

Programme

THE HANDS THAT WANT TO SEE

“The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress”

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Through centuries, there has been a historical and philosophical exploration of blindness and a fascination with what the blind actually do ‘see’. Visual culture calls for a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked.

To question blindness is to question what seeing, and sighted experience, entails in itself.

I too was struck with this fascination with what the blind ‘see’. Over the course of the past year, I have studied blindness through history, philosophy and the arts with great interest. My initial fascination came from a place of pity and a deep, personal fear of going blind. I viewed the loss of vision as the ultimate loss, as so many before me. I wanted to create architecture to aid those unfortunate enough to have entered a world of darkness.

Little did I understand that my views were skewed, filled with misconceptions. Discriminating even. I placed pity upon those I knew so little about. Thankfully, over the course of my studies I have learned to understand blindness, even if just a little. I do not claim to know what the Blind Experience entails, as I am just one of many Sighted taking great interest in blindness.

Through this diploma, I wish to raise awareness around blindness, deconstruct misconceptions and explore the Blind Experience of visual media, such as in The Arts and Architecture.

BLINDNESS

The term 'blind' creates all sort of confusion, as blindness often does not mean complete darkness. To most people blindness means total, absolute darkness: a complete absence of visual experience. However, blindness is not blackness. In fact, the majority of blind people can perceive light and colour in some degree. Only about 10% have this severe degree of impairment, disabling them to perceive light.

Another common misconception is that most blind people were born blind. This is very much not the case, as most of them have lost their sight during childhood or adulthood. This means most blind have a memory of the visual world, which in turn effects how they adjust to their new condition.

The fear of total darkness might be an underlying reason as to why so many people fear to develop visual impairments or blindness. Blindness was one of the highest-ranking health concerns among Americans in 2014, on par with cancer, HIV and Alzheimer's disease. However, blindness and visual impairments manifest themselves in many different ways and rarely mean complete darkness. In many of the cases, the degeneration of vision can be halted, even repaired.

This goes to show that blindness has earned an undeservingly bad reputation, striking great fear into people, including myself.

PHILOSOPHY

Through centuries, there has been a historical and philosophical exploration of blindness, and the possibilities of sensory substitution, and the perennial fascination with what the blind 'see'. The 'man born blind restored to light' was one of the foundational myths of the Enlightenment, according to Foucault. Numerous studies have been conducted on the blind, and with the possibilities of ophthalmic surgery, the fascination of what the formerly blind might 'see' after sight restoration still remains highly speculative.

Blindness manifests itself in many different forms. In most cases, blindness is not blackness, and light and colour are perceived in various forms from person to person. Dependent on each blind person's history and previous experience, they also adapt differently to their new, blind condition. Therefore, in contrast to what we might call 'actual' medical-legal form of blindness, philosophers created The Hypothetical Blind Man, whose blindness is congenital and complete. This assumes a monothematic truth to blindness and therefore permits studies of a generic form of blind experience.

Is being blind, as Descartes once remarked, like 'seeing with the hands?'

French philosopher René Descartes described the blind man as to be sensing the world with his hands. Through long sticks, poking and prodding the ground, the blind man could sense his environment in great detail. Descartes' view on blindness as 'seeing with the hands' is not unique. It is a common misconception that touch is a mere substitute to vision for the blind man. The blind man's perception of the world can be more accurately described as 'seeing with the entirety of the body and the self.' The same could be said about the sighted. Our perception is not the sum of the visual, tactile and audible givens. We perceive in a total way of our whole being.

Nonetheless, disregarding Descartes' perhaps limited knowledge on the blind's perception of the world, Descartes equates vision to touch. He considers touch more certain and less vulnerable to error than vision. Similarly, touch was regarded as a more true sensuous experience than vision by the French writer Husson. He explained: 'I prefer my touch to your eyes, because it allows me to appreciate things for what they really are (...).'

Further exclaiming touch as a equated sense to vision, Diderot believed that if ever a philosopher, born blind and deaf from his birth were to construct a man after the fashion of Descartes, he would place the seat of the soul at the finger's end, for thence the greater part of the sensations and all his knowledge are derived.

Unfortunately, not everyone share this idea. Through centuries, the vision has been regarded as the most noble of senses, and the loss of eyesight as the ultimate loss. The idea of the vision as the dominant sense can be traced back to the Renaissance, when the senses where understood to form a sort of hierarchical system from the highest sense of vision down to touch.

I think it is important to not pity the blind and judge the way they interact with their environments. Many blind are content experiencing the world differently to us sighted, and do not intend to restore their sight. While the possibility of ophthalmic surgery is a blessing, we must not fall into the trap believing we are giving the blind the 'gift' of sight. While us sighted might not be able to imagine a world without our vision, the same might be said about the blind. We must respect the different ways of experiencing and 'seeing' the world, and not believe one way is better than the other. It is also important not to discriminate the blind, judging their ability to interact with the world as we sighted do. Unfortunately, through centuries the blind (and the deaf) have been considered less intelligent, simply because they would not fit into the generic ways of measuring intelligence constructed by society. Still today, many blind are experiencing discrimination due to their inability to see.

