Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account
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What is This?
Abstract

This essay comments on W.J.T. Mitchell’s statement that ‘Visual culture entails a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked’. If visual studies entails a meditation on blindness, it is this article’s hope that it will avoid some of the missteps of similar meditations of the past. Specifically, it hopes that visual studies can abandon one of the stock characters of the western philosophical tradition: the ‘Hypothetical Blind Man’, who serves as a prop for theories about consciousness. This figure is considered briefly in the theories of Descartes, Locke and Diderot, then it is compared with first-hand accounts of blindness from the autobiographies of blind people written in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Keywords
blind autobiography • blindness • Denis Diderot • disability studies • Helen Keller • philosophy of perception • visual culture

The first question that my presence in this forum might prompt is: what can a blind person hope to contribute to a discussion of visual culture? As an admitted outsider to the field of visual studies, I would like to comment on the following statement in W.J.T. Mitchell’s essay ‘Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture’: ‘Visual culture entails a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked’ (Mitchell, 2002: 170). In my last book, Sight Unseen, I attempted to show blindness through my own experience, and a survey of representations of blindness in literature and film. At the same time, I wanted to show seeing, to sketch my understanding of vision, drawn from a lifetime of living among the sighted in this visual culture that we share. I began from the premise that the average blind person knows more about what it means to be sighted than the average sighted person knows about what it means to be blind. The blind grow up,
attend school, and lead adult lives among sighted people. The language that we speak, the literature that we read, the architecture that we inhabit, were all designed by and for the sighted.

If visual studies entails a meditation on blindness, it is my hope that it will avoid some of the missteps of similar meditations of the past. Specifically, I hope that visual studies can abandon one of the stock characters of the western philosophical tradition – ‘the Hypothetical Blind Man’ (Gitter, 2001: 58). The Hypothetical Blind Man – or ‘the Hypothetical’ as I will call him for the sake of brevity – has long played a useful, although thankless role, as a prop for theories of consciousness. He is the patient subject of endless thought experiments where the experience of the world through four senses can be compared to the experience of the world through five. He is asked to describe his understanding of specific visual phenomena – perspective, reflection, refraction, color, form recognition – as well as visual aids and enhancements – mirrors, lenses, telescopes, microscopes. He is understood to lead a hermit-like existence, so far at the margins of his society that he has never heard this visual terminology before the philosophers bring it up. Part of the emotional baggage he hauls around with him comes from other cultural representations of blindness, such as Oedipus and the many biblical figures whose sight is withdrawn by the wrathful God of the Old Testament or restored by the redeemer of the New. His primary function is to highlight the importance of sight and to elicit a frisson of awe and pity which promotes gratitude among the sighted theorists for the vision that they possess.

I will not attempt to survey every appearance of the Hypothetical throughout the history of philosophy. It is enough to cite a few of his more memorable performances, and then to suggest what happens when he is brought face-to-face with actual blind people through their own first-hand, eyewitness accounts. Professor Mitchell alludes to the passages in Descartes’ La Dioptrique (1637) where he compares vision to the Hypothetical’s use of sticks to grope his way through space. Descartes’ references to the Hypothetical are confusing and often are conflated by his readers. In one instance, he compares the way in which the Hypothetical’s stick detects the density and resistance of objects in his path to the way in which light acts on the objects that the eye sees. In a later passage, Descartes performs a thought experiment, giving the Hypothetical a second stick which he could use to judge the distance between two objects by calculating the angle formed when he touches each object with one of the sticks. Descartes does not explain how the Hypothetical is supposed to make this calculation or how he can avoid running into things while so doing. I doubt that Descartes actually believed that any blind person ever used two sticks in this way. In fact, the image that illustrates his discussion shows the Hypothetical’s dog sound asleep on the ground, indicating that the Hypothetical is going nowhere. Even so, Descartes’ description of the way that a blind person uses one stick reflects a basic misunderstanding. He imagines that the blind use the stick to construct a mental image, or its equivalent, of their surroundings, mapping the location of specifically identified objects. In fact, then as now, a stick or cane is a poor tool for this kind of mental imaging. The stick serves merely
to announce the presence of an obstacle, not to determine whether it is a rock or a tree root, although there are sound cues – a tap versus a thud – which might help to make this distinction. In many situations, the cane is more of an auditory than a tactile tool. It seems that in Descartes’ desire to describe vision as an extension of or hypersensitive form of touch, he recreates the blind man in his own image, where the eye must correspond to the hand extended by one or perhaps two sticks.

