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Inside and Outside of Vision and Blindness

Seeing within the Mind's Eye and the Inner Darkness of Aphantasia

Douglas McCulloh

“Shot in the Dark: Blindness and the Zero Point of Photography”

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Douglas McCulloh’s essay “Shot in the Dark: Blindness and the Zero Point of Photography” focuses upon the creative practice of Evgen Bavčar and other leading figures in blind photography. Bavčar’s photographs are rigorously organized within his mind’s eye before being captured through a camera lens. Each picture is an external reproduction based upon an original image, or *wriimage*, as an internally visualized idea. Bavčar cannot see his photographs and viewers of his photographs cannot see the original images, which

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exist only within Bavčar's mind as "fixed, locatable . . . inviolate, beyond tampering" (8). Assertions of the untouchable original raise interesting questions about the reliability of inner visualization and visual memory. Nevertheless, the point remains that Bavčar alone has access to the private gallery in his mind and, more significantly, that the visual ideas for Bavčar's photographs are conceived within his mind's eye. McCulloh reflects upon the ways blind photographers work with internal conceptualizations to produce original images beyond the conventional influences of vision and visual culture. As such, their work is not peripheral or esoteric; rather, blind photographers "occupy the pure, immaculate center—image as idea, idea as image": the zero point of photography (8).

As curator of *Sight Unseen: International Photography by Blind Artists*,¹ which he describes as a moment of ferment and emergence for blind photographers, McCulloh writes from a position of "deep immersion in blindness and photography" (10) informed by "prolonged conversation with the world's most accomplished blind photographers" (8). First exhibited in 2009, *Sight Unseen* continues to tour. Ongoing engagement with, and awareness of, blind photography—and blindness and the arts in general—continues to develop alongside the push for improved accessibility within the arts and a more sensorially aware understanding of cultural spaces and institutions.² As a sighted person, my teaching, research, and evolving thoughts about culture and the senses, informed by collaborative projects with people who are blind or visually impaired, draws influence from McCulloh's insights—most notably, the way blind photography raises persistent questions about the dominance of visibility, or ocularcentrism (which privileges sight as the most valued sense), when producing and sharing images is so quick and easy for sighted people using mobile devices and automatic cameras. Contrasted to the processes of blind photographers, who are not typically influenced by the trends or clichés of visual culture, sighted photography and image-making in general can "mistake visual abundance for vision" (10). As McCulloh suggests, sighted photographers "internalize a lengthy set of conventions" (10)—from subject choice and practical decisions about image quality and framing, through to selecting an appropriately decisive moment to capture (or they perhaps choose to invert those conventions through a knowing series of rebellious countermoves)—all of which amount to "a narrowing of vision" (10). Understood in this way, sighted photography can become a sort of "progressive blindness" (10) in terms of original image-making.

The notion of "image as idea, idea as image" has additional personal significance because learning about creative processes like Bavčar's helped me realize I am aphantasic. Aphantasia means not being able to consciously visualize images within the mind's eye.³ The process of generating inner visualizations—which operates on a spectrum from

1. Douglas McCulloh, *Sight Unseen: International Photography by Blind Artists* (Riverside, CA: UCR/California Museum of Photography, 2009).

2. See Georgina Kleege, *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018) and Constance Classen, *Museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

3. For more on aphantasia, see Adam Zeman, "Phantasia: The (Re)discovery and Explorations of Imagery Extremes," in *Extreme Imagination: Inside the Eye's Mind*, ed. Susan Aldworth and Matthew MacKisack (London: University of Exeter, 2018), 6–13.

hyperphantasia (extremely vivid mental imagery) through to aphantasia (the inability to mentally visualize)—is a capability that blind photographers seem to fundamentally rely upon. Aphantasia is sometimes referred to as “inner blindness” or “mind blindness.” While it would be trite to suggest this is in any way comparable to blindness or visual impairment (it clearly isn’t) it is intriguing to consider differing capabilities around mental visualization



Blind I Stand Before the Mirror . . . (2020) by David Johnson. This photograph shows one part of a five-piece installation by Johnson that evokes an image-of-thought-of-self whose tessellating and fragmentary modes of sensing provide both the instrument and the object of reflection; photograph and copyright Royal College of Art, London, 2020.

and how this relates to conceptualization, image creation, and imagination. Of particular interest (to me) is dialogue between sighted aphantasics and non-sighted non-aphantasics (blind or visually impaired people with a mind's eye, which might include hyperphantasics) where the latter potentially draw upon a rich inner visuality. As McCulloh suggests, blind photographers—and by extension I'd like to suggest other blind visual artists, perhaps even people who are blind or visually impaired in general—are often more inherently attuned to creating visual imagery within their mind's eye.

