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**'In praise of subjectivity: vision and perspective in Jorge de Sena's *O Físico Prodigioso*'**

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**Short form of title: 'Vision and perspective in *O Físico Prodigioso*'**

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## **In praise of subjectivity: vision and perspective in Jorge de Sena's *O Físico Prodigioso***

### **Abstract**

This article seeks to assess questions of vision, power and sexual desire in the relationship between the gazed-upon object and the gazing subject in Jorge de Sena's 1966 novella *O Físico Prodigioso*. It is proposed that the constantly shifting narrative focus of the text permits the reader to move beyond the gender-coded and unidirectional gaze relationship outlined by Mulvey, and thus break down the binaries of male-female, gazer-gazee, and powerful-powerless which traditionally dominate our conceptions of sexual and political power relations. The article proposes that *O Físico Prodigioso* presents a textual working through of the multiple, partial perspectives that Haraway lauds as an alternative to male-coded objectivity, where diverse perspectives and visual exchange are crucial to personal sexual relationships and to political resistance.

### **Key words:**

Vision, perspective, male gaze, positionality, power

## **In praise of subjectivity: vision and perspective in Jorge de Sena's *O Físico Prodigioso*<sup>1</sup>**

Sensory perception is central to the production of meaning and knowledge in human experience. The senses are a source of information about how the world works, and they place experience in the body (Carlson, 2013: 166). In the sciences, so closely linked are the questions of vision and knowledge that 'vision has received more research attention than the other senses combined' (Garrett, 2011: 294). Yet *what* we see must be held distinct from vision as the interpretation of what is beheld. As Robert Snowden et al (2012: 3) clarify, 'we see the world in a particular way, not because that is the way the world is, but because that's the way we are'. How we see, therefore, may be revealing of how we think. Vision is thus also about a desire for how things could or should be, and as such, may be ideologically based, with the potential to impose or indeed repudiate power (Soyinka 2004: 53). Different approaches to vision, the visual and visibility, from diverse academic fields, may bring

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different levels of interpretation to what and how we see. Cinema and visual cultural products (such as photography, fine art, and the like) work by drawing on our position as viewers, and by positioning us as viewers, allowing us to see from others' perspectives. The alternative and potentially plural perspectives that visual media may present, as Irit Rogoff (2002: 26) argues, may enable us to distance representation from the dominance of patriarchal, eurocentric and hetero-coded narrative convention, and to reconsider the representation of human experience from other angles. Yet what is the function of vision within other cultural products, such as prose literature? This article draws on critical and theoretical perspectives on sight and seeing, vision and the visual, from the biological to the philosophical and political, and from cinema and gender studies, to examine the nature of looking and the dynamics of the gaze in Jorge de Sena's 1966 novella, *O Físico Prodigioso*. It will investigate how Sena uses sight and vision to locate and interrogate bases of knowledge and power, to acknowledge the inevitable partiality of perspective, and to call to account the supposed objectivity of the gazing subject (Haraway, 1988), and it will argue that Sena's work calls for a continual questioning and destabilisation of all power systems, whether those are located in specific political regimes or in cultural practices. This article therefore contributes to existing debates around Sena's critique of the mid-century dictatorships that he experienced, and extends an analysis of that critical perspective to Sena's exploration of how power works in personal and cultural, as well as political, contexts.

*O Físico Prodigioso* was first published in a short story collection in 1966 and as a stand-alone novella in 1977. At this time, Sena was living in the USA in voluntary exile from both Portugal's *Estado Novo* dictatorship (1928-74) and the authoritarian regime that had been installed recently in Brazil. The book had been written in 1964, when Sena was living in Brazil. This was the same year as the military coup that led to dictatorship in the country. In particular during the second part of the novella, which sees the *físico* repeatedly tortured by

the Inquisition, the novella allegorises repressive regimes such as those the author witnessed in both Brazil and Portugal (see also Harland, 2004: 175-76; Rothwell 2011: 55). The plot of *O Físico Prodigioso* is relatively simple: an unnamed, itinerant horseman (the *físico* of the title) encounters in the forest three damsels who lead him to cure their mistress, Dona Urraca, who is wasting away from an unknown illness. The knight and Urraca fall in love and continue to live together until they are suddenly arrested by the Inquisition, which subjects the *físico* to a long period of torture. At first he will not die; he is protected by the devil with whom he has an arrangement that gives him fantastic powers in return for sex. His eventual death becomes symbolic for state-perpetrated suffering as a whole, and inspires a popular revolt. Revolution turns to violent chaos, which is halted only by the emergence of characters representing a new *físico* and Urraca at the end of the novella.

