

“Let’s howl, said the dog”: Dissent, Potentiality, and the Politics of Voice in José Saramago’s *Seeing*.

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Abstract

This article rereads José Saramago’s *Seeing* (2004) by foregrounding the dog whose howl frames the novel. Moving beyond human-centred interpretations of political dissent, it brings Jacques Rancière’s *distribution of the sensible* into dialogue with Giorgio Agamben’s critique of biopolitical sovereignty. While the novel presents the dog’s invitation to howl as a possible interruption

of political violence and narrative closure, critical and authorial interpretations tend to translate the animal voice back into a humanist framework. The article asks what it would mean to resist this impulse to ‘control the narrative’ and hear the howl as a challenge to the anthropocentric limits of political and literary intelligibility.

Introduction: Blindness, Lucidity, and the Politics of Dissent

José Saramago's *Seeing* (*Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*, 2004) opens with a minor procedural inconvenience that quickly escalates into a full-scale political crisis. On the day of municipal elections in the capital of an unnamed country—the same country that had been struck by an epidemic of ‘white blindness’ in Saramago’s earlier novel, *Blindness* (*Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, 1995)—no one shows up to vote, apparently deterred by the torrential rain. When the rain finally stops, at four o’clock in the afternoon—a liminal hour “neither late nor early, neither fish nor fowl” (Saramago, *Seeing* 13)—the citizens finally leave their houses en masse and stream to their polling stations. At first, the officials breathe a sigh of relief, but when the votes are finally counted, it appears that an overwhelming majority of the ballots are blank. A second election, held a week later under ideal atmospheric conditions, produces an even higher percentage (eighty-three percent) of blank votes. Thus, what initially seemed like an anomaly instead appears to be a deliberate act of collective insubordination. Rather than interpreting these results as a challenge to its legitimacy, the government instead frames the blank vote as “a vile assault on the very foundations of representative democracy” (31) and declares a state of emergency. The intelligence services are mobilized to interrogate the citizenry, but they are ultimately unable to discover the truth of who is behind this conspiracy. Eventually, the government decides to leave the capital, which is placed under a blockade and formally designated a “lawless city” (85), expected—indeed, required—to descend into anarchy and a Hobbesian war of all against all. Instead, the withdrawal of the municipal government and the police leads to scenes of quiet cooperation and communal spirit. Frustrated by the people’s apparent indifference and self-sufficiency, the interior minister—who emerges as the central antagonist of the novel—stages a terrorist attack on a metro station in the city centre and tries to pin it on the insurrectionists, but even this fails to produce the desired result. Finally, following a tip-off from a concerned citizen denouncing a woman (the wife of his ophthalmologist and the protagonist of *Blindness*,

who did not go blind) as being behind this “new blindness” (173), the interior minister dispatches a team of undercover policemen to secure proof of the woman’s guilt by any means necessary. The novel ends with the extrajudicial killing of the doctor’s wife and her dog, whereupon, it is suggested, a new epidemic of blindness ensues.

Written in the aftermath of 9/11, and in the context of the War on Terror, *Seeing* gives literary form to Saramago’s outspoken critique of what he described as the contemporary “age of lying” (Saramago, “edad de la mentira”)¹ defined by the erosion of democratic norms, the normalization of emergency powers, and the production of consent through fear and disinformation. Saramago, who was born in 1922 and lived for much of his life under the Salazarist *Estado Novo* (1933-1974), repeatedly warned of the fragility of democratic institutions and the ease with which formally democratic regimes slide into authoritarian practices. As was the case in *Blindness*, the indeterminacy of the setting allows *Seeing* to operate on an allegorical level: the capital city may or may not be Lisbon, but the dynamics at play are potentially applicable everywhere. Moreover, the original titles of these two novels identify them as ‘essays’ (on blindness and lucidity, respectively) rather than novels, indicating that the principal aim is to explore a problem or question in narrative form. In this regard, *Seeing*, like *Blindness* before it, can be seen as a (literary) contribution to a contemporary political and philosophical debate on state violence, the fragility of democracy, and the possibilities—and limits—of resistance in the face of sovereign power. The mass blank vote has been described as a lesson in participatory decision-making, a collective refusal of political interpellation, or an experiment in “Bartlebian politics,” whereby Bartleby’s famous refrain, “I would prefer not to,” serves as a model of passive resistance (Žižek 214). Given the prominence of the state of exception and the question of (bio)political sovereignty, the novel resonates powerfully with the work of Giorgio Agamben. At the same time, given their preoccupation with sense perception and its relation to political subjectivity, both *Blindness* and *Seeing* are clearly aligned with Jacques Rancière’s work on dissensus, the politics of aesthetics, and the *distribution of the sensible*.