The most detailed depiction of the Hypothetical came about in 1693, when William Molyneux (1912[1693]) wrote his famous letter to John Locke. He proposed a thought experiment where a blind man, who had learned to recognize geometric forms such as a cube and a sphere by touch, would have his sight restored through an operation. Would he be able to distinguish the two forms merely by looking at them? The Molyneux question continues to be debated today, even though the history of medicine is full of case studies of actual blind people who have had their sight restored by actual operations. Apparently, Molyneux was married to a blind woman, which has always led me to wonder why he did not pose his hypothetical question about her. Perhaps he knew that others would object that marriage to a philosopher might contaminate the experimental data. There was a risk that the philosopher might prime her answers or otherwise rig the results. Certainly in commentary on actual cases of restored sight, debaters on the Molyneux question are quick to disqualify those who were allowed to cast their eyes upon, for example, the faces of loved ones before directing their gaze at the sphere and the cube.

Generally, Denis Diderot’s ‘Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See’ (1999[1749]) is credited with urging a more enlightened and humane attitude toward the blind. His blind man of Puiseaux and Nicholas Saunderson, the English mathematician, were both real rather than hypothetical blind men. As he introduces the man from Puiseaux, Diderot is at pains to supply details of his family history and early life to persuade his reader that this is a real person. Significantly, the man from Puiseaux is first encountered helping his young son with his studies, demonstrating both that he is a loving family man and capable of intellectual activity. But the questions that Diderot poses generally fall under the pervu of the Hypothetical. Certainly, many of his remarks help to support Descartes’ theory relating vision to touch:

One of our company thought to ask our blind man if he would like to have eyes. ‘If it were not for curiosity,’ he replied, ‘I would just as soon have long arms: it seems to me my hands would tell me more of what goes on in the moon than your eyes or your telescopes.’ (Diderot, 1999[1749]: 153)

Diderot praises the blind man’s ability to make philosophical surmises about vision, but does not have a high opinion of blind people’s capacity for empathy:

As of all the external signs which raise our pity and ideas of pain the
blind are affected only by cries, I have in general no high thought of their humanity. What difference is there to a blind man between a man making water and one bleeding in silence? (Diderot, 1999[1749]: 156)

The phrasing of the question here suggests an afterthought. I imagine Diderot, at his table, conjuring up two men, one pissing, one bleeding. While his visual imagination is practised in making these sorts of mental images, he is less adept at tuning his mind’s ear. He recognizes that for the blood to be spilt at a rate sufficient to create the same sound as the flowing urine, the bleeding man would normally cry out in pain. So he imagines, in effect, a bleeding mute. But he fails to take into account the relative viscosity, not to mention the different odors, of the two fluids. But Diderot cannot think of everything.

Now I imagine a blind man wandering onto the scene. My blind man is not quite the one Diderot imagines. For one thing he is a bit preoccupied; the philosophers have dropped by again. They talk at him and over his head, bandying about names that are now familiar to him: Locke, Molyneux, Descartes. They question him about his ability to conceptualize various things: windows, mirrors, telescopes – and he responds with the quaint and winsome answers for which he knows they have come. Anything to get rid of them. Distracted as he is, the sound of the bleeding mute’s splashing blood registers on his consciousness. Lacking Diderot’s imagination, however, the thought does not occur to him that this sound emanates from a bleeding mute. His reason opts instead for the explanation that the sound comes from some man relieving his bladder – a far more commonplace phenomenon, especially in the mean streets where the blind man resides. It is not that the blind man has no fellow feeling for the mute. Come to think of it, the mute would make a good companion. He could act as a guide and keep an eye out for marauding philosophers, while the blind man could do all the talking. But the blind man does not have enough information to recognize the mute’s dilemma. The only hope for the bleeding mute is to find some way to attract the blind man’s attention, perhaps by throwing something. But surely, such a massive loss of blood must have affected his aim. While the blind man, living as he does at the margins of his society, is accustomed to being spurned by local homeowners and merchants who find his presence unsightly, and so might flee the bleeding mute’s missiles without suspecting that his aid is being solicited.