Brief in length, yet complex in both form and content, this short novella has attracted significant critical attention within Portuguese literary studies, although, and despite being translated into English, French and German (amongst other languages), *O Físico Prodigioso* has nonetheless remained a relatively obscure text within comparative literary studies. Scholars have previously commented on Sena's use of myth, legend, literary and religious narratives as intertexts. For example, Orlando Amorim (1999) analyses the Faustian current that runs throughout the text and at the same time parodies the myth, while Jorge Fazenda Lourenço (1998) examines the interplay between myth and identity through the lens of the Persephone/Adonis myth and Harvey Sharrer (1989) gives a broad-ranging analysis of medieval intertexts in the novella. Francisco Cota Fagundes (1981) elaborates an influential analysis of the *físico*'s parallels with the figure of Christ, and how Sena diverges from the biblical narrative as a model in order to drive home his own humanistic perspective, in which love must prevail. As this article will argue however, love and desire bring a power dynamic

that must be acknowledged, negotiated and balanced if they are not to emerge as a dominating force.

The apparently simple plot belies the novel's radical, innovative literary qualities: Sena's formal experimentation (most notably, the interspersing of poetry, parallel columns of narrative and 'whirlwind' narratives within the novella's otherwise linear prose; and the destabilisation of all binary oppositions) has lost none of its challenge for contemporary readers (for example, Lopes 1989; Williams 1989; Fazenda Lourenço 1998; Marinho 1981). As Horácio Costa observes, the book perpetually reflects back on itself, like a hall of mirrors in which the reflection is a changeable and intangible image rather than a concrete reproduction (1992: 109). The complexity of detail throughout the novella demands close and attentive reading and while it is certainly a vehicle for literary experimentation and an exploration of humanistic values of love and freedom (Neves, 1997: 333; Cota Fagundes, 1981: 133-34), this novella is also an extensive and eloquent interrogation of the gendered, sexual and ideological codifications of looking within culture. The 'pan-eroticism' of the text retains its potential to shock (Sena 2001: 8), dealing at various points with sex with the devil, gang rape, orgy and even a hint at bestiality, in addition to a more conventional heterosexual eroticism that runs throughout the text. It is perhaps surprising that the sexual aspects of the text have received less attention than they deserve. Francisco Cota Fagundes (1989) explores the novella's treatment of eroticism and/as love, while Phillip Rothwell (2011) and Orlanda de Azevedo (2003) take a heavily theoretical, Lacanian approach to their treatment of love, self-love and sex in this text. António Manuel Ferreira (2009), on the other hand, ignores this most radically sexual of Sena's prose fiction works in his exploration of homoeroticism in the author's oeuvre. Sena's treatment of vision as embodied knowledge and lived experience foregrounds the positionality of the onlooker (Azevedo, 2003: 22) and disturbs the cultural, gendered and heterosexist structures of looking that Laura Mulvey (1975) identifies in

cinematic narrative conventions, and which are equally applicable to the way we look in other cultural contexts, including literature. Sena brings together the personal and the political through his treatment of the power dynamics of the gaze, addressing not only the sexual politics that theories from visual cultures have tended to focus on, but extending his interrogation of scopic regimes to explore the role of the visual in political regimes, and to present a splitting and multiplying of perspective that contests the ‘unmarked’ nature of knowledge within the patriarchal structure of dictatorship (Haraway, 1988: 586).

Sena’s presentation of myriad ways of looking and being seen go well beyond the obvious references to invisibility (a power that the *físico* receives from the devil in return for sex) and the Narcissus myth, which are explored at length by Orlanda de Azevedo (2003). Sena interrogates in multiple ways the idea of a ‘noble’ or distanced, unembodied (and thus unquestioned) vision on the part of the subject of the gaze – a positionality that, as theorists such as Mulvey (1975: 7), Ella Shohat & Robert Stam (2002: 55), and Donna Haraway (1988: 583) remind us, reinforces the power of patriarchal discourses. In *O Físico Prodigioso*, Sena positions the gaze at the core of embodied, human experience and in doing so, he not only explores how power is held, but also how it might be challenged through a reconfiguration of structures of looking. Sexual politics are bound up with political power, and surveillance of the body as a means of stimulating desire leads to an exploration of surveillance as an oppressive tool used by the state to exert power.

As Beth Newman (1990: 1029) has observed, visual metaphors pervade our theoretical vocabulary for the study of literature, where we speak of ‘narrative perspective’ and ‘focus’ as organising principles in prose fiction, and where the third-person narrator is understood as a distanced (again unmarked) onlooker whose gaze is directed at the characters and events narrated. It is further necessary to be mindful that the mode of consumption of literature is also visual, even where literature may be more readily conceived of as a verbal

