senses is one of the most characteristic and persistent traits of Western culture (Curi, 2004). Our languages, our mind-sets, our every-day lives and our art testify this fact. In Ancient Greece the term *ιδέα*—which refers to the verb *ιδείν* (‘to see’)—was the linchpin of epistemology. Likewise, the term *θεωρία* (from *θέα*, ‘sight’, and *οράο*, ‘to see’) denominates a *vision*, an organized structure of ideas. In Descartes, clearness and distinctness—two attributes of light—are the criteria of evidence. The Husserlian *Wesensschau* (‘vision of the essences’) is key to the phenomenological system. Nonetheless, the power of vision is never univocal nor wielded in a sole direction. Conversely, this power is constitutively twofold: seeing is inseparable from non-seeing, light from darkness, strength from weakness, *sight from blindness*.

If we connect this historico-cultural *panorama* with the interviews at the RNIB and the concept of mapping, we will notice that this fluctuation prompts several important socio-spatial thoughts. Visually impaired people have to compensate their partial or total lack of visual acuity with a range of alternative cues. They map their environment and the obstacles to their movement by relying heavily on audio and tactile signals, haptic maps and other wayfinding devices.⁵ While sighted people are constantly bombarded with an overwhelming amount of visual information, visually impaired people have a peculiar spatial awareness (e.g. texture of the floor, height of the ceiling, echo and reverberation around them) and relate to the world in more temporal terms. As Stephen Hallett points out, this set of strategies configures a very different psychological geography that may reveal innovative resources in solving the world’s problems.

Mr. Hallett chairs a UK-based charity called China Vision and is the director of 'Enabling the Disabled', a project run jointly with a local NGO, the Beijing One plus One Centre (British Embassy Beijing, s. f.). They coordinate a number of activities and enterprises — e.g. radio broadcasting, special education and training visually impaired photographers — which improve the condition and the rights of disabled people.⁶ In the interview, Stephen Hallett talks about Li Ning, one of the trainees involved in the photography project 'Non-Visual Photography'. Even though she is born blind, her pictures show a highly visual response. She has certain 'feeling' of the colour blue and a spatial awareness that emphasizes with the environment by dint of a profound sensitivity — a vision beyond sight conveyed through the language of images. Thanks to this 'universal feeling', she manages to transcend some of the clichés of the sighted world, yet hovering *in* the immanence of vision. As emerges from the interviews, blind people constantly process an internal mapping that is related to a mental cartography. *The production of space* within their minds fills the gaps of their optical perception by 'feeling' some of the phenomena and sensations that constitute what Henri Lefebvre denominated *blind field*. (Lefebvre, 2003)

Between fields (i.e. the rural, the industrial and the urban), which are regions of force and conflict, there are *blind fields*. These are not merely dark and uncertain, poorly explored, but blind in the sense that there is a blind spot on the retina, the centre — and negation — of vision. A paradox. The eye doesn't see; it needs a mirror. The centre of vision doesn't see and doesn't know it is blind. Do these paradoxes extend to thought, to awareness, to knowledge? (Lefebvre, 2003)

According to Lefebvre, we are blinded when we are "unable to leap over the quotidian, manufactured according to the constraints of industrial production and the consumption of industrial products, to the urban, which has shaken off those determinisms and constraints" (Lefebvre, 2003, pp. 29-30). Submerged in what Saramago calls *mal branco* (Saramago, 1995), we cannot pierce the curtain of visualities and socio-mental borders in which our everydayness is engaged. This trap creates *the illusion of transparency*, a view of space as innocent, as luminous, as unmistakably intelligible, as giving action free rein (Lefebvre, 1994). But what the crisscross study of Lefebvre and blindness highlights is that space is a much richer and multiple reality. Space harbours differences, rhythms, levels of perception, *camp*s of confinement: in short, space is always 'dangerously' social and constantly in the process of production.⁷ One of the tasks of mapping is therefore to construct a deeply *sensitive spatial 'code'*⁸ of resistance, by discerning the geopolitics of visualities and by *feeling* the thresholds of Difference.

