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# Landscape Shaped by Blindness. Touching the Rock (1990) and Notes on Blindness (2016): Towards an Ec(h)ology of Vision

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**Landscape shaped by blindness. *Touching the Rock* (1990) and *Notes on Blindness* (2016), Towards an ec(h)ology of vision.**

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Even to the most avid, most unquestioning cinema-goer, Middleton and Spinney's *Notes on Blindness* (2016) might appear as a paradoxical venture. The documentary feature, which shares its title with a 2014 short and a Virtual Reality companion piece, brought to the screen *Touching the Rock* (1990), theologian John Hull's testimony of sight loss. The memoir itself was adapted from the journal Hull recorded on cassettes between 1983 and 1986, three years after officially being registered as blind. In the adaptive process undergone by these notes over the years, the recent translation into the audio-visual media of film and digital VR might appear as one step too far—a misguided cooptation, if not an aggressive takeover. The potential indecency of converting a man's harrowing tale of sight loss into a visual medium seems immediate enough to arouse a scruple in any sighted spectator.<sup>1</sup> By deriving aesthetic pleasure from a film on blindness, might she be complicit in something obscene—in that the obscene gives a visual form to that which should remain imageless?

This aesthetic and ethical quandary seems to find confirmation in the subtitle that the filmmakers chose for their VR experience: *Into Darkness*. Beyond the apparent contradiction inherent in sculpting light to immerse us in darkness, this adaptive object raises complementary issues to those implied by the film. Its apparent attempt at emulating sensory deprivation might not offer any real insight into blind people's way of being.<sup>2</sup> Because of Middleton and Spinney's choice of topic, such a misapprehension would not simply appear as a mistake, a failure in the documentary's mission to capture something of reality. By failing to enhance awareness and understanding, their adaptation would contribute to a long history of disabling misrepresentations, which further marginalised a population that was already exposed.

The political and ethical issue raised here does not only pertain to the inherent vulnerability of disability: it is to do with the nature of visuality as a site of power. The matter of visually impaired people's place within contemporary societies is made more problematic by the latter's fetishising of sight—a phenomenon first designated by Martin Jay as 'ocularcentrism'. Mistaken attempts at apprehending blindness through visual media therefore entail a form of power-play. They take the risk of excluding visually impaired people even more from the sensory and cognitive world that we share as a society, that political space defined by 'the distribution of the sensible' (Rancière).<sup>3</sup>

Landscape, as a visual object, plays a crucial role in exploring this issue. Beyond its importance in Hull's testimony, which transports us from the rainy prospects of Birmingham to the rocky vistas of the protagonist's native Victoria, the genre crystallises the matter of visual power in a very particular fashion. Its ocularcentrism seems ingrained: the *OED* reminds us that the word was introduced as 'a technical term of painters' (*OED*, 'landscape, n.', accessed 9/2/2018). In *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell identifies its 'visual/pictorial essence' (Mitchell 7) as one of the mainstays of scholarly research on the genre, dating back to Ruskin's assertion that landscape as a view only emerged with its aesthetic representation (*Modern Painters*). As suggested by the title *Landscape and Power*, landscape as a locus of ocularcentrism does not only present an affinity to the visual: it is an

aesthetic space in which the power dynamics inherent to visibility are at play and on display. Mitchell's introductory essay, 'Imperial Landscape', explores the contiguity of traditions of landscape-making with variations on imperial ideology. It also highlights the role that the issue of power played in the history of scholarship on landscape—essentially as such thinkers as John Barrell and Ann Bermingham showed the 'moral, ideological and political darkness' (Mitchell 6) to be found under the cover of 'innocent idealism' in more traditional analyses, such as Clark's *Landscape into Art* (1949). After highlighting the paradigmatic change brought about by these critiques of the politics of landscape, Mitchell considers the opening of a new chapter for studies of the genre. His preface to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Landscape and Power* states that the original essays included in the collection already challenged the crux that gave it its title. This was the case of his own essay, which envisaged the joint obsolescence of imperial ideologies and the landscapes that encapsulated them. Having seen the limits of the 'time when metropolitan cultures could imagine their destiny in an unbounded "prospect" of endless appropriation and conquest' (Mitchell 20), we are bound to see an evolution in landscape as a medium. Such an evolution might rely on our ability to consider spectators that do not fit the predatory models delineated, for instance, in Appleton's *The Experience of Landscape*.

No blind man appears on Mitchell's list of alternative, non-predatory observers. Yet the experience of blindness presents precisely the form of challenge that would have us envisage landscape under a different angle. Taken as a laboratory for cultivating the normative gaze, landscape seems to rely on the disciplined framing and hierarchical organisation of the visual field by a seeing subject, himself produced to 'command' the view. It appears to rely on a disciplinary dialectics of reciprocal identification and visual appropriation, producing self-fashioning by encouraging the subject to recognise a view as his own. Of course our blind spectator will not, by definition, fit into such a model of interaction between the prospect and its observer. His body's reluctance to be put in its 'proper' place when facing the view will make it into a site of resistance to certain conventions of landscape-making.