medium. Reading is a process of seeing and interpreting the words on the page: it is a process of vision in which we conjure up in our mind's eye the image or word-picture that is described. Critical perspective is an extension of the reader's subjective perspective, and in the act of reading critically a series of looking/viewing positions are created, with the scholar traditionally claiming a position of greater distance from the visualised world, and sharing with the narrator the position of the unmarked body, the gazing subject (see also Mulvey, 1975: 11-12; Snow, 1989: 30; McBride, 1989: 19). Of course, critics and theorists working in feminist, gender, queer and postcolonial studies in particular have offered pertinent critiques of the very notion of the unmarked subject and/or critic, and of the validity of 'objectivity'. The positionality of the critic is now widely accepted; equally, the idea of the unreliable narrator is longstanding. The idea of the unreliable narrator, however, suggests that there is the possibility of reliability – that the *unreliable* narrator is somehow at fault or culpable in being impossible to trust; that s/he represents a divergence from a more reliable norm. Yet, as Haraway (1988) argues, this type of reliable/unreliable or right/wrong binary is in itself only one way of understanding the world, and as critics of Sena have discussed at length, *O Físico Prodigioso* consistently deconstructs neat, dichotomous pairings in favour of a more complex and slippery world view (Williams 1989; Marinho 1989; Vessels 1989). *O Físico Prodigioso* makes a fruitful case study for the alternative way of seeing that Haraway proposes: one in which the gaze and the 'knowledge' that comes from vision is multidirectional, polycentric and always embodied (1988: 581). For Haraway, to recognise subjectivity is to acknowledge the limitations of the individual and in so doing, to extend power as a collective effort because individual knowledges together are greater than the sum of the parts and may be used to contest the apparent unlocatability of 'objective knowledge' (1988: 584). Sena uses literature as a vehicle to test, highlight and reject the orderliness of incomplete 'objectivity' in favour of diverse, conflicting and complementary perspectives (Vessels 1989: 67).



*O Físico Prodigioso* reads as a series of word-pictures and descriptive scenes in which Sena explores the relationship between vision and power. Through his detailed descriptions, Sena appropriates a cinematic ‘language’ (see also Harland 2004: 184), and we may identify in the opening lines of the novella, the use of a ‘male’ desiring gaze that Mulvey identifies in narrative cinema. In the opening lines of the novella, the eponymous *físico* is positioned as the holder of phallic power:

Balanceando o erecto corpo ao passo do cavalo, vinha descendo a encosta. O sol, muito alto ainda, iluminava de crepitações o vale que, selvático, se abria ante o seu olhar que pervagava abstracto, sem distinguir o mato que floria, as pedras que rebrilhavam pardas e cinzentas, os pequenos animais que esvoaçavam, corriam, rastejavam, ou se ficavam suspensos, sem temor, fitando a mole imensa e caminhante de cavalo e cavaleiro (Sena, 2001: 15).

The detail of the narrator’s description functions like the cinematic camera, panning over the scene to bring to the fore visual elements such as the bodies against the landscape, the sun, and the perception of the movements of the fauna. From this very opening line, Sena plays on the cultural convention (exemplified especially in cinematic texts) of the ‘male’ gaze on a sexualised female object, for although the sex of the rider is not revealed until the end of the long second sentence, we are perhaps drawn to an assumption of masculinity through the reference to an ‘erect body’ which recalls the aroused penis and - as Pedro Eiras has observed - creates a vision of physical power through the ‘verticality’ of the rider which contrasts with the ‘horizontality’ of the countryside that it penetrates (2008: 38). The upright horseman is the embodiment of phallic power: the erectness of the body riding indicates an air of masculine majesty, of power and domination of the environment as the rider penetrates the geometrically complementary valley (Azevedo 2003: 26). Although sexual action is entirely absent from the scene at this point, the description nonetheless contains a sexual tension which is rooted in the gaze of the male rider who surveys the territory before him, and looks forward to the *físico*’s scrutiny of Dona Urraca’s inert body a few chapters later (Sena 2001:

31; see also Atkin 2015: 19; Eiras 2008: 391; Lopes 1989: 45; Azevedo 2003: 26; Sousa 1989: 26).

The horseman's perspective seems to be fused with that of the third-person narrator: the sun responds submissively to the horseman's desire to see into the valley; the animals, inferior in size and in power, gaze on; the valley opens up meekly to his scrutiny. Eiras (2008: 38) seems to echo Mulvey (1975: 12) when he suggests that this scene causes an identification of the reader with the principal male protagonist whom s/he uses as a sort of substitute or proxy within the narrative, using both the gaze on the protagonist, and what the protagonist sees, to gain a sense of potency within the fictional action that they are observing. So far, so conventional.