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

Seeing, which Saramago described as his most political and subversive novel (“Nous ne vivons”), thus quite clearly and overtly functions as a political parable about the *state of exception* and a critique of authoritarian responses to democratic dissensus. My purpose in this essay is not to dispute such a reading, which is not only plausible but indeed actively suggested by the novel itself. Rather, I am interested in a salient feature of the novel which most interpretations leave either uninterrogated or at least unexplained, but which bookends the entire action and, as I hope to show, goes to the heart of the political, philosophical, and aesthetic stakes of the novel: the figure of the dog whose howl frames the novel. As noted above, *Seeing* ends with the death of the doctor’s wife and her dog Constant. The final sentences are worth quoting in full:

The woman goes over to the iron balustrade, places her hands on it and feels the coolness of the metal. We cannot ask her if she heard the two successive shots, she is lying dead on the ground and her blood is sliding and dripping onto the balcony below. The dog comes running out, he sniffs and licks his mistress’s face, then he stretches out his neck and unleashes a terrifying howl which another shot silences. Then a blind man asked, Did you hear something, Three shots, replied another blind man, But there was a dog howling too, It’s stopped now, that must have been the third shot, Good, I hate to hear dogs howl. (307)²

The sudden appearance of these two blind men implies that following this double killing, the country is on the brink of a new epidemic of blindness, which can then be read as a cipher for authoritarianism, the normalization of the state of exception, and the collapse of the social order. The first blind man’s disdainful remark that he “hate[s] to hear dogs howl” explicitly harks back to the phrase that serves as the

- 2 Saramago’s prose style is characterised by a sparse use of punctuation, restricted to commas and full stops, with no quotation marks, question marks, colons, etc., which, Saramago felt, would interrupt the “continuous flow” of the narrative. According to his translator Giovanni Pontiero, the basic principle underlying Saramago’s style is that “everything *said* is destined to be *heard*” (qtd. in Orero and Sager xi, original italics). This emphasis on the oral/aural quality of narrative is highly significant, since, as we will see, the question of who can speak and whose voice can be heard is a central concern of the novel.

novel's epigraph: "Let's howl, said the dog." The political crisis of *Seeing* is thus bracketed by an animal voice that is first issued as an invitation and finally dismissed as an intolerable noise. But why should a novel so insistently concerned with voting, legality, and political legitimacy be framed by the voice of an animal? What work does this figure perform, and what does it ask of the reader? How does this framing affect the way we read the novel, and how can this be read as a key to understanding what is at stake in this text? In what follows, I propose that we take this framing seriously, by which I mean that rather than approaching the dog as a moral allegory or a symbolic proxy for human protest, we should instead ask what happens if the howl is understood as marking a limit to political intelligibility itself. If existing readings of the novel have convincingly established Saramago as a novelist of political dissensus, what remains largely unexamined, and where the present article intervenes, is the role played by the figure of the animal, and indeed the human/animal binary, in structuring the sensible field within which such dissensus becomes perceptible as politics at all.

I will proceed in three stages. First, I revisit the Aristotelian distinction between *logos* and *phonē* as it has been reworked by Rancière and Agamben in their theorizations of (bio)political subjectivity, sovereignty, and dissent. I then turn to Saramago's novel to explore how it stages a self-reflexive engagement with questions of contingency, narrative control, and political potentiality. Finally, I return to the figure of the dog, arguing that the framing of the novel by the dog's howl marks a limit to humanist interpretations of political dissent, opening instead onto a politics of potentiality that remains unresolved but holds open a gap in the distribution of the sensible.

Political Animals

To understand why *Seeing* frames its political crisis with the figure of a howling dog, it is useful to return to one of the founding moments of Western political thought—Aristotle's definition of the human being as a political animal (*zōon politikon*) in Book I of *The Politics*:

Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and she has endowed man alone among the animals with the power of speech [*logos*]. Speech is something different from voice [*phonē*], which is possessed by other animals also and used by them to express pain or pleasure; for their nature does indeed enable them not only to feel pleasure and pain but to communicate these feelings to each other. Speech, on the other hand, serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust. For the real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perception [*aisthēsis*] of good and evil, the just and the unjust, etc. It is the sharing of a common view [*koinōnia*] in these matters that makes a household [*oikos*] and a state [*polis*]. (Aristotle 1253a)

In this foundational passage, Aristotle distinguishes between *phonē*, the mere voice shared with other animals, and *logos*, the capacity for speech that articulates the just and the unjust, the advantageous and the harmful. It is not life in common as such that makes humans political, Aristotle insists, but participation in a shared *logos*: a common sense (*koinē aisthēsis*) of what counts as good and bad, right and wrong. On this basis, the city (*polis*) emerges as a community of speech, while the household (*oikos*) remains the domain of necessity, reproduction, and animal life. It is worth noting that *logos* does not simply denote speech in the sense of vocal utterance: it also means word, reason, account, proportion. Etymologically, *logos* derives from *legein*, to gather, to select, to arrange, to put in order. *Logos* is thus, first and foremost, a faculty of distinction. It enables the drawing of lines: between just and unjust, good and bad, useful and harmful—but also, more fundamentally, between human and animal, nature and culture, private life and political life. The political community, for Aristotle, is founded on a shared capacity to make such distinctions. The *polis* exists for the sake of *eu zēn*, the good life, and not merely *zēn*, life as such. Politics, in this sense, is the collective organization of life according to a shared conception of the good.

