Work, time and visibility: prophetic narratives in the Brazilian sertão

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We shall present a few images from the book Rain Prophets, published in 2006. They show the men we worked with, gathering their opinions on life in sertão and the times to come. For eleven years, always on the second Saturday of the year, the Business Center Association of the city of Quixadá gathers men, mostly agricultures, known in the community for their foreseeing of the rains to come. They are, therefore, called prophets. Together with technicians and amateur meteorologists they say what they think the next winter will be like: rainy or dry.

In a dry region with deep social problems associated with the lack of rain, the poor utilization of water reservoirs and with the industrial politics of drought, the oral tradition of men from the interior of Ceará puts the rain prophets in a privileged position within the community. Facing the expectations of drought, synonym no famine, death and privation, the dreams and hopes are summarized in the sentence “the weather is beautifully rainy”, expression used to anticipate rain. The prophetic narratives of these agricultures (mostly) relating to the weather, the rain or its absence play a particular role in the relations between nature and language, man as a continuation of nature.

In opposition to an ecological discourse that empties the place man has in relation to nature or even in the present importance given to nature as an idyllic, dreamlike space, absent from conflicts, resting, a place destined to leisure (such as the modern resorts, for example) – nature, in its intimate relation to work and ethics, is an “open book”, in the

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words of prophet Chico Leiteiro. This way, nature places a different role in relation to
knowledge. Seeing is one thing and knowing is another, says the prophet. This book-nature
has multiple meanings. In its relationship with the prophet, nature is the referent that asks
for the production of interpretations. For this reason, the texts proposed are permanently
reinvented and can be used in many different ways.

According to Maturana and Varela (The truth of knowledge, 1995, p. 37), all text asks
for someone to help it work, or else, “to know is to make and to make is to know”. The
reflection about human knowledge happens within language which is “our particular way of
being humans and being in the making of humanity” (p. 69). But still according to these
authors, in order to state this *continuum* it is necessary for us to think on the circularity
between action and experience. Therefore we must not forget that all that is being produced
and said is produced and said by someone, it is a human action, performed by someone in
particular and in a particular environment.

Why do we produce narratives? To narrate is to affirm life. Narration is the human
invention of border spaces. Walter Benjamin said that in the real narrative the soul, the eye
and the hand are placed within the same space: the invisible, the visible and the work. In
the real narrative the hand intervenes decisively, with its gestures, learned in the experience
of work. Benjamin asks himself: isn’t this experience the raw material of the narrative
experience as an expressive way of knowledge? The experience with work and with the
hands is what sustains the significant fluxes of saying what is not possible, transforming the
experience into something solid, unique, useful.

In the open work performed by the prophets, with the dilution of the role played by
the expectator (opposite to the world to be deciphered), man is not a mere passive decoder
of meanings but a recreator. This way we shall focus the visibility regime put in practice by
the nature prophets in the sertão of Ceará. Such visibility regime is totally different than the
one present both in the mediated-audiovisual and in the scientific regimes we live in. In the
first one, reality shows, webcams, web logs and surveillance cameras follow the principle
that everything must be shown, building a sense of reality closely linked to visibility.
Contemporary subjectivities are deeply affected by such principle of mediated visibility and
find a privileged space for aspiration and realization.
The expositions of intimacy, of private life, of the banality of everyday life in the media witness this tendency. Such images that intend to show everything are, in general, images with no secret, no shadow, images that expel the eye or keep it in the shallowness. Usually there is no in, no out and no beyond. In a similar tendency, techno-science broadens the borders of visibility and builds visualization systems that take us to the infinitely big and to the infinitely small, in an attempt to reveal everything, body and soul, untangling the natural borders between inside and outside, near and far, etc.

In opposition to such promise of maximal visibility, stand the prophets of northeast Brazil. From within the world where they live, the prophets read the subtle signs of everyday life in sertão – bees, ants, winds, smells, heat waves – foreseeing what is not there, what is not immediately visible: the future. In order to analyze another visibility regime present in their prophecies, our reference will be the phenomenological work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly the dialog between visible and invisible. We shall start with the idea that “to see is always to see more than what is seen” in order to show how it does not mean an hypertrophy of the visible (present in the subjectivity regimes of nowadays media and techo-science) but a reserved dimension of invisibility that affirms itself as a condition and a possibility for vision itself. This perspective implies a relationship with the visible where this guards some secrets, where things have an opacity to be revealed, where what is seen supposes always a not-seen and a dialog with what is not revealed immediately. There is, in vision, a kind of blindness, a dimension of invisibility. In the words of Merleau-Ponty:

“[… when I say that all visible is invisible, that perception is the lack of perception, that conscience has a “dark spot”, that seeing is always more than what is seen – one must not understand that as a contradiction: I am not adding a non-visible to the visible which would be simply an objective absence, that is, an objective presence elsewhere…); one must understand that visibility itself includes a non-visibility.”

Invisible, therefore conceived, is not another visibility placed elsewhere or an impotence of some kind but the very condition for visibility to take place. This is the mystery of vision. Prophet Chico Leiteiro puts the mystery in his own terms:

“I know almost nothing about letters but nature, … nature is an open book. Sometimes people say: how do you know: My friend, I answer, seeing is one thing and knowing is another”.

3
The prophet’s speech meets resonance with the one of the philosopher. Nature is not a spectacle nor a representation but something with which one dialogues. The world, says Merleau-Ponty, is a “correlative” of my body. Before being an object of knowledge, the world speaks to us through physical exchanges we establish with the things based on the functions and motor intentions we project upon them. This dialogue is made of vital significances which express things in terms of motor intentions. The sensible world – colors, odors, tactile impressions – is not the lifeless material or our knowledge nor simple subjective informations but the expression of the coexistence of my body and the things. A color only reveals an aspect of the colored object when it awakens in my body a certain behavior towards it. The world, therefore, expresses itself according to “physiognomies”. The perceived thing is not a positive reality but a meaning that is drawn in an allusive way. The physiognomy of the thing always anticipates the thing itself.

Prophet João Ferreira, when asked about his idea of nature, answers that he reads the signs of nature through the way his body responds to them: reading the signs of nature is reading, with the body, the inscriptions that appeal to meanings that will be shared in culture. The experiences that must anticipate a weather prediction are a kind of knowledge of different value to the other ones for they represent a witness of a body-action and of the senses. This way, the experience is what permits us to share the sensible world and to build a memory that affirms men as subject of its own destiny, inscribing him in a human community.

The body of the prophets seems to enter in a dialogue with the physiognomies of nature and within it to collect the signs of future times. The signs of a good winter listed by the prophets clarify this process: excessive heat, the presence of may spider nests in doors and windows, the movement of black and red ants upwards, thunder and lightning on the south coast in the month of October, the heavy sweat in the body are all signs of rain.

To collect in nature the signs of a time to come is to create a relation with the visible and the invisible that implies seeing beyond. That is why “seeing is always more than what is seen”. That is why vision is neither knowledge nor the representation of a totality; it is the relationship with a world that always reveals itself through aspects and profiles, guarding in all that is seen the promise of an unseen, of something yet to be seen. It is in this sense that the rain prophets keep an open dialogue with the world that leads to an
invisible dimension of vision in a way that the visible can promise future times to come. In such promise, life itself is reinvented.