Taking the testimony of blindness as a challenge to ocularcentric conventions is not an isolated gesture. One of the features of disability studies has been to consider disabled *lives*: to step away from the binary criteria of normal vs. pathological, and to adopt a social rather than purely medical model of disability. Analysing literature from such a vantage point, critical studies on blindness have pointed to the responsibility of ocularcentric culture in systematically misrepresenting visual impairment (Bolt). They have also highlighted the avenues which the experience of blindness opens up for aesthetic and social creativity (Thompson, Kleege). But few studies so far have directly explored the intersection of disability studies and visual culture (Mirzoeff, Kleege), or tried to show how blindness as a form of experience actually affects the forms and practices of audio-visual media. Hull's memoir appears as the ideal object for such an interdisciplinary attempt. It has been studied by blindness scholars (A. Bhat just completed a PhD entitled "Corporeal Refractions: Narrativising the Visually Impaired Subject in Selected Writings by Jorge Luis Borges, John Hull, and Stephen Kuusisto"). It has also been analysed by scientists—most famously, by Oliver Sacks in the eponymous case study of *The Mind's Eye*. But its adaptation into the audio-visual constellation of *Notes on Blindness* is recent. And while the feature promises to become a landmark for studies on documentary cinema, no piece of scholarship so far addresses it for its counterintuitive and politically charged reflection on how visual impairment partakes of visual culture.

Exploring the treatment of landscape within Hull's testimony of sight loss, and Middleton and Spinney's endeavour to bring it to the screen, we find that blindness brings a creative disruption to the making of landscape, which leaves behind a model in which the

view is appropriated, and the subject fashioned to command it. Blindscares privilege echolocation, an altered practice of perception that challenges a sighted, appropriative and visually normative conception of landscape. In the new, improper phenomenology of sensation that emerges, we are taken away from visual privilege and into the commonwealth of the senses. We are reminded that, as aesthetic subjects, we all share in ecosystems of perception.

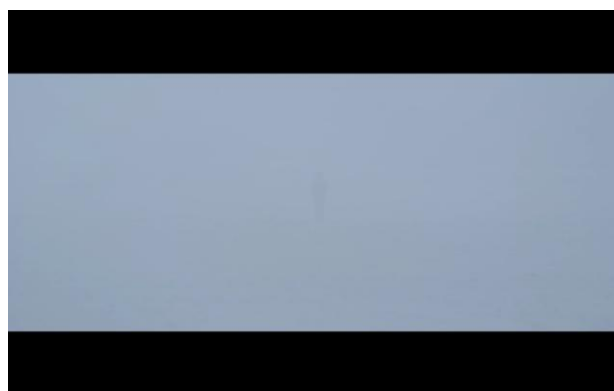
### **Blindness as Dispossession: Sight Loss and the Disappearance of Landscape**

A twofold connection appears, in the memoir and its adaptation, between the dispossession felt in blindness and the erasure of landscape. The special affinity of landscape with visibility explains why the experience of loss is crystallised by the disappearance of the view. Conversely, the cultural importance of landscape within ocularcentric practices of self-fashioning means that the vanishing prospect comes to emblemize the self that is lost to blindness.

The role of landscape as a tool that engineers belonging show, by contrast, in Hull's account of the panic he experienced in the first years after losing his sight. The anxiety he describes is directly connected with the disappearance of landscape, which deprives him of any sense of place, and threatens his very selfhood. The first episode of panic in *Touching the Rock* opens as Hull goes out into the snow one December day:<sup>4</sup>

I left the house, but had only gone a hundred yards when I became aware of a growing feeling of doubt. I became intensely aware of the fact that I was walking through an intensely cold nothing. [...] I was alone, entering the night of an endless tunnel of intense cold. [...] I had a sense of impending doom. [...] I turned and retraced my steps to the house. (Hull 40)

The onset of panic coincides with the erasure of the view. As darkness engulfs Hull's surroundings the world vanishes, and the meaning of direction itself is lost: he finds himself 'walking through [...] nothing'. In the photography, the articulation of the protagonist's anguish with the loss of landscape is signalled when non-colours take over the frame, and challenge any attempt at hierarchizing the shot into planes. We move from an entirely white screen, in which the character is almost impossible to find:



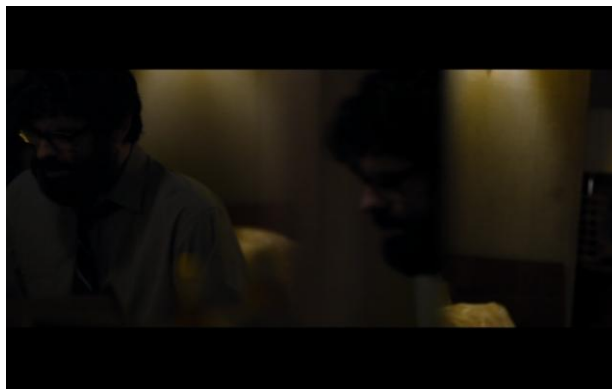
(36'09)

to one where the 'blackness' (Hull 41) is only broken by white snowflakes, in an image that has no recognisable depth or structure.



(36'54)

Although the protagonist is outside, the absence of light converts the open site of landscape into an enclosed space, an 'endless tunnel'. The contrast between the open prospect and the sense of being closed-off within blindness is crucial to the expression of panic, verbally and visually. In the film, the episode in the snow is combined with another moment recounted in the same entry of the memoir, in which panic triggered an asthma attack. Back in the house, a shot shows Hull through a door, duplicated, and awkwardly caught up between the frame of a mirror and that of the picture:



(36'47)

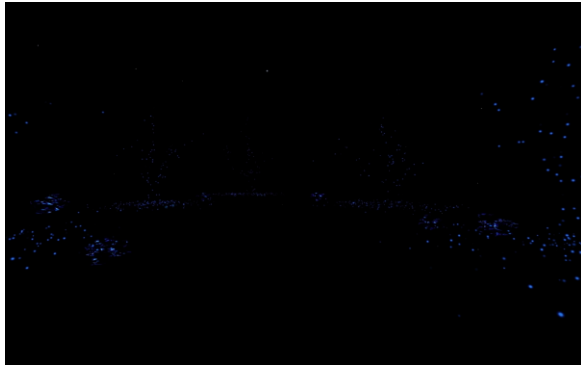
The text version of the audio accompanying these images reads:

I had an intense feeling of being enclosed. I desperately needed to get out. I must get out. I felt that I was banging my head, my whole body, against a wall of blindness. I had to break through this black curtain, this dark veil which surrounded me. Somewhere, out there, there was a world of light. I had to get out into it. (Hull 40-41)

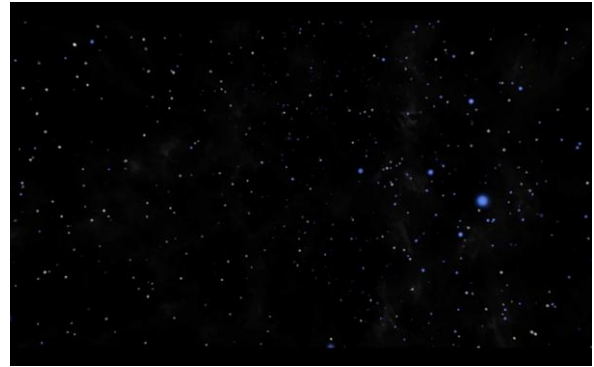
Throughout this sequence, Hull's sense of constriction builds on the image of the tunnel, as he evokes the 'wall' or 'curtain' which block the view. The incapacity to escape to the open space of the expanded view is experienced as a vital threat, as the protagonist finds himself exiled from the only viable 'world of light out there', and fighting for breath: 'I was being strangled, suffocated by the blackness. I was in a hot box, there was no light or air' (Hull 41).

A similar visual strategy is used in the chapter of the VR adaptation entitled 'Panic'. The iconography of the app, which combines points and patches of light against a dark background, consistently brings out the contours of things as sound signals their presence. But while most chapters encourage us to explore our surroundings, and familiarise ourselves with the objects fading in and out of view, 'Panic' presents us with very few recognisable

elements. What little we initially had to structure a perspectival landscape quickly evaporates, and we are left with nothing that would help us organise the space we are walking into:



Remnants of perspective in the first minutes.



Erasure of perspective.

The footprints which we are meant to follow are barely perceptible, and immediately disintegrate as we reach them. While a few diegetic sounds initially provided a sense of orientation within space—thanks to the binaural technology<sup>5</sup> used by the app—, those gradually fade away as the soundtrack merges into an undifferentiated and overpowering buzzing noise.



Disappearing footprints.

The dialectics of visual appropriation and identification at work in the production of landscape is negatively confirmed by the alienation experienced at the loss of the view. The sense of threat to one's very selfhood is recorded, within the text and images, as an anxiety associated with the loss of the face. As a focal point, the face is crucial to the reciprocal fashioning of the view and its observer: the rules of perspective themselves are thought out with respect to the spectator's line of vision.<sup>6</sup> Among the visual bearings that vanished with the loss of his sight, Hull mentions his own face, wondering: 'To what extent is the loss of the image of the face connected with loss of the image of the self? Is this one of the reasons why I so often feel I am a mere spirit, a ghost, a memory?' (Hull 21). In response to this erasure of the self's mirrored image, Middleton and Spinney blur the contours of faces, showing them contre-jour so that they disappear in the engulfing light, or framing them in a fashion that both frustrates us and signals the intensely visual dialectics at play in the face-to-face encounter:

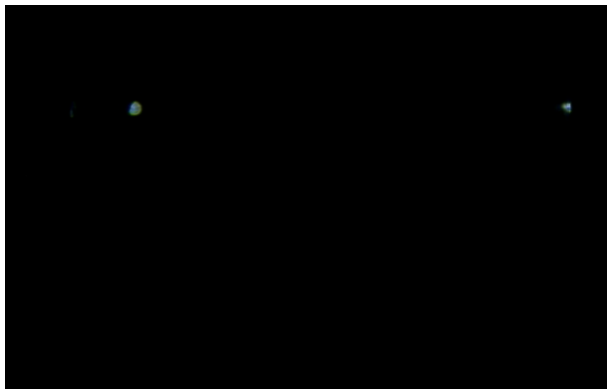


Thomas, contre-jour (19'08)

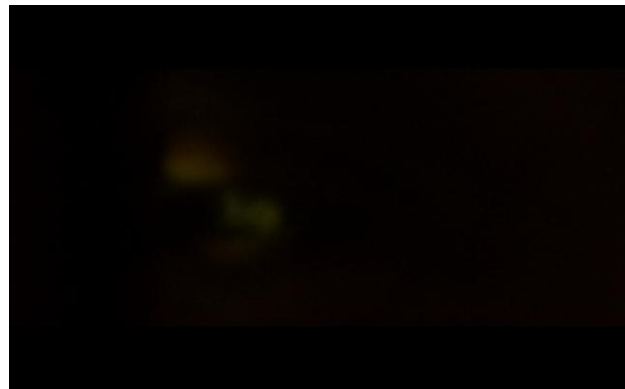


Imogen (23'05)

By cutting out the eyes of Hull's daughter, the filmmakers negate *our faces* as spectators—the cinematic image must at least *appear* to look back to satisfy our need for visual interaction. Hull's account similarly stressed the symmetry that binds the image of the other to that of the self: 'Other people have become disembodied voices [...]. Am I not like this too, now that I have lost my body?' (Hull 21). The mirrored loss of the visible world and of Hull's own body highlights the entanglement of a supposedly 'external' image with the subject's intimate phenomenological sense of inhabiting the world.<sup>7</sup> By often blurring or blotting out a proportion of the image, the treatment of photography similarly challenges the spectator *qua* visual subject.