Both Rancière and Agamben return to this passage in order to interrogate the meaning of the political. Rancière takes Aristotle at his word

when he claims that the *polis* is founded on a shared sense (*aisthēsis*) of the just and the unjust, etc.—a ‘common sense’ that is at once ethical and sensory. Politics, on this account, is not grounded primarily in rational deliberation, but in the ordering of perception itself—in what can be seen, heard, felt, and recognised as meaningful. The decisive issue for Rancière, therefore, is not the essence of the human, but the conditions under which something counts as *logos* rather than mere *phonē*. The political stakes of this distinction are articulated through what Rancière famously calls the “distribution of the sensible” (*le partage du sensible*), by which he means the historically specific partition through which a community determines what can be seen and not seen, heard and not heard, said and not said (*Politics* 12). In French, *partager* means both to divide and to share: it names at once a cut and a distribution, a partition that separates the world into discrete parts and an allocation that determines who may ‘take part’ in what is held in common. The distribution of the sensible is therefore not merely a cultural background or perceptual framework; it is the operation that establishes the very conditions of participation.

In this sense, politics is always already aesthetic—not because it concerns art or beauty, but because it rests on an ordering of perception and experience. A given political reality is founded on determinations of what can be seen, felt, and heard; of what counts as speech and what is dismissed as mere noise. Conversely, aesthetics is always political insofar as it concerns the organisation of the sensible field within which subjects, actions, and meanings become perceptible and intelligible. Importantly, this distribution is never fixed once and for all. It is subject to dispute and redistribution, and for Rancière it is precisely this contestation—this interruption of the sensible order—that constitutes politics as such. “Traditionally,” Rancière writes,

in order to deny the political quality of a category—workers, women and so on—all that was required was to assert that they belonged to a ‘domestic’ space that was separated from public life, one from which only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger or anger could emerge, but not actual speech demonstrating a

shared *aisthesis*. And the political aspect of these categories always consists in re-qualifying these spaces, in getting them to be seen as the places of a community; it involves these categories making themselves seen or heard as speaking subjects (if only in the form of litigation)—in short, as participants in a common *aisthesis*. (“Ten Theses” 38)

The essence of politics, then, is not consensus but dissensus: “It consists in making what was unseen visible; in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech [...]. It is the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself” (38). Rancière’s definition of politics flies in the face of consensus-based theories of the political (from Habermas to Rawls). The object of such philosophies is not politics, Rancière argues, but rather *police*, which for Rancière is not simply the repressive apparatus of the state but rather the logic that naturalizes the existing distribution of the sensible. It is characterized, as he writes, by “the absence of void and of supplement” (36): society is imagined as a complete and exhaustive arrangement of functions, places, and ways of being, in which there is no remainder and no excess. The police order denies the possibility that there might be something else, something more. Its implicit slogan—one that resonates strongly with the language of *Seeing*—is “Move along! There’s nothing to see here!” (37). Politics, by contrast, consists in transforming spaces of circulation into spaces of appearance, instituting a dispute over what can be seen, said, and heard.

Agamben, meanwhile, focuses on Aristotle’s assertion that the *polis* exists for the purpose of securing “the good life” (*eu zēn*), as opposed to just providing the material basis for life (*zēn*) (Aristotle 1252b). In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes that “the opposition between life (*zēn*) and good life (*eu zēn*) [...] is, in fact, at the same time an implication of the first in the second, of bare life in politically qualified life” (7). Rather than debating the precise definition of the “good life,” as political philosophy has contented itself to do, Agamben instead insists that we ask “why Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life. What,” he continues, “is the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included

by means of an exclusion?” (7). Political life (*bios*) does not simply leave natural life (*zoē*) behind; it captures it by excluding it, installing bare life at the very threshold of the political order as its silent foundation. The political community is therefore always founded upon an exception, one that both establishes and destabilizes its boundaries. In order to qualify as a political animal—as a *zōon politikon*—the human being must exclude not only actual animals from participation in the *polis*, but also their own animality. The distinction between human and animal is thus not settled in advance; it must be continually produced and policed. Who or what counts as human, and hence as a “natural” member of the political community, remains an open and contested question, the site of a “a ceaselessly updated decision” meant to produce the “truly human being” but which instead can only produce “a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a bare life” (*The Open* 38). Indeed, it is no accident that in Aristotle’s definition of the *polis*, the distinction between bare life and political life should be isomorphic with the distinction between *phonē* and *logos*. Just as *zoē* is included in the *polis* only insofar as it is excluded as bare life, *phonē*—the animal voice expressive of pleasure and pain—is included in *logos* only as what must be overcome or silenced. The question of how life dwells in the *polis*, Agamben writes, “corresponds exactly with the question of how a living being has language,” since “the living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the *polis* by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it” (*Homo Sacer* 8). The political animal is thus constituted through a double exclusion: of bare life from the good life, and of animal voice from articulate speech. It is this internal disjunction, he argues, that makes possible the reduction of the human to bare life under conditions of sovereign power. The question, for Agamben, then becomes how to suspend or short-circuit this exclusionary logic and imagine a community that would not be founded on an exception.