McCulloh identifies three different approaches the blind photographers in *Sight Unseen* typically use to bring a photograph into the world. The first approach, used by Bavčar, involves creating photographs as “physical manifestations of images that already exist as pure idea” (8). The second approach involves using the camera to create images of the “outside world” where the photographer, being blind, operates without “sight-driven selection and self-censorship” (9). The photographs are created through various combinations of the mind's eye, conceptual thinking, and chance, which McCulloh proposes as a form of “non-retinal photography” (9) with reference to Marcel Duchamp's non-retinal art. The third approach could be summarized as using photography to enable the photographer to see the images captured by the camera, rather than the photographer seeing an image in the world and then using the camera to capture it. Photographers in this group are legally blind but tend to “retain very limited, highly attenuated sight” (9), so the process of creating an image relies upon mechanically enhanced vision (aided by tools like a high-definition monitor) to help see, or figure out what was seen, by viewing the photographs that have been captured. McCulloh proposes that these artists—in each case, and between/across the different approaches/modes they choose to use—transform photography as an act of image production into a multifaceted conceptual structure.

Related to my research interests, which include sensory film studies, these observations resonate with a core concept within composer-turned-director Gary Tarn's 2005 documentary *Black Sun*. Tarn's film tells the story of painter, filmmaker, and author Hugues de Montalembert, who was left blind after a random attack in 1978. Through his dispassionate but engaging narration, based upon his 1986 autobiography *Eclipse*, in *Black Sun* de Montalembert recounts the arduous personal process of adapting to his newly attuned senses. Seemingly resilient to profound change while also facing up to the myriad complexities of a deeply challenging situation—conveyed in *Black Sun* through images and sounds that are, at times, both nightmarish and uncommonly serene—de Montalembert defiantly undertook a solo journey to Bali about eighteen months after becoming blind. Tarn's documentary presents a variegated range of distorted, obtuse, unconventional, and often obscure imagery in combination with an intuitive and elemental score. *Black Sun* does not attempt to illustrate de Montalembert's lived experience; instead, the sounds and images provide an intersensory entanglement with the narrative, inviting the audience to “make sense” of the “interplay of these modalities.”⁴

4. See David Howes, “Sensing Cultures: Cinema, Ethnography and the Senses,” *Centre for Sensory Studies* (Montreal, QC: Concordia University, 2016), <https://centreforsensorystudies.org/occasional-papers/sensing-cultures-cinema-ethnography-and-the-senses>.

In an incisive moment, de Montalembert emphatically states, “vision is a creation, it’s not a perception.”

People with sight “look at things” but sighted people’s capability to really see what they are looking at is highly variable. In an open address to the viewer, de Montalembert observes that, when looking at the world around you, “what you see will be different to your neighbor.” Just as some people hear music but dismiss it as noise, de Montalembert notes that “[sighted] people are like this with their eyes.” As such, sight is configured as a creative and conceptual process shaped and determined by the viewer; the ability—or willingness—to engage with seeing is more complex than simply possessing a reasonable level of visual acuity. The implication is that blind artists, such as de Montalembert and the photographers in *Sight Unseen*, are more creatively and conceptually attuned to vision and image-making—through vision and image-making within the mind’s eye—than many conventionally sighted people. Following similar sentiments, McCulloh begins his curatorial essay for *Sight Unseen* with the provocation that “blind photographers possess the clearest vision on the planet”⁵ and concludes “Shot in the Dark” with a quotation from José Saramago’s 1995 novel *Blindness*: “Why did we become blind . . . I don’t think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see.”⁶