(4'17)



(4'22)

The vanishing of the view does not only threaten the phenomenological makeup of the self. Hull's experience emphasizes the cultural and political nature of the crux of landscape-making and self-fashioning. His narrative of dispossession and alienation reaches a turning point in a trip that the family take to visit his parents in Australia. In the entry entitled 'Visiting Melbourne', he recalls:

I had been afraid of a renewed sense of loss through being in a place which has so many visual memories for me. Flinders Street Station and Princes Bridge, St Paul's Cathedral, and the famous view of the city seen over the river Yarra from the Botanic Gardens, these are all sights which are deeply etched upon my mind. [...] To be suddenly plunged back as a blind person in a world so full of remembered visions made me feel most unhappy. I felt particularly dismayed by the thought that I would not be able to enjoy the coastline. (Hull 100-101)

After describing the ‘spectacular scenery’ he would never see again, he concludes ‘I have to admit that all of these fears were fulfilled’ (Hull 101). Entries from the preceding year showed an adaptation to his new condition. Conversely, this return to his homeland revives his feeling of loss and makes it more acute. The self he has been trying to piece back together in Birmingham is threatened again, more poignantly than ever, by the reminder that those landscapes that were the backdrop of his childhood and formative years have disappeared forever.

The crux between the progression of blindness, the disappearance of landscape and the loss of self appears also in negative, in the way landscape is given back to the protagonist. After the loss of sight, both the view and the subject perceiving it are refashioned within a different sensory and cognitive makeup. Ways of rebuilding landscapes and the self are met through other means—or by means of otherness. The face to face dispositive of appropriation hinged on the specular modality of identity. What can be reconstructed on the other side of blindness will emerge through a process of alteration. Here, in a reversal evocative of the detours of alterity, the place where landscape returns to this Australian man is the country he emigrated to; and the medium which brings it back to him is rain.

### **Landscape Regained.**

As time elapses, a sense of self and place are returned to the protagonist. This partly coincides with the reemergence of landscape. Yet the narrative does not retrace its steps. It does not restore Hull to the dialectics of visual appropriation, or to a position from which he might command the view. Rather, ‘blindscapes’ point to the improper logic that underlies the subject’s sensory and cognitive encounter with the view.

The earliest instance of the return of landscape is to be found in Hull’s arresting evocation of the rainy vista that appeared to him one day, as he was leaving the house: ‘I opened the front door and rain was falling. I stood for a few minutes, lost in the beauty of it. Rain has a way of bringing out the contours of everything; it throws a coloured blanket over previously invisible things’ (Hull 25-26). In the description that follows, the falling rain produces a continuum of differentiated sound within which the elements of the landscape reappear:

I hear the rain pattering on the roof above me, dripping down the walls to my left and right, splashing from the drainpipe at ground level on my left, while further over to the left there is a lighter patch as the rain falls almost inaudibly upon a large leafy shrub. On the right, it is drumming, with a deeper, steadier sound upon the lawn. I can even make out the contours of the lawn [...] The sound of the rain is different and shapes out the curvature for me. [...] Here the rain is striking the concrete, here it is splashing into the shallow pools that have already formed. Here and there is a light cascade as it drips from step to step [...] Over the whole thing, like light falling upon a landscape is the gentle background patter gathered up into one continuous murmur of rain. (Hull 26)

The description immediately strikes the reader as extraordinary in its auditory quality, as evidenced by the rich variety of sound effects associated with the rain—from ‘pattering’, ‘dripping’ and ‘splashing’ to ‘drumming’ and ‘cascad[ing]’. Yet each of these audible elements restores a fragment of the visible world. What proceeds from this audio-visual process of conversion is not purely a soundscape, but a landscape in its own right, as confirmed by the final comparison of the ‘patter’ of the rain to ‘light falling upon a landscape’. This more explicit association rounds up the series of visual notations scattered

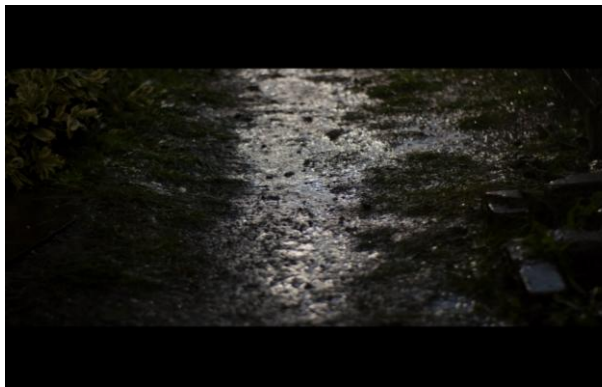


throughout the description: the ‘contours’, ‘shapes’ and ‘curvatures’, ‘previously invisible things’ that appear under the ‘coloured blanket’ of the rain. The dispositive of the scene itself harks back to the tradition of landscape, with the subject apprehending the vista through the frame of the open door.