Despite their differences, Agamben and Rancière thus converge on a crucial point: politics, for both, is not the administration of what is already given, but the interruption of an order that presents itself as necessary and complete. Whether conceived as the disturbance of the

distribution of the sensible or the rendering inoperative of a biopolitical apparatus, political action names a break in the way things are. Read against this theoretical background, *Blindness* and *Seeing* emerge as sustained literary experiments in the politics of perception. Both novels are obsessively concerned with sensory categories—seeing and not seeing, clarity and obscurity, lucidity and blindness—and both stage crises of community that are inseparable from crises of sense. In *Blindness*, the sudden loss of sight precipitates the collapse of social order, exposing the fragility of norms, laws, and moral distinctions once the sensory foundations of shared reality are withdrawn. In *Seeing*, by contrast, the crisis unfolds in reverse: an act of collective lucidity is immediately framed as a relapse into blindness. What the authorities refuse to acknowledge is not the political character of the blank vote. On the contrary, they recognise it as an act of dissent, and it is for this very reason that it must be redescribed as an assault on the foundations of democracy. To accept the blank vote at face value—as voters exercising their constitutional right to vote for none of the above—would be to concede that the legitimacy of the existing political order has been called into question. The three-party system that structures parliamentary life in the novel—the party on the right, the party in the middle, and the comparatively small and ineffectual party on the left—presupposes that all political positions can be counted, represented, and exhausted by these options. The blank vote exposes the limits of this representational logic, revealing a remainder that cannot be assimilated without destabilising the system as a whole.

The desperation with which the government seeks to disavow this remainder is reflected in the increasingly incoherent metaphors through which it attempts to name the threat. The blank vote is variously described as a “plague” (77), a “virus,” as the bite of a “subversive insect” (67), a “malignant tumor,” a “tapeworm” paralysing the civic conscience of the population, a “dangerous germ of perversion and corruption,” and—most absurdly—a “torpedo fired below the waterline of the majestic ship of democracy” (272-3). These mixed metaphors betray what Rancière has called the ‘hatred of democracy’ on the part of those in power. Democracy is celebrated so long as it functions as

a mechanism for reproducing the existing order; when it produces an outcome that cannot be managed or represented, it is redescribed as pathology. The population itself comes to be treated as a kind of virus that must be isolated, contained, or excised.³

Crucially, the blank vote does not articulate a demand. It does not nominate a representative subject, advance a programme, or express a preference that could be translated into the language of institutional *logos*. It is a collective, negative gesture that refuses qualification. For this reason, it must be relegated to the domain of *phonē*: an inarticulate murmur, a meaningless noise whose very refusal to make sense threatens the prevailing distribution of the sensible. The government’s response can thus be read quite literally as an attempt to restore the police order: to reassert a partition of the sensible in which political speech is once again monopolised by authorized voices and recognised forms of articulation.

Saramago underscores the violence of this operation in the second half of the novel, when the narrative itself begins to conform to the conventions of a police procedural. Faced with a form of dissensus that has no leader and no face, the state seeks to manufacture a subject who can be named, accused, and neutralised. This shift in genre effectively dramatises the distinction Rancière draws between politics and police. Politics, understood as dissensus, disrupts the established order of perception; police work restores that order by assigning places, roles, and identities, and by suppressing the possibility that something else might appear.

It is against this backdrop that the dog’s howl acquires its full significance. Situated at the threshold between *logos* and *phonē*, the howl is neither meaningful speech nor mere sound. It is an address that cannot be assimilated to the existing distribution of the sensible, yet cannot be dismissed as purely natural noise. The epigraph’s invitation thus reads as a provocation addressed not so much to the characters in the novel, but rather to its readers: a call to reconsider the anthropocentric foundations of political representation. To hear the howl as political speech would require nothing less than a redistribution of the sensible, one

3 On this biopolitical rhetoric of contagion and its implications for the novel’s conception of ‘the people’ as opposed to ‘the population,’ see de Waard.

that unsettles the distinction between human and animal, speech and voice, politics and life. The fact that this invitation goes unheeded at the novel's end signals the restoration of the police order in its most fundamental form. The cycle of blindness and lucidity resumes. Yet the howl persists as a remainder—an unresolved demand that points toward another conception of community, and, perhaps, an alternative, more open ending to this narrative.