This dialogue around looking, seeing, imagining, and visualizing converges with Mark Haddon’s introduction to *States of Mind: Experiences at the Edge of Consciousness* (2016), which discusses consciousness in relation to the importance of poetry, fiction, and art as, among other things, “windows into other minds.”⁷ Haddon reminds us that “novelists, poets and artists have intuitively understood many of the mind’s oddities since long before doctors and scientists began taking an interest.”⁸ Creative intuition and the ways in which it relates to imagination and self-expression, including where it overlaps with neurological and other scientific insights, is as fascinating as it is open-ended and unresolved. Earlier this year in conversation with David Johnson—who identifies as “unashamedly a ‘blind artist’ rather than ‘an artist who is blind’”⁹—we touched upon aphantasia. It quickly became clear that Johnson’s inner visualizations produce vibrantly colored images with a range of details. In contrast with the darkness in my mind’s eye, Johnson describes his own inner visions as “almost cinematic.”¹⁰

Mental imagery of this kind is sometimes referred to as “quasi-sensory” because it “resembles a perceptual experience but [potentially] lacks any source of sensory input.”¹¹ Jennifer Hodgson, in *States of Mind*, raises questions about the range of sensory modes that occur within our heads, moving beyond the mind’s eye (a term that reflects the

5. McCulloh, “Curatorial Essay” in *Sight Unseen*, 2.

6. José Saramago, *Blindness* (London: Vintage, 2017), 309.

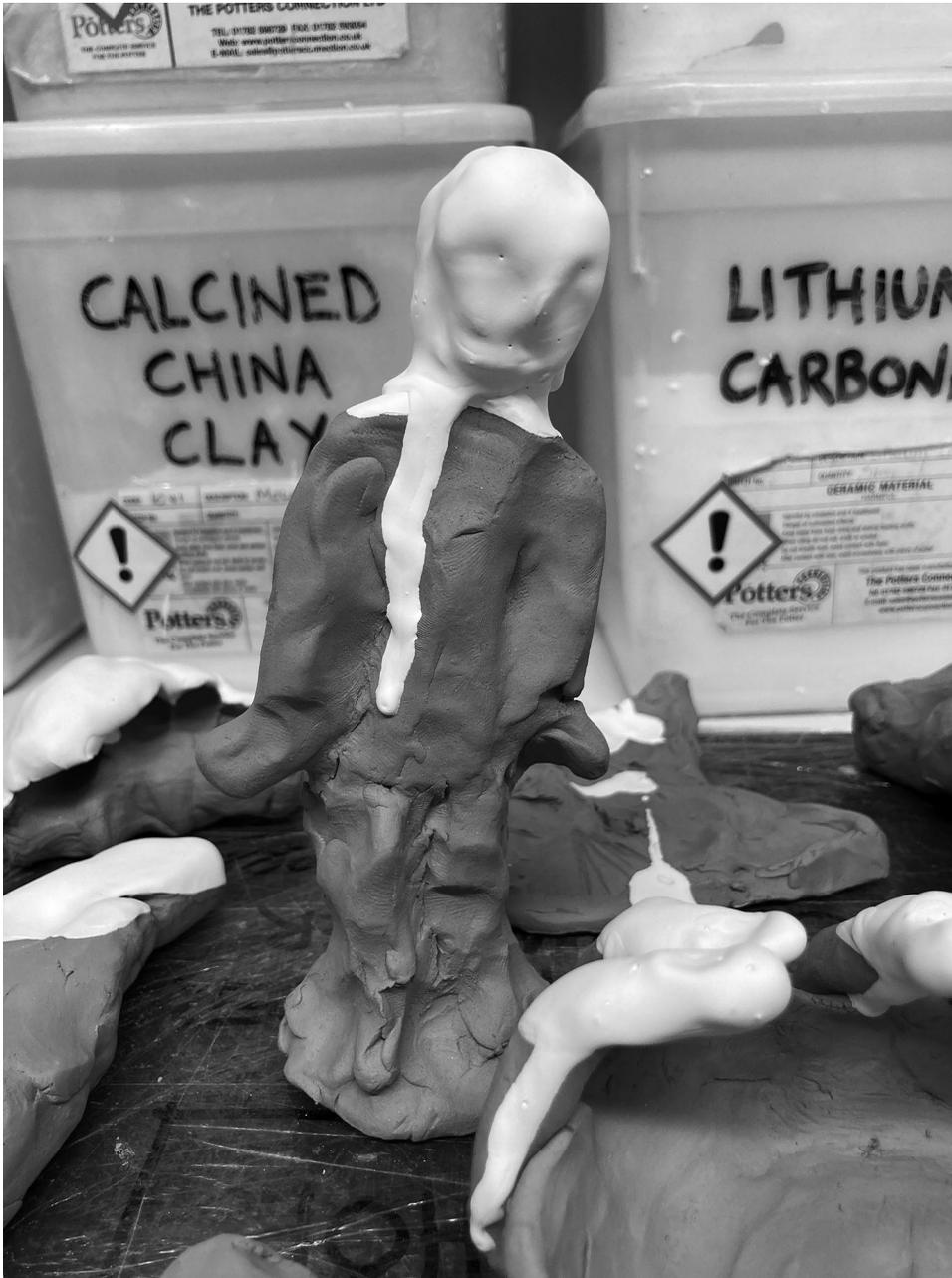
7. Mark Haddon, “Introduction,” in *States of Mind: Experiences at the Edge of Consciousness*, ed. Anna Faherty (London: Wellcome Collection, 2016), xv.