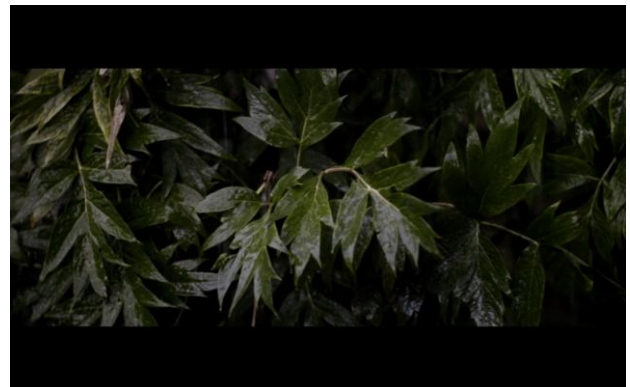


(42'07)

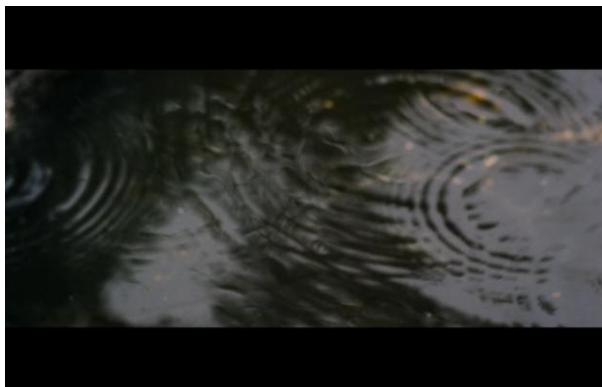
Taking its cue from the description, the film produces a series of shots each characterised by a specific sound texture. The simple juxtaposition of images of a bin, foliage, a car, and puddles heightens our sensitivity to different sound patterns.



Trickling down the path (42'31)



Almost inaudible on a leafy shrub (42'38)



Splashing into shallow pools (42'46)



Pattering on the roof (42'51)

Though it starts with the epiphany brought about by rain, the rediscovery of landscape through sound soon turns to more aspects of the audible world, and it does not remain shackled to the traditional, visual dispositive of the genre. Breaking away from the frame that allowed it, the return of landscape proves more widely relevant to Hull's experience of

‘whole-body-vision’—a multimodal sensitivity to his surroundings which sketches ‘panoramas’ across sensations. In a later entry entitled ‘Acoustic Space’, the protagonist recalls bringing his children to the park. In minute detail, he describes the sounds that surrounded him—from the crunch of ‘many different kinds of footsteps’ (Hull 71) to the rustling of papers, the hush of distant conversations, the rumble of cars, the call of birds, and the splashing of paddle boats, indicating: ‘It was an astonishingly varied and rich panorama of movement, music and information. It was absorbing and fascinating’ (Hull 71-72). Again here, the word ‘panorama’ indexes what might otherwise read as a collection of sound impressions to the visuality of landscape. The references to absorption and fascination further confirm this connection—both designate possible phases in our relation to images<sup>8</sup>—, as does Hull’s assertion that ‘[a]coustic space is a world of revelation’ (Hull 74): what is revealed is exposed to view, made visible (*OED*, ‘reveal, v.’, accessed 8/2/2018).

For all its entanglement with the visual modality, the blindscape sketched out here parts ways with the compositions consecrated by the ocularcentric tradition. The protagonist’s warning that ‘[t]he world revealed by sound is so different’ (Hull 71) soon finds confirmation in the fact that the acoustic panorama fails to follow the rules of visual appropriation. It does not abide by the binary division of front and back inherent in sighted phenomenology:

another feature of the acoustic world: it stays the same whichever way I turn my head. [...] The view looking that way is quite different from the view looking this way. It is not like that with sound. [...] I may lean right back and face the sky. It makes little difference. (Hull 73-74)

Hull’s remark emphasizes the extent to which this 360°-angle view resist any attempts to ‘penetrate’ (Hull 73) it. The posture he describes, with his face open to the sky, is one that renounces the visual bearings of verticality, depth, and perspective, which normally give us a degree of control over our visual field. Relegating as it does the hierarchies inherent in the phenomenology of the sighted body, the landscape also refuses to organise its differentiated sound into a hierarchy of receding planes, all positioned relatively to one another. This is partly because, unlike the world revealed by light, acoustic landscapes are discontinuous: their component parts blink in and out of existence: ‘The *intermittent* nature of the acoustic world is one of its most striking features. [...] The seen world cannot escape from your eyes. Even in the darkness, you can use a torch and force things into visibility, but I have only very limited power over the acoustic world’ (Hull 73).

The VR chapter dedicated to this moment at the park stresses the ways in which the acoustic panorama fails to enforce the traditional, appropriative logic of landscape—by not putting its elements into place, or treating the subject as the privileged recipient of an ordered prospect. The transience of things is met by our inability to control the view, in an equation that points to a metaphysical sense of necessary loss. Hull’s reflection: ‘Where nothing was happening, there was silence. That little part of the world then died [...] To rest is not to be’ (Hull 72-73) is brought home most poignantly when the protagonist’s own child shimmers into view, calling out ‘Daddy! Daddy!’, before vanishing once more.

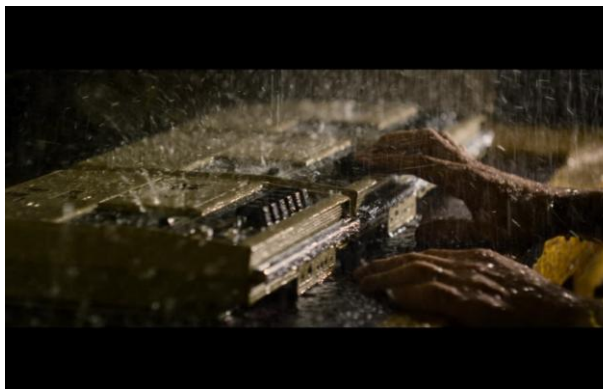


Thomas calling out.



Thomas fading away.