Contingency, Necessity, and Narrative Control

About halfway through the novel, immediately following an “acerbic exchange” between the prime minister and the president about the planned dissemination of government propaganda, and directly before the arrival of the fatal letter denouncing the doctor's wife as the mastermind behind the blank vote, the narrator turns to face his audience, anticipating an objection from a discerning, “analytical” reader, namely the suspicion that the preceding conversation was introduced merely to justify a change in narrative direction (*Seeing* 170). Was this scene a retrospective patch, added by the narrator to rationalise what was to come? Or was it rather an unforeseen but unavoidable event, part of the narrative's “destiny,” which has now forced the narrator to “set aside the story he had intended to write” (170) and pursue this unexpected new course instead? Who is in charge of this story anyway? It is difficult to give such a reader a satisfactory answer, the narrator says. “Unless, of course,” he adds, “the narrator were to be unusually frank and confess that he had never been quite sure how to bring to a successful conclusion this extraordinary [*nunca vista*, lit. ‘never seen’] tale of a city which, en masse, decided to return blank ballot papers” (170), in which case this sudden turn of events would be a welcome way out of the narrative impasse. “What other explanation is there,” he adds (with a wink), “for his abrupt abandonment of the complex narrative thread he had been developing merely in order to set off on gratuitous digressions not about what-did-not-happen-but-might-have, but about what-did-happen-but-might-not-have” (171). This is an extraordinary and quite vertiginous passage, a kind of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*: an interruption that serves both to draw attention to the constructedness of

the narrative and to implicate the reader in the events unfolding on the page. The narrator explicitly raises the question of necessity and potentiality, all the while reflecting on who or what is really controlling the narrative in this novel. The narrator’s ironic question—“What other explanation is there?”—serves precisely to raise the possibility that this is not the only explanation and that, by extension, this digression may not be ‘gratuitous’ at all, but rather the key to the novel’s conception of its own relation to history and politics. Just as, in Agamben’s reading of Aristotle, potentiality (*dynamis*) always also implies the “potential *not* to be or *not* to do,” since otherwise “potentiality would always already have passed into actuality” (Agamben, “Bartleby” 245; my emphasis), so the narrative here insists on the contingency of actuality, i.e. the co-existence of what did happen and what might have happened—and, implicitly, with what still might (not). The two versions of narrative control the narrator presents—either this event is just an excuse to change the course of the plot, or it’s an unforeseen event, beyond the narrator’s control—imply a different relationship between the narrator and his narrative, and also opens up a gap in the plot that might allow for a different ending. In this version of the novel—the one we are reading—that potentiality is foreclosed, but through this digression the narrator asks the reader to consider how it might not be.

This opening onto contingency is mirrored later in the novel, when the police superintendent, having come to recognise the injustice of his mission, decides to warn the doctor’s wife of the government’s efforts to pin the blame on her. When she asks him why he is helping them, he replies:

Because of something I read in a book, years ago now, and which I had forgotten, but which has come back to me in the last few days, What was that, We are born, and at that moment, it is as if we had signed a pact for the rest of our life, but a day may come when we will ask ourselves Who signed this on my behalf. (269)

This phrase, which Saramago claimed sums up the entire novel (“Saramago combat”), is later repeated, almost verbatim, when, in an

effort to challenge the government's narrative, the superintendent submits his own account of recent events to one of the few newspapers that is not fully co-opted by the government's propaganda machinery. When the executive editor asks him why he is taking such a risk, he repeats this account, adding, after "Who signed this on my behalf," "well, I asked myself that question and the answer is this bit of paper" (286). This pact that we sign by virtue of being born is, of course, the social contract, by which the citizen consents to be governed and obey the law in exchange for protection and civil rights. As Hannah Arendt writes in her essay on "Civil Disobedience": "A kind of consent is implied in every newborn's factual situation," but, since we cannot choose the circumstances of our birth, it is difficult to call this consent voluntary, unless, she adds, "the child happens to be born into a community in which dissent is also a legal and *de-facto* possibility once he has grown into a man. Dissent implies consent, and is the hallmark of free government; one who knows that he may dissent knows also that he somehow consents when he does not dissent" (88). In *Seeing*, the government's reaction to the blank vote demonstrates that there is in fact no right to dissent (at least not 'like that') and hence reveals the authoritarian reality behind the free and democratic façade.