Where the perspective of the camera always dominates over others in cinema, however, because it is necessarily the perspective from which viewers also see, literature has the means to offer multiple perspectives – if not at once, then at least in swift succession. At the same time as describing what the horseman sees, the narrator also reveals that the horseman is watched by the small animals in the immediate environment (who go apparently unseen by him), opening up alternative, polycentric lines of vision. The narrator's and reader's perspectives are therefore multiple and split, for at the same time as seeing *as* the protagonist, our gaze also falls *on* the horse and its rider, and the *cavaleiro* is placed simultaneously in the position of subject and object of the gaze – a position that both confirms and contests Mulvey's Lacanian-inflected argument that the object of the gaze is always in the position of the lacking woman: the bearer, but not the maker, of meaning and knowledge (1975: 7). The *fisico*'s presence within this scene installs and reinforces heterosexual masculine power over that which is seen (desiring subject of the gaze); at the same time, he is the sexual object within the scene, causing the flow of the description/action to be paused 'in erotic contemplation' (Mulvey, 1975: 11). The *fisico*'s position as desired

object therefore implies a reading gaze that contests heteronorms by placing the male object of the gaze in the position of the lacking woman (Neale, 1983: 16). In this instance, as elsewhere in the novella, the binary gender coding of heterosexist culture is destabilised (see also Marinho 1981; Rothwell 2011). The multiplicity of possible perspectives in these opening lines is unsettling because it both confirms and tests the masculine cultural codes of the gaze. The normalising discourse of phallocentrism that is both erected and disrupted in this opening image of the *físico* is representative of a contestation of knowledge that will be unpacked as the novella progresses.

Throughout the first two chapters, the structural norms of a masculine-coded and active onlooker, and a feminine-coded and passive object of the gaze are undone. In the scene that immediately follows this opening, the narrative gives a ‘soft-focus’, voyeuristic description of the *físico* undressing to bathe. Unaware that he is being observed, the *físico* performs an inadvertent striptease: his body is revealed bit by bit in a slow-paced description that focuses closely on the detail of his actions (a sort of narrative zooming in). As such, the *físico* becomes the passive and feminine-coded object of the gaze – a position that is reinforced when he is sexually penetrated by the invisible devil (Sena, 2001: 16-17). If, as Steve Neale (1983: 15) has argued, ‘the spectatorial look [...] is implicitly male’, then this scene can be read as a queering of the male gaze. The *físico* as erotic object brings homoeroticism to the fore in the narrative as an alternative to the heterosexist structure of cultural convention. At the same time, the patriarchal cultural order is shifted as the *físico* becomes the lacking, penetrable other - the signifier for the devil’s desire and the body on which the devil lives out his fantasies and obsessions. The *físico*’s indifference to the act ties him to his place as a bearer of meaning, and leaves him devoid of sexual agency (Mulvey, 1975: 7). The invisibility of the devil as he performs the sexual act further limits the *físico*’s potential for agency, for the latter is observed but cannot gaze back. Scopophilia, in this

instance, is the prerogative of the devil alone.

Nevertheless, at the same time as homoeroticism is foregrounded, it is also disavowed, for as Eduardo Lourenço (1984:57) reminds us, and despite the devil's attempts to satisfy himself sexually using the *físico*'s body, the devil himself has no form (see also Sena, 2001: 93). If the devil is not a human, then, to what extent can he be understood by human constructions of sexuality and sexual identity? Sena's representation of eroticism as an experience that is not necessarily embodied undermines the very idea of sexuality as an essential marker of identity and calls for an even more radical revision of social conceptions around sex and eroticism than Foucault (1990: 77-78; 157): Sena, it would seem, is calling for pleasures with or without contingent bodies, thus reconfiguring the gaze relationship.

In the sexual relationship with the devil, desire is stimulated and mediated by the sight of the body of the other. The devil's and narrator's observation of the *físico* is voyeuristic, because the devil can choose not to be seen. The *físico* enjoys a similar position later, when, invisible, he voyeuristically observes the *donzelas* (Sena, 2001: 34). By contrast, in his first sexual encounter with Dona Urraca after he has cured her, the *físico* remains invisible at her request: her gaze on him is removed altogether in a shift that modifies the balance of power between them (Rothwell, 2011: 56). He encounters her looking for him in her chamber, aware of his invisibility and seeking to find him through the sense of touch. She insists that she wants him invisible and undresses him. When she removes his body from sight, Urraca uses the absence of his visual aspect to focus on both his and her pleasure, and the narrative explains how her 'dedos interrogativos' scrutinise his invisible body, bringing him to the point of ejaculation that is both seen and felt (Sena, 2001: 40). To make invisible the body of the other, of the looked upon, is to focus solely on the experience of pleasure, rather than on 'sexual identity'.