BLINDNESS IN VISUAL MEDIA

Many blind have unfortunately experienced discrimination due to their handicap and been denied participation in fields such as art and literature. This discrimination can be tied to - as described earlier - the common misconception that blindness means total darkness and that the blind are not exposed to any visual stimuli whatsoever. This has further led to another misconception: that the blind have neither no interest or can possibly take pleasure in visual media. However, there are both blind authors and artists out there that take as much pleasure in these mediums as any other.

Art created by blind artists often have great tactile and haptic qualities. Some of the artworks are also vivid and colourful, painted in an impressionistic manner. There is no doubt that blindness and touch can bring a lot to Art.

But what about Architecture?

Architecture is not meant to be experienced through a magazine, blind architect Chris Downey said. The climate, the sounds, and the touch of the materials – all this goes into creating a whole environment. It is about being there physically and engaging with the environment. Architects have to think beyond just the visual aspects of architecture.

Studies show that as much as 80% of our sensuous stimuli comes through our vision. British philosopher Bryan Magee has made some noteworthy comments on the sighted that rely heavily upon their vision. He describes seeing as a need, a continuous feeding of stimuli, which leads to an almost ungovernable craving. This craving for the pleasure of the sight is so strong, that only if the sighted were eating all the time, they would be content. Visual stimuli is addictive.

While Magee may be describing the extreme cases of visual craving, we can clearly see that the modern world is obsessed by visual stimuli. Architect Juhani Pallasmaa voiced his concern on the matter in his book *The Eyes of the Skin*. Today, vision has been subject to a range of technological enhancements, further strengthening its significance as the most noble of senses. Other senses has been left rather untouched. From newspapers and

magazines, to televisions, mobile phones and social media – our society is characterised by a cancerous growth of vision, Pallasmaa claims. Everything is measured in its ability to show or be shown. The gradual growing hegemony of the eye seems to be parallel with the development of Western ego-consciousness and the gradual separation of the self and the world.

These tendencies are also visible in architectural practice and education. Juhani Pallasmaa explained it as an increasing dominance of the sense of vision and suppression of others. The way architecture is taught, conceived and critiqued, leads to the disappearance of sensory and sensual qualities in architecture. The dominant sense of vision also strongly figures in the writings of the Modernists, illustrated clearly in a quote by Le Corbusier: “I exist only if I can see”

Perhaps is this the reason why we have seen an opposing – call it ‘style’ if you would like – of architecture developing over the past years. Atmospheric architecture focus on the sensuous qualities that a space emits. Atmosphere can be describes as a form of physical perception, very much like described by French Philosopher Merleau Ponty. He explains that our body is both an object among objects and that which sees and touches them. Therefore, our perception is not the sum of only visual, tactile and audible givens, but we perceive in a total way of our whole being. Atmospheric architecture is shaped through the bodily experience and interaction with architecture. It is created in a human scale, bodily relatable and through measurements of the human body. Drawing similarities to John Locke’s theory on ideas and to Merleau Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, we can assume that through atmospheric architecture, the body and mind cannot be separated as subject and object, because the perception of the body influences what is perceived by the mind. Photography, written articles and the interpretation of others cannot compare to the individual experience and interaction with architectural spaces. German philosopher Gernot Böhme claims, “We must be physically present” to experience a space in its complete entirety.

EXPLORATION

Through my diploma, I had achieved an extensive inventory of smaller room studies, sketches and ideas on how blind and sighted could interact with architecture through experiences of light and matter. Created in a vacuum, free from limitations of the outer world, the studies did not want to come together to create a 'whole'. My initial approach to my working-method throughout the diploma was however exactly this: to create numerous studies that hopefully would inform a final, concluding project.

Nevertheless, perhaps it was not meant to be. I realised my heart and interest lied in the process, the experimentation and exploring, and the thoughts and reflection that of this sprung out onto paper. While understanding blindness a little more every day passing by, I had yet to reach a conclusion on the matter. Perhaps I never would. Similarly, my project asked of me not to be finalised in a single concluding building. I took a change of direction, into a heavier focus on the representative media of architecture, the process, the exploration and experimentation, and not so much on a finished product and conclusion. I wanted to create a work that would inform not only my project, but also equally others'.

The work would draw links between the blind and the sighted experience of architectural visual work, and bridge the gap between the different sensuous stimuli derived from vision and touch. I ought to create representative media such as the plan, the section, the render, the photographs (...) sparking a discussion of alternative ways of picturing architecture, for the blind and sighted equally.

To aid me in my work, I proposed a partial redesign of the in-process Deichmanske Library in Oslo. I recreated a small area from the existing plans, making it into a section for literature and spaces for the blind and visually impaired. While not being the core of my diploma, the proposal helped to bring out my experimental drawings into life.

The Diploma resulted in a series of visual architectural representation, drawing parallels between the blind and sighted experience of spatial qualities.