At the same time, this episode has an important meta-fictional dimension; in asking who signed this on my behalf, the superintendent is in fact asking: who is the author of the story of my life? It may seem as though everything was already written long ago by God knows who, but is the ending really predetermined—by God, by fate, by Saramago? By delivering his account to the newspaper, signed in his own name, he is seeking to take control of his own narrative and become the author of the book whose name he cannot remember. For a moment, it does indeed seem as though this act has turned the tide of the narrative. Although the authorities immediately move to confiscate all copies of the newspaper containing his account, the text refuses to disappear. Instead, the city, framed as a single collective subject, responds by setting "hundreds of photocopiers" to work, redistributing the article through anonymous, horizontal networks of circulation (295). Sheets of paper rain down from buildings; strangers hand one another

photocopies; the truth spreads not through official channels but through collective improvisation.

This scene functions as a direct counterpoint to the government's earlier plan to "bombard" (165) the city with propaganda dropped from helicopters. Where the latter represents a vertical, authoritarian imposition of meaning, the former enacts a redistribution of the sensible from within the city itself. For a brief moment, the city appears to realise what the narrator earlier described only as a hypothetical possibility: a political community capable of taking matters into its own hands and daring to question the rhetoric of necessity, the dogma that "one thing inevitably leads to another" (292). And yet, this hopeful moment of "white magic" (*da branca*, in reference to the blank vote; 295) is short-lived. Just a few pages later, the superintendent is executed by a government hitman, the doctor's wife and her dog Constant are killed shortly thereafter. The police order peremptorily reasserts itself. The hoped-for redistribution of the sensible is summarily quashed, and the space of contingency opened by the narrator's digression is violently closed.

What these two moments share, then, is not so much their outcome as their form. Both articulate a vision of politics and history as something other than the execution of a predetermined script—whether that script is written by sovereign power or by the narrator himself. Both insist that political and narrative orders are contingent and open to renegotiation. And both demonstrate, with equal force, how threatening such openness is to a regime that depends on the foreclosure of possibility. Seen in this light, the novel's ending does not simply depict the triumph of authoritarian power; it stages the suppression of potentiality itself. The question 'does it have to end this way?' is raised insistently by the text, only to be answered—provisionally, contingently—in the affirmative. But the very fact that the question can be asked, and asked from within the narrative, signals that something remains unresolved. The remainder of this unresolved potential does not reside in a redemptive future promised by the novel, but in a limit it repeatedly gestures towards, without crossing. It is at precisely this limit that the figure of the dog returns. The howl that frames the novel marks not only the

end of the story, but the point at which the redistribution of the sensible confronts its own anthropocentric boundary. It is time, therefore, to go back to the beginning, and confront the dog's exhortation.

The Book of Voices and the Meaning of Life

Let us, then, by way of conclusion, return to the epigraph, which is marked by a number of productive ambiguities:

Let's howl, said the dog
—*The Book of Voices*

It is, first of all, a quotation: a reiteration of an utterance already spoken, already past, and thus already removed from the immediacy of voice. The apparent source of this quotation, *The Book of Voices*, appears in fact to be Saramago's own invention. Thus, not only does the phrase, like all epigraphs, occupy a liminal position, neither inside nor outside the narrative, it also seems to exist between citation and fabrication, voice, and writing. Indeed, the very notion of a 'book of voices' is something of a contradiction in terms, since writing conventionally secures meaning at the cost of silencing the voice it records. The indeterminacy also extends to genre: is it from a fable? But in fables, animals speak in human language; they do not howl. The dog is addressing one or more listeners—whose identities (and species) remain undetermined—inviting them (us?) to howl. He 'says' this, exhorting his audience to engage in a different form of shared utterance—one that, importantly, does not pass through *logos* and cannot be captured by writing. Howling is collective, contagious, and ephemeral; it leaves no archive. If it belongs to a 'book,' it does so only as a provocation, a gesture toward what cannot properly be written down.

Such ambiguity can be unsettling—even, it seems, for the author himself. In a newspaper interview, Saramago offered the following gloss on the epigraph: "The dogs are us. It's time to start howling" (*Os cães somos nós. É hora de começar a uivar*) ("Saramago combate"). At first glance, this remark seems to confirm what many readers

might already suspect: that the dog functions as a symbolic stand-in for the human collective, and that the howl names a metaphorical cry of protest against injustice and repression. Read in this way, the animal figure is folded seamlessly back into a humanist framework. The invitation to howl becomes a call for civic indignation, and the dog's voice is recuperated as an allegory of human speech. Yet this interpretive gesture—especially when it comes from the author himself—has the effect of prematurely resolving precisely those questions the novel otherwise so insistently raises. By declaring that "the dogs are us," Saramago neutralises the instability introduced by the animal voice and reinscribes the very distinction between *logos* and *phonē* that structures the anthropocentric tradition of political thought. If Saramago's signature prose style is indeed based on the premise that "everything said is destined to be heard" (Orero and Sager xi), this does not necessarily mean that everything that is 'heard' will be interpreted as having been 'said' in the first place. The dog is permitted to speak only insofar as his voice can be translated into a recognisable form of human discourse: "Let's howl, *said* the dog" (my emphasis). What appeared, in the novel, as a challenge to the boundaries of political audibility is thus retrospectively domesticated by the author in a gesture that inadvertently mirrors that of the first blind man who "hate[s] to hear dogs howl" (307). This gesture can be understood as a reactivation of what Agamben calls the 'anthropological machine'—a discursive apparatus or *dispositif* that (re-)produces the human as a political subject through the inclusive exclusion of the animal. Within the regime of humanist anthropocentrism, "man," as Agamben famously puts it, "is the animal that must recognise itself as human to be human," and this self-recognition proceeds, crucially, via the nonhuman (*The Open* 26). Literature has historically functioned as one such anthropological machine, training readers to identify with animal figures and to read them as reflections of themselves. In this way, the animal is not simply expelled from political subjectivity; it is captured as a limit figure, a metaphorical resource that helps define what political subjectivity is by standing in for what it is not. To say that the dog