Invisibility to the One-Eye

É desta massa que nós somos feitos? Metade de indiferença e metade de ruindade.
José Saramago, *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*

Beauty – I've buried beauty. I don't need beauty. I don't need images in my brain.
Since I cannot appreciate beauty, I have always run away from it.
Sophie Calle, *The blind*, 1986: *Excerpts*

"What does our blindness look like?" (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 29). The concept of *blindness* implies that a certain object or situation is invisible (literally, not visible) to the eyes. This is due to a

lack in the perceptual capacity of the viewer, to environmental conditions or to a 'hiding' of the object. The etymology of the Classical Greek term *λήθη* 'sheds light' on this: The term comes from the negation 'α-' and from *λήθη* ('oblivion', 'to hide', 'to veil' – and also one of the five rivers of Hades, where all those who drank from it experienced complete forgetfulness). 'Truth' is thereby not self-evident: it needs to be chased and disclosed from its state of covertness. By the same token, blindness is tightly correlated to invisibility, to a 'visible spectrum' and to a camouflage of the object. On the other hand, 'to see' means to uncover concealed realities —to go beyond the immediacy and shallowness of vision. Consequently, in order to clarify what our blindness looks like we will focus on a specific area of the world —the dark underbelly of Contemporary India— and we will try to un-veil the strata of socio-spatial *verborgenheit* sedimented in the geology of its being.

As comes to light in Arundhati Roy's interview, India is currently grappling with a serious 'internal security threat', the Maoist insurgency (Chowdhury, 2010).⁹ These rebels inhabit some of the poorest (in terms of income per capita) regions of eastern and central India, areas characterized by primary sector-based economies and significant natural resources. The states encompassed by the Red Corridor (see map below) are provided with mineral-rich forests and hydroelectric potential, and are homeland to millions of India's tribal people (*Adivasis*). Most of the areas that comprise this mineral belt tend to have stratified societies, with caste and feudal divisions, scarce infrastructure, exiguous medical services and indexes of literacy below the national average.

In 2005 the Indian government signed a MoUs (Memorandum of Understanding) worth billions of dollars with giant mining corporations like JSW Steel, Tata Steel and Vedanta (*The Economist*, 2010). All these MoUs—for steel plants, sponge-iron factories, power plants, aluminium refineries, dams and mines—are secret and impose a corporate takeover of tribal lands (Roy, 2010). Hence, this civil war.

Since then, thousands of indigenous people have been slaughtered, women have been raped, villages have been burnt down and people have been forced to move into police camps. Notwithstanding, despite the arming of the anti-Naxalites militia known as Salwa Judum and the nationwide Operation Greenhunt, the government hasn't managed to wipe out all the Maoists. The rebels are backed by several *Adivasis* communities and their counteroffensive caused many casualties in the paramilitary troops and in the police. The insurgency spread across a wide swathe of eastern India, albeit in jungle areas



Figure 2. *Blind Project* (Carney, 2007)

Source: Taken from <http://petermcarney.com/blind/?cat=42>

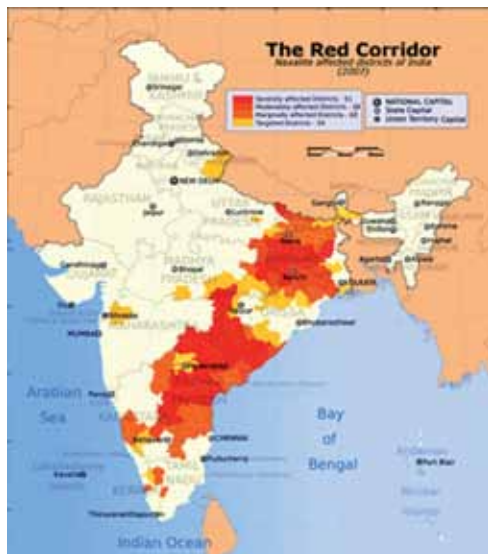


Figure 3. The Red Corridor

Source: Taken from Wikipedia, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:India_Red_Corridor_map.png

where the state is hardly present. Nowadays, out of 630 districts in India, almost 220 are either 'Maoist affected' or under Maoist control (Chowdhury, 2010).

How long will these people resist? What is a population supposed to do when it is being flushed out of the map? What is the relation between visibility and power, media covering and location? Can there be *another* vision?