The landscape recomposed here is not ‘proper’—rather, it is what we might call an ‘improper’ landscape. It is immersive, and therefore not meant to be appropriated by the observer: the acoustic panorama ‘places one within a world’ (Hull 71). Though the rainy vista provided a sense of framing and continuity closer to ‘proper’ visual landscapes, Hull’s memory was to have been ‘lost in the beauty of it’. And the aspiration beautifully made true in the film, of ‘rain [...] fall[ing] inside a room’ (Hull 27), has the subject standing under the rain, *in the view*:



(1.15’08)



(1.15’54)

Ultimately, blindscreens are also improper in that they evidence the impropriety of cognition as produced by a mixture of overlapping sensory experiences, rather than disciplined and specifically designed forms of perception. The notion of the impropriety of human embodied experience—in the context of constantly overlapping sensations, but also of regular repurposing in the body’s processing of sensory data, is at the heart of ‘whole-body-vision’, which today’s neuroscientists would call ‘echolocation’. The word appears in *Touching the Rock* as Hull attempts to characterise his sense of the presence of things he cannot see: ‘this phenomenon is now generally called “echo location”’ (Hull 22). At the time, neuroscientific research was providing new insights into this form of perception. A recent article states:

Reports of blind people using a special sense to orient and to locate obstacles in front of them go back to the eighteenth century. However, it took until the 1940s to show that they actually do not feel remote obstacles with their facial skin but unconsciously evaluate echoes to gain information about their spatial surroundings. (Wallmeier 1)

In recent years, the study of blind ‘expert echolocators’ has provided us with more information about the process of neural recycling involved in ‘perceiving the environment multidimensionally by using sound instead of light’, as Daniel Kish, also known as ‘the real life batman’, puts it.<sup>9</sup> Neuroscientists have shown that echolocation is made possible by a remapping of the brain, which allows audio data to be processed as visual data. fMRI scans show that when blind people perform an echolocating task, their visual cortex lights up, as it would for a sighted person seeing an object (Thaler).

Insofar as it relies on the possibility of cerebral remapping, echolocation challenges visual normativity. It questions the privileged status of sight as the sense of identification and appropriation, which was emblematised by landscape as an ocularcentric genre. Still more importantly, echolocation questions the idea that each sensory modality has its own aesthetics function and dedicated organs. It rejects the notion that sight is ‘proper’ to the eye, or that the eye’s ‘proper’ function is to see, and challenges the disciplinary aesthetics that would rely on such an analytical approach to perception.

This is apparent from the filmmakers’ choices in representing Hull’s challenges to visual normativity. Rather than immersing us in a world of make-believe blindness, they kept the visual modality of film. In so doing, they chose to give sight a new status within the commonwealth of the senses.

### **Bringing Blindsapes to a Sighted World or, Deconstructing the Norm of Visual Appropriation**

What transpires from the reflection on echolocation is the inadequacy of a relativist approach that would allow each person their experience without considering the collective impact of that experience. This is where the blindsapes of *Touching the Rock*, *Notes on Blindness* and *Into Darkness* reclaim the political vocation of landscape-making.

The reelaboration of landscapes by other means is not to be taken simply as proof that blind people have their own singular apprehension of landscape. As long as visually impaired people belong to societies that consider them as lacking, as made clear by the negative prefix, any assertion that their ways of experiencing the world are valid will be but empty words. Being part of a political community does not amount to being allowed to be within it, provided that one is invisible enough or keeps to one’s proper place. It is knowing that one’s experience makes a difference to the distribution of the sensible, that it counts, not as a negative image of what is normal, but as part and parcel of the collective experience of being human. Blindsapes are not, therefore, to be identified as ‘other’ simply to be discounted as marginal. They are meant to challenge our societies’ comfortable distinction between the normal and the pathological (Canguilhem), between what is standard, and fulfils its ‘proper’ function, and what falls short of that. This insistence that a blindman’s experience of landscape should resonate with and displace us in our visually normative, sighted understanding of the genre, is made particularly clear in the film’s approach to inclusivity. Significantly, this brings us back to the landscapes of Victoria.

Given its topic, it was to be expected that *Notes on Blindness* be accessible through an audio-described version. But the filmmakers chose to go beyond that, and make the soundtracks of their documentary into a laboratory for current practices of accessibility in film. They chose to have not one, but two audio-described versions, narrated by different voices. Beside this well-tried approach, they also created an ‘enhanced soundtrack’, in which extra sounds and audio segments convey more of what is appearing on the screen. The existence of these versions testify to the filmmakers’ awareness that there are multiple ways of seeing, and of viewing. The film does not shy away from the paradox of moving images

trying to apprehend a condition which would make them inaccessible. Far from glossing over the fact that Hull was deprived of the landscapes of his childhood while the sighted spectator can enjoy them, Middleton and Spinney specifically chose an excursion in Victoria to introduce their spectators to the soundtracks they made—in the most crucial political gesture of the film. In the excerpt Hull and his family are seen walking along a ridge, against a background of arid rock formations. The trailer accessible on the *Notes on Blindness* website simply replays the same passage, moving from the standard soundtrack to the audio-descriptions, and finishing with the ‘enhanced’ version.



Two stills from the accessibility trailer to *Notes on Blindness*: Marilyn, carrying a sleeping Thomas, turns around to ask John if he is all right. He says ‘yes’ and follows them as the camera pans and zooms out.