‘really’ represents the human is to reinscribe animality as mere *phonē*, a pre-political substrate that acquires meaning only when elevated into *logos*. In this sense, Saramago’s own explanation disavows the possibility that we might not already know what the dog has to say to us.

In another interview, Saramago again insisted that the epigraph held the key to the entire novel: “The dog in the epigraph, it’s you, it’s me, it’s everybody” (*c’est tout le monde*) (“Il faudrait”). This is just one step away from insisting that ‘everybody’—the ‘monde’ in ‘tout le monde’—includes humans and nonhumans, and that to counteract the forces of authoritarianism we should therefore embrace our shared animality and engage in collective howling across species limits. But again, Saramago stops short, instead reaffirming the humanist subject and offering a final message, or moral: “I like the idea of ending a novel on the howling of a dog. The image symbolises the question I ask in all my novels: what is the meaning of ‘life’?” (*que signifie la vie?*) (“Il faudrait”). This is, frankly, a bit trite, but perhaps we can rescue this question from the jaws of banality by rephrasing it as a question about the distinction between two forms of life: *bios* and *zoē*. The meaning of life is not a given, but the outcome of a political decision that separates qualified life and articulate speech from bare, animal life that remains excluded from the realm of intelligibility and common sense. The dog’s invitation to howl marks precisely the threshold of this zone of indeterminacy, where life has not yet been assigned its meaning—and where politics, in its most radical sense, might still begin.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to make the case that *Seeing* is secretly a post-humanist fable of more-than-human community-building, particularly when one considers just how little nonhuman animal life actually appears in the novel. If at all, animality inhabits the text only in a figurative sense—e.g. the aforementioned animal metaphors (“tapeworm,” “insect”) used by the government to describe the threat posed by the blank vote, or the animal code names (“puffin,” “albatross,” “osprey”) which the interior minister insists on using when communicating with the police superintendent, prompting

the latter to mutter to himself: “Ye gods of police and espionage, what a farce, [...] the next thing you know we’ll be communicating by squawks and screeches” (206). While the latter is intended as an ironic aside, in both cases, animality is figured as an outside threat, a potential contagion eroding the logic of political order and rational discourse. But the only animals involved are humans. The single exception here is Constant, the Dog of Tears, who, notably, is the only named character in the novel. Our first encounter with Constant in *Seeing* is strikingly mediated, indeed a sort of mise-en-abyme: having tracked down the author of the letter indicting the doctor’s wife, the police superintendent is shown a photograph of the group of people she led to safety, taken at the end of *Blindness*. Looking at the photograph, he is struck by the presence of a large dog, standing next to the doctor’s wife, “looking straight at the camera” (201). The superintendent may not recognise the dog, but we who have read *Blindness* do: Constant stares at us from this scene in the earlier novel, across multiple frames and layers of representation, almost as if he is daring us to respond. It is worth noting that besides being the only named character in the novel, Constant is, in fact, a recurring figure across Saramago’s fiction, appearing first in *Raised from the Ground* (*Levantado do Chão*, 1980), and then again in *The Stone Raft* (*A Jangada de Pedra*, 1986) and *The Cave* (*A Caverna*, 2000), and of course in *Blindness*. He is, then, literally a sort of ‘narrative constant,’ and as such serves as an allegorical figure, typically appearing to guide or comfort human characters when they are lost or in distress. Saramago himself described him as “the incarnation of moral purity” (“Il faudrait”), and this, for the most part, is how scholars have read the dogs in Saramago’s fiction.⁴ Because of their appeal to common symbols, however, such readings privilege consensus over dissensus and moreover serve only to reinforce the workings of the anthropological

4 Even readings informed by posthumanism or animal studies tend to treat the dog primarily as a symbolic or allegorical figure, one that ultimately serves to reaffirm the human—whether by restoring lost humanity, modelling ethical behaviour, or functioning as a surrogate voice for the author’s moral vision (see, for example, Nashef; Salzani and Vanhoutte. For more conventional, i.e. thematic, treatments of Saramago’s dogs, see Mateus; Duarte; Sá).

machinery, inviting readers to recognise themselves in the nonhuman as the embodiment of innocence, purity, and the resilience of the human spirit in the midst of widespread depravity and inhumane violence, while at the same time obstructing a more radical redistribution of the sensible in which the human is not automatically the *a priori* subject of narrative and moral consideration.