To make visible the end product of that pleasure (for example, when the *físico*'s

semen is ejaculated from his invisible body) is to unsettle the place of vision in the scopophilic regime and in the dynamics of power, desire and the satisfaction of desire between the looker on and the looked upon. As Urraca herself explains, the power of the imagination may produce greater pleasure than what is actually there: the partial perspective of interpretation that she opts for is where meaning and knowledge are located. To make invisible the body is to find the body, as Urraca's exploring fingers demonstrate. Desire may never be beyond the reach of power (Foucault 1990: 81), but for Sena, freedom and pleasure are contingent on the acceptance of the power relation and a conscious deployment of power to satisfy desire. When Urraca places herself consciously in the position of the object of the gaze, she gives the *físico* the power that is held by the subject, but at the same time, she claims sexual agency for herself by resisting the violence that the voyeuristic gaze implies.

To watch without being seen, or without permission, may be dominating, and equally, the notion of a 'male' gaze implies men doing something to women. When the person who is looked upon knows that the onlooker is looking, however, the one gazing has a responsibility not to abuse the power of their gaze (Garland-Thomson, 2009: 41). Power is thus unbalanced and rebalanced. The illicit becomes licit as the power of voyeurism is dissipated by the *físico*'s submission to and pleasure in Urraca's desire (he closes his eyes so as to make her as invisible as he is, switching off entirely the gaze that is also power); transgression becomes transcendence as the sensory stimulation of desire gives way (at least fleetingly) to the sensory experience of pleasure. The focus of the power relation thus shifts from who has or is deprived of power, to how the power is used (and challenged); desire becomes mediated through the body but is not located on it (or on knowledge of it). Pleasure (which, in Sena, is often synonymous with love) therefore becomes a liberating force that frees the individual from the identifying marks of sexuality (Rothwell, 2011: 55). Once the body has been removed and the power inherent in the gaze relationship rebalanced, there is a return to the

body as a producer of desire - hence the end of their conversation where each in turn observes the other naked (Sena, 2001: 44).

The invisibility and partiality of the subject of the gaze are problematised thematically in the development of the plot, and formally in the three parallel narratives, which undermine the idea of the omniscient, 'objective' narrator by presenting two views simultaneously. In the first parallel narrative, the dialogic nature of the gaze relationship comes under further scrutiny when the *físico*, once again in the position of gazed upon finds his own desire increased by virtue of being desired. Here, the subject of the gaze is not one, but three women, and the representation of their gaze is split by the two columns of texts which sit side-by-side, appearing simultaneously rather than consecutively.

While José Saramago (1991: 14) is correct in his observation that such a technique cannot, all the same, be *read* simultaneously, the parallel narratives nonetheless *appear* together and the reader must make a decision as to which to read first – which to prioritise, in effect. In making this decision, the reader is thus forced to act in a partial way – and to recognise the partial and subjective nature of the perspective that they read. In the example given above, as Maria de Fátima Marinho (1981: 147) explains, the right-hand column is more explicitly erotic, although the two columns work together rather than contradict one another. The multiple lines of vision (narrator's, *donzelas*', *deusas*', *físico*'s, the horse's) that are present in this episode offer views that are both 'from the body' and 'from above' (Haraway, 1988: 589). Easy cultural dichotomies such as angel/whore, innocent/sexual, looker-on/looked-upon, give way to webs of vision that locate the knowledge and desire associated with that vision in multiple sites, each having a partial perspective, rather than in the single, undetermined location of the 'male' gaze. Those partial perspectives offer the possibility that the knowledge gleaned from them may be called to account:

<p>Mas logo o pudor [das donzelas] se lhes transformou num afogueado fascínio. E os olhos que se haviam desviado perscrutaram em volta, a ver se ele estava só. E aproximaram-se um pouco mais. O cavalo, que ficara fitando-as, sacudiu a cabeça e relinchou de leve.</p>	<p><i>As deusas, sorrindo do suspiro dele, avançaram mais. E era como que uma ardência o olhar delas, que pelo seu corpo se pregava, e a que o corpo, palpitando, correspondia pouco a pouco. Cupidinhos esvoaçaram tocando flautas.</i></p>
<p>Elas estremeceram, e pararam como congeladas, no medo que ele despertasse. Mas ele apenas respirou mais fundo, entrecortadamente, como se outro respirar do sangue, convergindo, interferisse no exalar opresso.</p>	<p><i>E as deusas tremularam na neblina que as envolvia agora, com os olhos incitando-o a que se não movesse. E ele apenas se espreguiçou, para que o corpo se expusesse mais, no torpor violento que o invadia.</i> (Sena, 2001: 20)</p>