What the *field* analysis, the conceptual *extraction* and the territorial *plotting* (Corner, 1999) can teach us about this situation is that the government plan is putting in practice what Paul Virilio called the '*production of disappearance*'. That is, "a process leading to the disappearance of citizenship by transforming the residents into 'foreigners within', a new sort of untouchable, in the transpolitical and anational state where the living are nothing more than 'living dead' in permanent deferment" (Virilio, 2005, p. 165)¹⁰. In other words, the indigenous people that populate the Red Corridor are being outcasted, demonized and made faceless with the purpose of 'clearing' an area. This tanatopolitics explicits itself in the creation of a 'blind field', which reveals the spatial nature of marginality (Acosta, 2007). The districts affected by the economic agreements were considered *terra nullius*, 'blank' lands (Piper, 2002) immediately disposable for the 'free'-market speculation. For this reason, these populations at the bottom of the social pyramid were to be made voiceless and *invisible, imperceptible subjects of the world map*. In this '*state of exception*' (*Ausnahmezustand*), out of the shelter of the law, they lay outside society's visible spectrum: they are reduced to *bare life (nuda vita)* (Agambem, 2005).¹¹

In the forest, under the condition of spatial and political *invisibility*, all Adivasis become *homines sacri*, lives exposed to the Sovereign's *vitae necisque potestas* (Agambem, 1995).¹² Theirs is a 'life that does not deserve to live', barren spots on the corporations' maps and, therefore, beyond the threshold of visibility.

As a result, the Maoist and tribal uprising demonstrate the facticity of mapping. India's internal conflict is a sanguinary war over the production of *spatial visualities*. The indigenous resistance is striving to materialize its grievances on a forlorn terrain. The Indian government is exerting its media and military *imperium*, to *blind the public vision* on a violent siege of the space. Our blindness is the outcome of a biopolitical *Empire-mapping*—an incapacity to see beyond what the Sovereign daily presents to us, which drowns every Polyphemus in the river of forgetfulness.

Conclusion: Mapping a New Vision

A mulher do médico perguntou, e eles, e o médico disse, Este, provavelmente, estar curado quando acordar, com os outros não ser diferente, o mais certo é que estejam agora mesmo a recuperara vista, quem vai apanhar um susto, coitado, é o nosso homem da venda preta, Porque, por causa da catarata, depois de todo o tempo que passou desde que o examinei, deve estar como uma nuvem opaca, Vai ficar cego, Não, logo que a vida estiver normalizada, que tudo comece a funcionar, opero-o, ser uma questão de semanas, Porque foi que cegámos, Não sei, talvez um dia se chegue a conhecer a razão, Queres que te diga o que penso, Diz, Penso que não cegámos, penso que estamos cegos, Cegos que vêem, Cegos que, vendo, não vêem.

José Saramago, Ensaio sobre a cegueira

Hair is magnificent. Especially African hair. I curl up in women's long hair. I pretend I'm cat and meow. My room is oblong. There's nothing in it. It's clean.

Just a fridge and grass outside the window. It's beautiful, at least I think so and I believe what I want to believe.

Sophie Calle, The blind, 1986: excerpts

Every society sets the limit beyond which life is 'unworthy of being lived'; every society —even the most modern— decides who its *Adivasis* will be. In today's geopolitical horizon, "bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being" (Agamben, 1998).

Homo sacer is every man affected by spatial invisibility. In the same way, any kind of geography defines itself by means of a *diagram* (Deleuze, 1988) of visualities. A 'diagram' is a socio-spatial multiplicity, a cartography of thresholds that demarcates the fluid borders between blindness and vision. According to the studies conducted in this research, I will indicate three provisional conclusions:

- 1) *Blindness* —both in the real and in the metaphorical sense— *embodies a kind of vision*. By dint of a range of non-optical resources, blindness constantly produces an investigation of the world, a diagram of differential visualities. Moreover, as Borges underlines in his lecture on the subject, blindness can be the clay for the construction of an art and a life rich of discoveries, significance and achievements. Blindness is an extraordinary powerful way of mapping, a continuous mapping-*anew*, a vision beyond the 'blind field' of flat perception.
- 2) *The production of space implicates a struggle around visualities*. Every body of forces is involved in a – social,



Figure 4. *The Day of the Bhumkal: Face to face with 'India's greatest Security Threat'* (Roy, 2010)

Source: Taken from *Walking with the Comrades*, available at www.outlookindia.com



Figure 5. *Rest Station: A Maoist 'camp'* (Roy, 2010)

Source: Taken from *Walking with the Comrades*, available at www.outlookindia.com



Figure 6. Jorge Luis Borges

Source: *Borges Images Gallery*, *The Modern World*, available at http://www.themodernword.com/borges/borges_images.html

economical, political, ethnical and sexual —definition of the *thresholds of vision*. As a practice of orientation, mapping is therefore a way to challenge the borders established by the dominant blind vision of the sovereign One-Eye. The geopoetics of the *Strategy of the Beyond* (Virilio, 2005, p. 179)—joining the dots of the empire and leaping over the imposition of corporate space representations— are a fundamental weapon of resistance against the politics of disappearance.