The only words in the standard soundtrack consist in the dialogue: ‘You all right darling?’ ‘Yeah’. In the enhanced soundtrack, John’s voice explains: ‘I remember [...] a rocky sort of outcrop. [*Marilyn’s question and John’s reply are heard, faintly, underneath*] Walking with the kids, in the middle of these ancient rock formations [*the wind rises, giving a sense of the vastness of the vista*] which give you the feel that they’re...just waiting for something’. Introducing a third way of doing things, the enhanced soundtrack breaks down the binary couple of typical and atypical,<sup>10</sup> normal and pathological. It challenges our impression that alternative versions compensate for a lack in other spectators. It points out what a sighted person might be overlooking: in this case, the words added to the more basic version mean that we stop focusing only on the view, and pay attention to other aspects of the landscape: the dryness of the soil underfoot, the rolling of cracked earth and rocks, and the wind. It also makes us more aware of the small blindscape produced by John’s glasses in the second shot—one that challenges our sighted sense of normalcy, as the thickness of the lenses make it appear upside-down.

Blind testimony teaches us a different form of being within landscape, by paying it a different form of attention. In the way they refer us to the interaction of sensory modalities, of words and percepts, blindscales encourage us to envisage the political order that is the distribution of the sensible, as an ecosystem—a system of echoes—and an ecosystem—a system that constitutes our natural-cultural habitat. Discovering landscapes through other means, we reconsider the political space in which we all take part as sentient and sensitive beings: not as a territory to be claimed by any one subject, whether single or collective, but as a milieu to be shared and lived in, *improper* in that it cannot be appropriated.

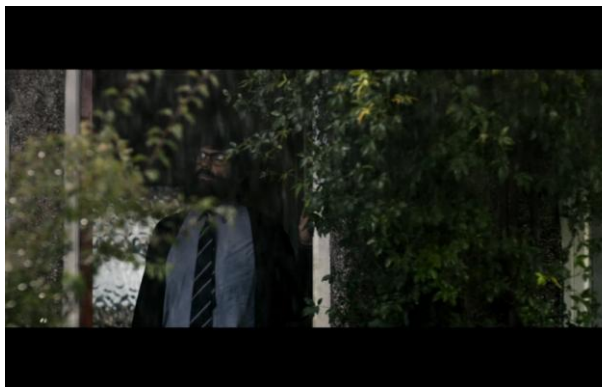
In considering perception and attention as ec(h)osystems, and in stating that this entails a paradigmatic move away from notions of property/propriety and ownership, I follow in the footsteps of Yves Citton’s *Pour une écologie de l’attention*. Citton’s proposed transition from an economy to an ecology of attention suggests attention might not be the commodity which contemporary economy supposes it is, especially in the digital age.<sup>11</sup> This



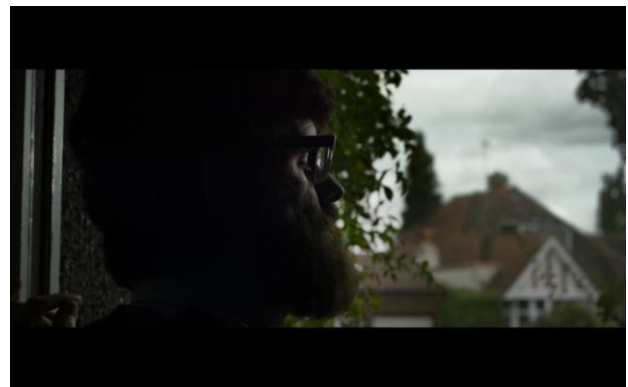
approach states that attention might be improper: the active principle of a relational structure within which it cannot, by definition, be appropriated by anyone. Considered from this angle, attention is no longer a currency the scarcity of which makes it a symptom of cultural crisis. It is rather an ethical and political resource, which flourishes as we show that we care for and with others.

The transition from an echo-logy to an ecology of perception is crucial to understanding how Hull’s testimony and its filmic adaptation transform our relation to landscapes. Blindscares no longer partake of an economy of selfhood, where the self comes into his or her own by identifying to and appropriating the view. On the contrary, the testimony and documentary produce an ec(h)ology of landscape, in which space is improper: shared, and perceived through a mixture of sensory modalities. Landscape as an ecological milieu is also inappropriable in that hearing its echo implies really to apprehend the view as an ‘other’. This is best evidenced by the fact that in echolocation, and Hull’s account of acoustic landscape, the relation to one’s surroundings is invested and experienced as a *conversation*. Daniel Kish says of the clicking that he uses to visualise space that ‘[it] is like a language: you’re asking the environment where are you and what are you?’ (PopTech talk, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/videos.poptech.org/2011/video/DanielKish-PopTech-2011-HD.mov>, accessed 9/2/2018, 15’21-15’40), waiting for the environment to send soundwaves in response, carrying the imprints of what the clicks encountered. In *Touching the Rock*, Hull’s particular attention to sound also takes the shape of a conversation, for instance when he finds himself entranced by the sound of bell-ringing in the aftermath of a wedding, and inwardly responds: ‘Yes, I hear you, dear bells, I hear you’ (Hull 172).