The three women who are the subjects of the gaze are called *donzelas* in the left-hand column and idealised as innocent, coy beauties. In the right-hand column, they are sexually predatory, naked *deusas*. While in the scene they are presented as the lookers-on, they are at the same time the object of the narrative gaze which parodies the heterosexist fantasy of the angel/whore dichotomy (Fazenda Lourenço, 1998: 188). In the final two paragraphs of the narrative (reproduced above), the perceived timidity of the *donzelas* is reinforced by their darting eyes, suggesting a lack of confidence despite their evident curiosity. The neighing of the horse mirrors the sleeping *físico*'s unknowing sigh, and has a symbolic function in constructing an atmosphere of intense but unspoken sexual tension. In the right-hand column, the *físico*'s awareness that he is being watched provokes a reciprocal desire that ultimately (in the whirlwind narrative that follows) dominates over the apparent trepidation of sexual awakening that is expressed in the left-hand column. The gaze as sensual/sexual experience (rather than the position and power of the subject and object as such) is brought to the fore in the *físico*'s response to their *deusas*' advance: he positions his naked body the better to be observed. The gaze is therefore central to awakening and stimulating sexual desire – desire which is pleasurable in and of itself and is enjoyed in the moment, as well as anticipating the pleasure of physical sexual interaction. In this interpretation, I diverge from Rothwell's

insistence, after Lacan, that desire must always at some level be repressed or deferred if it is to continue to exist (2011: 56); rather, I argue, it can be both enjoyed for what it is *and* perpetuate itself – repression may make desire stronger, as Rothwell argues, but Sena's novella also presents desire that produces more desire. In other words, desire *is* power, and rather than looking at how power limits or feeds desire, Sena explores the balance or unbalance of power in desire and through desire.

When the *físico* first encounters Dona Urraca, the power relationship between the healthy, male, gazing *físico* and the wasting, passive woman, Urraca, presents an unbalanced power relationship that is reinforced by the obvious intertext of the sleeping beauty legend (Sena, 2001: 30-32). Urraca does not remain passive in response to his 'cure', though: the *físico*'s gaze and his sexual attention awaken a dormant sexuality in the object of his gaze. When she engages in the sexual act being performed, Urraca rejects the heterosexist structure of the ideal of the passive sleeping beauty to claim embodied sexual agency (Atkin 2015: 21).

The visual play in the parallel narrative of the *donzelas*, and in the *físico*'s viewing of Urraca before he performs his cure, function in Freud's terms as an 'intermediary relation' (1910: 14) – a form of pleasure that increases desire before the ultimate aim (for Freud) of intercourse is achieved. Yet looking does more than feed desire: as Garland-Thomson (2009: 59) notes, awareness of being beheld may also ignite our sense of embodiment, for being the object of the gaze is a reminder that we – or at least our bodies – matter to someone else. This is precisely why the metaphorical position of woman in relation to the male gaze has provoked intense debate, for the gaze can be either – or both – judgemental and validating, and the potential for power within the gaze relationship is multiple. That potential for power to be exerted, for domination to occur through the gaze, is what invites a closer comparison of the sexual freedom of the first half of the novella and the Inquisition's scrutiny of the *físico* in the second half.



Whether in the sexual relationship or in political surveillance, the importance of vision and perspective as embodied experiences enable the location and accountability of knowledge. The erotic episodes of the first half of the novella highlight the power relations that underlie desire. In returning the gaze and claiming sexual agency, the *donzelas/deusas* and Dona Urraca redress the unbalanced power structures inherent in the gaze-relationship, challenging the positionality and purported objectivity of the unlocatable 'male' gaze by positioning desire, vision, knowledge and pleasure *in* the body. In some respects, these early episodes provide a positive contrast to the second half of the novella which sees the imprisonment, torture, and eventual death of Urraca and the *físico* (Cota Fagundes, 1981: 135). Yet the focus of the two halves of the novella is complementary rather than contradictory: the shifts in temporal setting and pattern of events between the first and second parts of the novella enable a renewal of Sena's exploration of gaze politics by turning to the use of vision as an ideological tool.

Surveillance is one of the principal means by which populations are kept in check in the modern world, and the mere threat of being watched can cause us to modify our behaviours, as is revealed in literary works such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, and as has been examined by a number of theorists, not least Michel Foucault (1977). It is a small step for the desire for all-round vision/knowledge (for the two concepts are linguistically linked; Garrett 2011: 316) to become dominating, controlling, or repressive, and the suddenness of the change from pleasure and freedom to oppression and suffering in *O Físico Prodigioso* demonstrate the fragility of any balance of power, whether in the gaze relationship or in other contexts.

The Inquisition presents a clear allegory for the PIDE during the *Estado Novo*, although it could also be seen to allegorise the practices of any oppressive regime, from the Soviet to the Fascist. The inquisitorial practices of the *Santo Ofício* (in *O Físico Prodigioso*

as in historical reality) seek to establish a distanced, ‘noble’ objectivity – as indeed, has been the practice in regimes from all points on the ideological spectrum. The gaze of the Inquisition is purportedly a tool of surveillance, yet it in turn is hinged on desire – it is scopophilic. The *frades* gain a certain fetishistic pleasure from regularly and repeatedly viewing the *físico*’s imprisoned body (Sena, 2001: 79). At the same time, a scopophilic response is invited from the reader, who derives some form of pleasure not just from imagining how the vivid descriptions might look, but also from the realisation that this is fantasy and that we readers are not the subjected other (Schehr, 1997: 79). There is little distance between the sexualised gaze and the disciplinary gaze, for both are about the domination over and the subjection of the other, and when that gaze is forced upon its object, the act may be violent (Lauwereyns, 2012: 212). Yet despite the claims to objectivity inherent in the disciplinary gaze, the interpretative nature of vision and the partiality of *all* perspective is highlighted in the friars’ viewing of the *físico* during the long process of evidence collection:

Até esta fase final, haviam passado muitos anos. Periodicamente, os membros do tribunal visitavam colectivamente [...] o principal criminoso, para colherem uma importante prova da sua natureza demoníaca, qual era que o andar dos anos, o facto de permanecer incomunicável num subterrâneo sem ar e luz, [...] e o facto de permanecer aí acorrentado com sólidas correntes chumbadas na parede [...], além do cinto especial de castidade [...], e o facto de a sua alimentação ter sido reduzida ao mínimo, nada disto o envelhecera ou retirara uma parcela sequer da juventude irradiante e da temível beleza que eram suas. É certo que apresentava todos os sinais exteriores do mais profundo arrependimento, e permanecia quase sempre sentado a um canto, com a cabeça pousada nos joelhos. [...]. Mas apesar de tudo isso, os membros do tribunal verificavam, pessoalmente e colectivamente, que a beleza, e a juventude eram inalteravelmente as mesmas. Com o andar dos anos, é certo que esses membros, naturalmente homens idosos e alquebrados pelo estudo, os jejuns, e as vigílias dedicadas à erradicação dos erros demoníacos, iam não sendo os mesmos. Mas a verificação era válida, na medida em que, de cada vez, sempre havia alguns que haviam participado da visita anterior. (Sena, 2001: 79-80).

In this description, the *físico*’s unaltering, youthful radiance overcomes the dejected reality of his bodily state, which has undergone significant physical trauma, and deprivation of food and light. A close reading further reveals how Sena interrogates the apparently unlocatable,

‘objective’ knowledge and judgement of the Inquisition: the Inquisitors are not always the same people, and the penultimate sentence of this long passage reveals the positionality of the viewing subject, removing the mask of patriarchal power and authoritarian claims to objectivity (Schehr, 1997: 33). Later, when the *físico*’s image becomes attached to the Inquisitors, their identity (and his) and the embodied knowledge that they claim is thus questioned further when the eyes with which they ‘see’ (the body with which they ‘know’) is no longer their own (Sena 2001: 85-86).

Unusual visual occurrences such as the face-changing of the Inquisitors drive home the idea that identity and knowledge (in particular) are not, and cannot be, fixed and stable (Azevedo, 2003: 32-36). That changeability is exemplified in the character of the *físico* (Fazenda Lourenço 1998: 184). The *físico*’s apparently consistent youthful appearance becomes symbolic of the qualities that he stands for, and of his curative and liberating potential. Such qualities are understood in positive terms by Dona Urraca, but on the part of the Inquisition as negative, threatening and punishable by force (Sena, 2001: 79). However, the Inquisition’s various attempts to impose suffering on the *físico* and the devil are resisted in a series of acts that pivot on the supposed relationship between vision and knowledge. First, the *físico*’s face is transferred to Urraca’s dead head as a sign that the two have resisted the attempted regulation of their mutual desire by the Inquisitors (Sena, 2001: 84). Second, the *físico*’s face is transferred onto the monks who have tortured his body, and the values of freedom and love that he stands for are multiplied and reiterated visually, no matter who is the subject or object of the gaze (Sena, 2001: 85-86). Finally, the very visibility of the *físico*’s ravaged body in the public space beyond the Inquisition’s palace provokes a popular revolt that brings down the Inquisition’s rule (Sena, 2001: 110). Indeed, by this point in the text which sees the *físico* dragging his body out of the grounds of the Palace of the Inquisition, and which is reminiscent of Christ’s walk to Calvary, the protagonist is referred to merely as

‘o corpo’: the magical and medicinal qualities inherent in the word *físico* have given way to the physical and the visible (Eiras, 2008: 42).

Visibility through physical presence thus appears as a form of resistance in itself – a resistance against the indignity that the Inquisition seeks to impose through bodily violation (Soyinka 2004: 93). At an early stage in the process of evidence collection, when the Inquisition tries to force the *físico* to become invisible and thus incriminate himself, he literally defecates on their attempts to subjugate him and resists the forced removal of his dignity by performing one of the least dignified acts possible (Sena, 2001: 85). Equally, the devil’s response to Frei Antão’s demands that he show himself is to appear as Frei Antão himself (the friar, in turn, bears the *físico*’s face) (Sena, 2001: 93). In both of these examples, to be visible is to resist, for to be physically and visibly present causes the subject of the gaze to be mindful of the object’s agency. Where the Inquisition seeks to make the evidence (what can be seen/understood) fit the crimes, the reliability of knowledge gleaned from their observations is undermined. The fantastic series of events represented in *O Físico Prodigioso* shows up the knowledge that might be attached to the seen world as unverifiable and unstable. In this text, the ability to see does not imply the right to knowledge and the interpreted nature of what is seen is foregrounded.