Of course, any interpretation operates by drawing boundaries: between sense and nonsense, signal and noise, inside and outside. As such, interpretation is itself a mode of controlling the narrative, a way of distributing the sensible by deciding what counts or should count as meaningful. To read the dog's howl as a symbol of human protest is to render it intelligible—but only by stripping it of the very excess that made it troubling. But what alternative is there to such humanist allegorical readings, especially when they are so clearly suggested both by the author and the text itself? What, in short, is the literary animal studies scholar to do? There simply is no sustained 'animal perspective' to recover in *Seeing*. The novel does not grant access to nonhuman interiority, nor does it appear to imagine alternative multispecies forms of community. If anything, the complete absence of nonhuman life from this highly allegorical city seems almost like an oblique confirmation of the fact that the *polis* is founded upon the exclusion of animality and the animal voice.

The task, therefore, would be to explore how, despite Saramago's resolute humanism—however "inclusive" (Salzani and Vanhoutte) it may be—the animal figures that inhabit the text, even in the form of metaphors and epithets, obstruct the smooth functioning of the anthropological machine in its effort to draw a clear distinction between the inside and the outside, speech and noise, the human and the animal. And perhaps the dog's ability to transgress narrative and textual boundaries holds a clue: according to the prevailing interpretation, one endorsed by Saramago himself, Constant is an allegorical figure, a symbol of comfort and goodness in the face of moral degradation. This is what makes his death at the end of *Seeing* so poignant. With his death, all hope would appear to be lost. But here it matters how we, as readers, respond to this howl, which

frames the novel, and in the process moves from the epigraph (para-textual, extra-diegetic) to the diegesis itself, drawing the reader into the action. The final scene, importantly, is focalised through an external observer—one for whom the doctor’s wife and Constant are simply “the woman” and “the dog,” and whose perspective therefore coincides with that of the government’s hitman—before shifting to the two blind men, citizens of the newly re-established police state, who “hate to hear dogs howl” (307). At the same time, by virtue of being referred to simply as “the dog” in this final scene, his identity becomes indistinguishable from that of the subject of the epigraph, which had primed the reader to attend to the dog’s howl. Our sense of shock and dismay at this ending and the callous rejection of the dog’s exhortation reassures us that we are not blind, and thus reveals a potential gap in the sensible itself.

I suggested before that the narrator’s self-conscious asides about necessity and contingency recall Bertolt Brecht’s techniques of alienating the audience (*Verfremdungseffekt*). A case in point is Brecht’s 1941 play *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (*The Good Person of Szechwan*), a similarly pessimistic political parable, likewise set in an allegorised city, with a bleak, unsatisfying ending, followed by an epilogue in which one of the actors appeals to the audience that it is up to them to create a world in which the play could have a better, more just ending. In much the same way, *Seeing* places the burden of resolution outside the text, with the reader. And the key to imagining an alternative ending, and thus finding a way out of the endless cycle of blindness and violence, lies in figuring out how to respond to the dog’s invitation to howl, which means going against the prevailing order and the voices of authority—including that of the author—that try to convince us to move along, that there is nothing to see or hear here. The failure of the howl to be heard at the novel’s conclusion marks the restoration of a familiar order. What is foreclosed, once again, is the possibility of hearing a political voice outside the established distribution of the sensible. But because the novel has already exposed the contingency of its own narrative trajectory—implying that what did happen might just as easily not have—this ending cannot be

taken as definitive or inevitable. It stands instead as a provocation: a demonstration of how easily dissent is neutralized when it cannot be translated into authorized forms of speech, and an invitation to imagine an alternative scenario, one in which even that which is “said” outside the frame of rational intelligibility may indeed be “destined to be heard.” Perhaps, then, the ambition of Saramago’s novel—one which neither it nor its author can name or fully articulate, but which exists on the periphery, haunting the text as an unactualizable potentiality—would be to transform itself into a ‘book of voices,’ a narrative capable of registering forms of collective expression that exceed the logic of political and aesthetic representation. The dog’s invitation to howl persists as a horizon of possibility—an address that the novel stages, repeats, and ultimately leaves unanswered. Or rather, it leaves it up to us, the readers, to decide how to respond.

Acknowledgements

Many of the ideas developed in this article took shape in the context of my course “Literature and Dissent” at Utrecht University. I would like to thank my students for sharing their insights, questions, and frustrations as we grappled with Saramago, Agamben, and Rancière over the years.

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Biography

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