The implications of this model of interaction with one’s surroundings go past the stage in which the landscape is addressed as ‘you’. Echolocation points to perception as an ecosystem in that perception cannot only be a matter of voluntary focus on our part. Perceiving is not simply achieved by directing our attention, but more deeply by making it available to the landscape. In conversation therefore, as in perception, we cannot be ‘I’ unless we are ‘you’. The self fashioned by blindscares appears through his or her interaction with the world—not by appropriating it, but by being addressed by it. As Hull says about the landscape that rain brought back to him: ‘You are presented with a world. You are related to a world. You are addressed by a world’ (Middleton & Spinney, 43’32-43’52). The protagonist emerges as an ‘I’ in so far as he is ‘you’ to the landscape that elicits his attention—a shift which the shot-reverse shot emblematises in the film, responding as it does to the prompt of Hull’s use of the pronoun:



The subjective shot is reversed by the second person pronoun...(43’34)



...before being reinstated. (43’46)

## Conclusion

Bringing us as it does from Hull's experience of loss to the status of sighted normativity, the reflection on landscape and its treatment in *Touching the Rock* and *Notes on Blindness* have a direct impact on our experience as spectators, both politically and aesthetically. Blindness does not just build an alternative, marginal experience of vision: it displaces us in our normative, sighted understanding of perception. Leaving behind a preconceived idea of sensory impairment, we are made to consider what sight might be once we apprehend it from an *improper* perspective.

From impairment to impropriety, the imp- takes on a life of its own, and encourages us to deconstruct the very framework in which we ran the risk of overlooking the landscape, of missing it entirely. In retrospect, our initial scruple appears as a remnant of the misguided superiority that comes with more typical, 'normal' and normatively identified forms of experience. Surely there is much there to reassure the sighted spectator, even as she finds herself challenged by such different ways of belonging to the visible, and of being in visual culture. 'Apprehending' the other need not mean appropriating, quite the opposite: it can only be done by allowing their experience to question our sense of what our own proper place might be.

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<sup>1</sup> This uneasiness might actually be worse for spectators already familiar with Hull’s writing. His decision to embrace ‘deep blindness’—choosing, for instance, not to retain visual memories of his wife that would no longer do justice to her as a living being—was at the centre of Sacks’s initial analysis in 1991. In ‘The Mind’s Eye’ Sacks recalls corresponding with blind readers who protested that this did not reflect their own relation to sight. Zoltan Torey, an Australian psychologist, was one of them. The contrast of his attitude with Hull’s—he practised and explored his powers of visualisation as much as he could—was to be given a forum when editors of the podcast Radiolab invited both as guests for an episode on blindness entitled ‘Out of Sight’ (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Studies in psychology suggest that experiments in sensory deprivation can have damaging consequences for the understanding of disability by the general public. This can happen for instance when sighted subjects, judging from five minutes of disorientation, come out thinking that blind people are even more dependent and disabled than they thought. See ‘Stumbling in Their Shoes. Disability Simulations Reduce Judged Capabilities of Disabled People’, by Arielle Silverman et al.

<sup>3</sup> In its exploration of the political and ethical stakes of giving a visual form to ‘blind landscapes’, this article focuses on vision as a site of power, and considers ocularcentrism as a force that favours the sighted within the distribution of the sensible. It is worth noting that those patterns of inclusion and exclusion from the political sphere find an anchorage in the privileged status that sight enjoys within Western traditions of epistemology. The age-old association of sight with knowledge, best exemplified by the optical ‘metaphors we live by’ (Lakoff and Johnson), symmetrically turns blindness into a metaphor for ignorance. In cultures that recognise knowledge as an instrument of power, the visually impaired therefore seem condemned to a life on the margins, deprived of any political agency. The landscape tradition can be envisaged as a particular expression, within the field of aesthetics, of those epistemologies that privilege sight as the most ‘intellectual’ sense—from classical philosophies to the development of Enlightenment thinking, and the challenges that it encounters in the contemporary era (see Jay, *Downcast Eyes*). Within the context of British culture, the oculo-centric equation of vision, knowledge, and power inherent in landscape was shaped by empiricist thinking, which had a profound influence on the discursive realms of science and the arts. The emergence of a ‘picturesque’ aesthetic of landscape, as emblematised by the work of William Gilpin or Uvedale Price, rested on an empirical understanding of knowledge as embodied, and produced by experience. Though the picturesque constituted a counterpoint to the more rationalistic, dualistic underpinnings of classical approaches to landscape- and garden-making, its insistence on the connection between sensory experience and sense-making points to landscape as a relevant site from which to consider the systematic marginalisation of the blind and visually impaired.



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<sup>4</sup> Most of the soundtrack for the films and VR project uses Hull's recordings. For this reason, notwithstanding some differences due to editing, a lot of the text overlaps. Unless the differences seem significant enough, and I indicate as much, the quotes I put in are from the text of *Touching the Rock*.

<sup>5</sup> Binaural technology is designed to record sound in a way that best approximates the human experience of auditory perception as determined by the presence of two ears. Binaural recordings are made through two microphones arranged to emulate the spacing and position of human ears on either side of a head. This allows sound engineers to produce a 3-D stereo-soundscape in which the listener's sense of immersion will be enhanced.

<sup>6</sup> See Edgerton, Samuel, *The Renaissance Discovery of Linear Perspective*, New York, Basic Books, 1975.

<sup>7</sup> See the interlacing of seeing and being seen, as described by Merleau-Ponty in *Le Visible et l'invisible*.

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Kish is the foremost advocate for the teaching of echolocation to blind people, and the founder of the association World Access For the Blind.

<sup>10</sup> As a counterpart to the philosophical and gnoseological categories of the normal and pathological, disability studies have worked to introduce the pair of 'typical' vs. 'atypical', which puts the 'social' model of disability on a par with the 'medical' model that often prevails. This shifts the focus from a pure reflection on treatment to a reflection on the cultural and social meaning of living with a disability.

<sup>11</sup> Former Silicon Valley tech designers have started to speak out against the commodification of attention that they were asked to foster. See especially Tristan Harris and the Time Well Spent group, <http://humanetech.com/>, whose reflection on design ethics parallels Citton's assertion that we need another paradigm to think of attention than that of economic neoliberalism.