- 3) *'Mapping a new vision' means to develop and to sharpen an ever-evolving critical eye.* The performative character of mapping is engaged in an operation of digging out, finding and exposing the spatial interrelationships that shape the structure of visualities. Only a profound sensitivity toward the unexplored —the fingertips of a 'blind' vision— may offer a way out from the bare life of the *forest of exception*.

Our world is a busy, fast and dangerous crossroad of people, money and ideas. The duty of the mapping viewer is to cross it with the same attention, sensitivity and commitment that constitute the *transcendent vision* of the Blind.

*Todo para los ojos
Y en los ojos un ritmo,
un color fugitivo,
la sombra de una fortuna,
un repentino viento
y un naufragio infinito.
Octavio Paz, Lago*

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Notes

- ¹ See also Rogoff (2000, p. 73): “Cartography is the signifying practice of both location and identity, a mode of writing through which we can uncover a set of general laws”.

² This video has been created with the most elementary knowledge of video-production. Its aim is to raise some socio-spatial questions concerning the interlaced relationships between visual impairment, spatial and political (in)visibility and mapping performativity.

³ The whole interview - on India-US relations, terrorism and so-called Maoist insurgency - was recorded on 2010 and is available at <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/faultlines/2010/05/20105610311806602.html>.

⁴ Borges gave this lecture on August 3, 1977 at the Coliseo Theatre in Buenos Aires. The transcription of the whole lecture is available in Borges (1984, pp. 107-121).

⁵ Cf. *British Journal of Visual Impairment* (available at <http://jvi.sagepub.com>).

⁶ Cf. <http://www.chinavisionuk.org/>. See also <http://petermcarney.com/blind/?cat=42>. The following photograph in this paragraph and the one on p. 2 were taken from this website.

⁷ “Geography and space are always gendered, always raced, always economical and always sexual. The textures that bind them together are daily re-written through a word, a gaze, a gesture” (Rogoff, 2000, p. 28).

⁸ “A code of this kind must be correlated with a system of knowledge. It brings an alphabet, a lexicon and a grammar together within an overall framework; and it situates itself – though not in such a way as to exclude it – vis-à-vis non-knowledge (ignorance or misunderstanding); in other words, vis-à-vis the *lived* and the *perceived*” (Lefebvre, 1994, p. 65).

⁹ Cf. In 2005, soon after coming to power, India’s Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, described the insurgency as India’s “gravest internal security threat” (Chowdhury, 2010, p. 20). See also *Politics with bloodshed – India’s Naxalite insurgents* (*The Economist*, 2010, p. 63). The so-called Maoists are also known as Naxalites, because of their roots in a 1967 peasant uprising in the West Bengali village of Naxalbari. ¹⁰ “It does indeed seem that the postmodern era is now preparing means of obfuscation, with the arrival of the *society of legal disappearance*, an original form of capital punishment where the transpolitical power aims at identifying itself totally with medical power in [...] the outline of a *civil excommunication*, an agonistic figure of extermination without a trial, without an amphitheatre, and without internment camps, beyond every delimitation of law or place” (Virilio, 2005, pp. 165-170).

¹¹ “In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without *logos* claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference” (Cf. Agamben, 2005, p. 40).

¹² “*Quando vita e politica, divisi in origine e articolati fra loro attraverso la terra di nessuno dello stato di eccezione, in cui abita la nuda vita, tendono a identificarsi, allora tutta la vita diventa sacra e tutta la politica diventa eccezione*” (Agamben, 1995, 165). In the English version: “When life and politics – originally divided, and linked together by means of the no-man’s-land of the state of exception that is inhabited by bare life – begin to become one, all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception” (Agamben, 1998, p. 148).