8. Haddon, “Introduction,” xiii.

9. David Johnson artist website, <https://davidjohnsoninsights.wordpress.com/about-me>.

10. Johnson, in conversation with the author, Nottingham Trent University, January 30, 2023.

11. Jennifer Hodgson, “What Does Your Inner Voice Sound Like?” in *States of Mind*, 142.



Clay Figure (with selective glazing) (2023) by Rob Allcock, member of the Visually Impaired Artists Group, My Sight Nottinghamshire, UK; photograph and copyright Kevin Hunt, 2023.

ocularcentrism of Western culture) to consider aural imagery in the mind—notably the inner voices some of us hear—as well as the possibility of motor imagery, haptic imagery, olfactory imagery (mentally imagined movement, touch, and smell), and more, that might (or might not) occur for each of us in some form or another. As de Montalembert implies, understanding the blur between creativity and perception—as a meeting point

between inner and outer worlds of experience—requires ongoing refinement and nuance, informed by creative practices and research within the arts and humanities alongside evolving scientific, medical, and social scientific knowledge.

Aphantasia, for example, was “(re)discovered” and named in 2015 by neurologist Adam Zeman: “phantasia” meaning mental imagery (with reference to Aristotle) prefixed by “a” to denote absence.¹² As the related research project and exhibition *Extreme Imagination: Inside the Mind’s Eye*¹³ acknowledges, aphantasia has a much longer history, and—despite initial expectations that aphantasics might be significantly overrepresented in scientific and mathematical fields (where logical progression is historically assumed to dominate over creative visualization)—many visual artists have identified themselves with aphantasia. One suggestion is that sighted visual artists, perhaps especially those with aphantasia, work with feedback loops as part of the image-making process, responding to what they see (through composition, mark making, and other actions) to iteratively amend and eventually formulate a completed work.¹⁴ For McCulloh, as suggested above, equivalent processes within sighted photography tend to narrow how vision is used. Reliance upon convention, he suggests, is reductive: looking and seeing in keeping with familiar cultural codes results in metaphorical “blindness” (IO) toward other creative possibilities.

This glimpse into blind photography, image creation, and the mind’s eye (or the lack of one) aims to show why discussion between and across sighted and non-sighted creative practices and experiences—including the significance of aphantasia and hyperphantasia—is an expansive area for ongoing exploration. As McCulloh argues in “Shot in the Dark,” blind photography takes us into the zero point of image-making because it raises essential questions about what it means “to see” as part of a creative process. By reframing how we think about blind photography, McCulloh helps expand a multifaceted and thought-provoking dialogue we should continue to engage in and learn from. ■

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12. See Zeman, “Phantasia: The (Re)discovery and Explorations of Imagery Extremes,” 7.

13. *Extreme Imagination: Inside the Mind’s Eye* (Centre for the Study of Perceptual Experience, University of Glasgow, 2019) is accessible as an online exhibition, which is the digital counterpart of twin exhibitions hosted by Tramway, Glasgow, and the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, in 2019. The physical exhibitions were organized by the Eye’s Mind research project team and curated by Susan Aldworth and Matthew MacKisack. The online version was conceived and created by Fiona Macpherson and Joanna Helfer, www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/cspe/engagement/extreme-imagination/online-exhibition.

14. See MacKisack, “From Inner Design to Extended Mind: The Aphantasic Artist in History,” in *Extreme Imagination*, ed. Aldworth and MacKisack, 49.