The Inquisition’s focus on the *físico*’s looks (as revealed in the passage cited above) imbues the horseman with a meaning that is in many ways greater than his acts would suggest, for the *físico* is shown in the novella to be selfish, narcissistic and power hungry, despite the parallels that are established with the biblical story of Christ (Cota Fagundes, 1981: 136). Indeed, it is precisely his non-conformity to the archetype of the hero that makes the *físico* a useful character, for he shows the range of human potential and the complex diversity (‘good’, ‘bad’ and in between) of thoughts, actions and emotions that we experience as humans – as do Dona Urraca and the devil (Fazenda Lourenço, 1998: 189). Through his

multiple and varied presentation of perspectives, Sena destabilises binary notions and seeks to locate knowledge and perspective as partial, positioned and embodied.

In his exploration of the gaze, Sena questions the visual (and the sexed body) as a marker of identity, calling instead for a focus on pleasure experienced through the body. He rejects the binary construction of licit/illicit sex as a regulatory force that emerges through the deployment of sexuality (modulated, as it is, by the heterosexist construction of the male body as holding desire that produces its meaning on the lacking female body). Sena shifts the so-called 'male gaze', de- and re-constructing it to examine it from a number of alternative perspectives and therefore questioning the construction of a heterosexual norm with penetrating male and passive female bodies as 'licit'. He presents women and men alike as sexual agents; same- and opposite-sex acts as equally valid. He removes the sexed body from sight in order to explore the potential of the body as a site or location of pleasure where and as it is experienced, rather than as a site where desire is only produced/reproduced, anticipating pleasure but never satisfied. The power relation is balanced through the shifting that occurs in where the gaze (and its potential for power) is located: the gaze is held by all of the various characters and narrator at some point in the novella. In his interrogation of the gaze as a regulatory or disciplinary tool, Sena reinforces the centrality of desire in the production of knowledge. Yet he also underlines the distinction between vision and power: they are not the same thing (Soyinka 2004: 53). By exploring, in multifarious ways, what it is to be both subject and object of the gaze (what it is to be bound *and* liberated by/from the gaze), Sena reveals how the features of viewing that are understood to increase desire are locked into an unsettling relationship of meaning construction. *O Físico Prodigioso* plays with the way that human beings make sense of the world and of one another through vision, for characters and readers alike; and a close reading of the text reveals how fragile that sense is, how reliant it is upon a questionable, if conventional understanding that what – and not

how – we see can lead to knowledge. By continually destabilising the visual and relocating the subjects and objects of the gaze, Sena questions and foregrounds the inherent partiality of all perspectives.

Haraway (1988: 590) has suggested that the complex and contradictory, locatable and partial views from the body are a complex process of ‘ongoing critical interpretation’ – a stance that may imply confusion, rather than the apparent clarity that an unlocatable ‘objectivity’ brings. Such confusion is to be desired. It is precisely such confusion and complexity – amply illustrated in *O Físico Prodigioso* - that highlights how knowledge cannot be located singly, simply, or anywhere in particular. The novella makes no case for a one-off revolution or a single act of contestation because new power structures may ultimately prove to be as flawed as those that they supercede – indeed, revolution as such is presented by Sena as being potentially as undesirable as the regime it unseats, for it succeeds in imposing another form of repression that is epitomised in the gang rape of a young girl at the end of the novella, while her elderly companion is unable to act to protect her (Sena 2001: 116). The failure of the popular revolt – and the construction of the narrative in which that revolt fails (see also Soyinka 2004: 27) – causes a consideration of alternative ways of seeing and understanding; a diversity of situated perspectives and knowledges that promote multiple ways of seeing, and do not impose any one in particular. Through his multifarious approach to the gaze, Sena refuses to accept that it has regulatory power over bodies, making the gaze at once nobody’s and everybody’s. Sena highlights for us the potential power of recognising our own positionality and that of others, and his celebration of subjectivity and the particularity of experience located in the individual body reminds us that greater power comes both from recognising and contesting the inherent weakness of a monolithic and undemocratic notion of ‘objectivity’, and from drawing together and valuing a broad set of subjective perspectives and embodied experiences of the world, which may see greater

representation of diverse views, knowledges and understandings in the plural, and from these many ways of looking there may emerge new, collective ways of being that have positive implications for both personal relationships and broader socio-political contexts.

Rhian Atkin, December 2015

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