The blind man quickens his pace as best he can. The mute succumbs at last to his mortal wound. And the philosopher shifts to another topic.

I am probably wrong to make fun of Diderot, since his treatment of blindness was at once far more complex and far more compassionate than that of other philosophers. And it is not as if his low opinion of the ability of the blind to empathize with others’ pain has ceased to contribute to attitudes about blindness. Consider this anecdote from recent history. Some weeks after September 11, 2001, the blind musician Ray Charles was interviewed about his rendition of ‘America the Beautiful’, which received a good deal of airtime during the period of heightened patriotism which followed that event. The
interviewer, Jim Gray (2001), commented that Charles should consider himself lucky that his blindness prevented him from viewing the images of the World Trade Center’s collapse, and the Pentagon in flames: ‘Was this maybe one time in your life where not having the ability to see was a relief?’ Like Diderot, the interviewer assumed that true horror can only be evinced through the eyes. Many eyewitness accounts of the event, however, were strikingly non-visual. Many people who were in the vicinity of Ground Zero during and soon after the disaster found it hard to put what they saw into words, in part because visibility in the area was obscured by smoke and ash, and in part because what they were seeing did not correspond to any visual experience for which they had language. People described instead the sound of falling bodies hitting the ground, the smell of the burning jet fuel, and the particular texture of the ankle deep dust that filled the streets. But for the majority of television viewers, eyewitnesses from a distance, those events are recalled as images, indelible, powerful and eloquent. To many, like the reporter interviewing Ray Charles, it is the images rather than the mere fact of the events that produce the emotional response. The assumption seems to be that because the blind are immune to images, they must also be immune to the significance of the events and therefore somehow detached from, or indifferent to, the nation’s collective horror and grief.

It is fortunate, for anyone interested in dismantling the image of blindness fostered by the Hypothetical, that we have today a great many first-hand accounts of blindness. In recent decades, memoirs, essays and other texts by actual blind people have attempted to loosen the grip that the Hypothetical still seems to hold on the sighted imagination. Thanks to work by researchers in the emergent field of disability history, we are beginning to have older accounts of blindness drawn from archives of institutions and schools for the blind around the world. One such account is a text written in 1825, by a 22-year-old blind French woman named Thérèse-Adèle Husson. Born in Nancy into a petit bourgeoisie household, Husson became blind at nine months following a bout of smallpox. Her case attracted the attention of the local gentry who sponsored a convent education for her, and encouraged her to cultivate her interests in literature and music. At the age of 20 she left home for Paris where she hoped to pursue a literary career. Her first text, ‘Reflections on the Moral and Physical Condition of the Blind’ (2001[1825]), seems to have been written as a part of her petition for aid from the Hôpital des Quinze-Vingts, an institution that provided shelter and financial support to the indigent blind of Paris. For the most part, her text follows the example of comportment and educational manuals of the time, offering advice to parents and caretakers on the correct way to raise a blind child, and to young blind people themselves on their role in society. It is, by turns, formulaically obsequious and radically assertive, since she writes from the premise – revolutionary for the time – that her first-hand experience of blindness gives her a level of expertise that equals or surpasses that of the institution’s sighted administrators. While it is unlikely that Husson’s convent education would have exposed her to the work of Descartes or Diderot, she considers some of the same questions previously posed to the Hypothetical. It is possible that the provincial aristocrats, who took up her education, may have engaged in
amateurish philosophizing in her presence. For example, like Diderot’s blind man of Puiseaux, she prefers her sense of touch to the sight that she lacks. She recounts how, at the time of her first communion, her mother promised her a dress made of chiffon, then, either as a joke or in an attempt to economize, purchased cheaper percale instead. When the young Husson easily detected the difference through touch, her mother persisted in her deception and even brought in women neighbors to corroborate. Whether playing along with the joke, or as a genuine rebuke of her mother’s attempt to deceive her, Husson (2001[1825] retorted:

I prefer my touch to your eyes, because it allows me to appreciate things for what they really are, whereas it seems to me that your sight fools you now and then, for this is percale and not chiffon. (p. 25)

In a later discussion of her ability to recognize household objects through touch, her impatience seems out of proportion, unless we imagine that she frequently found herself the object of philosophical speculation by literal-minded practitioners:

We know full well that a chest of drawers is square, but more long than tall. Again I hear my readers ask what is a square object! I am accommodating enough to satisfy all their questions. Therefore, I would say to them that it is easy enough to know the difference between objects by touching them, for not all of them have the same shape. For example, a dinner plate, a dish, a glass can’t begin to be compared with a chest of drawers, for the first two are round, while the other is hollow; but people will probably point out that it is only after having heard the names of the articles that I designate that it became possible for me to acquire the certainty that they were hollow, round, square. I will admit that they are right, but tell me, you with the eyes of Argus, if you had never heard objects described, would you be in any better position to speak of them than I? (p. 41)

Her emphasis on square versus round objects as well as her tone and her taunt, ‘You with the eyes of Argus’, suggests an irritation that may come from hearing the Molyneux question one too many times. She is arguing also against the notion that such words as ‘square’ and ‘round’ designate solely visual phenomenon, to which the blind have no access and therefore no right to use these words.

Almost a century later, Helen Keller gives vent to a similar irritation at literal-minded readers. In her 1908 book, *The World I Live In*, she gives a detailed phenomenological account of her daily experience of deaf-blindness. Early on, she footnotes her use of the verb ‘see’ in the phrase, ‘I was taken to see a woman’:

The excellent proof-reader has put a query to my use of the word ‘see.’ If I had said ‘visit,’ he would have asked no questions, yet what does
'visit' mean but 'see' (*visitare*)? Later I will try to defend myself for using as much of the English language as I have succeeded in learning. (Keller, 2003[1908]: 19)

Keller makes good use of her Radcliffe education to show that the more one knows about language, the harder it is to find vocabulary which does not have some root in sighted or hearing experience. But, she argues, to deny her the use of seeing-hearing vocabulary would be to deny her the ability to communicate at all.

In their 1995 book, *On Blindness*, two philosophers, one sighted and one blind, conduct an epistolary debate that might seem to put to rest all the old hypothetical questions. Unfortunately, Martin Milligan, the blind philosopher, died before the discussion was fully underway. If he had lived, we can assume not only that he and his sighted colleague, Bryan Magee, would have gone further with their debate, but also that they would have edited some testy quibbles about which terms to use and which translation of Aristotle is more accurate. Milligan, who worked primarily in moral and political philosophy, and was an activist in blind causes in the United Kingdom, forthrightly resists the impulse to allow the discussion to stray far from the practical and social conditions that affect the lives of real blind people. For example, he cites an incident from his early life, before he found an academic post, when he was turned down for a job as a telephone typist on a newspaper because the employer assumed that he would not be able to negotiate the stairs in the building. He identifies this as one of thousands of examples of the exaggerated value that sighted people place on vision. Any thinking person has to recognize that sight is not required to climb or descend stairs. He asserts that the value of sight would be that it would allow him to move around unfamiliar places with greater ease. He concedes that vision might afford him some aesthetic pleasure while viewing a landscape or painting, but insists that he can know what he wants to know about the visible world from verbal descriptions, and that this knowledge is adequate for his needs, and only minimally different from the knowledge of sighted people. He accuses Magee of voicing ‘visionist’ – or what I might call ‘sightist’ – attitudes that the differences between the sighted and the blind must be almost incomprehensibly vast, and that vision is a fundamental aspect of human existence. Milligan says that these statements seem to express the passion, the zeal of a missionary preaching to the heathen in outer darkness. Only, of course, your ‘gospel’ isn’t ‘good’ news to us heathens, for the message seems to be that ours is a ‘darkness’ from which we can never come in – not the darkness of course that sighted people can know, but the darkness of never being able to know that darkness, or of bridging the vast gulf that separates us from those who do. (Magee and Milligan, 1995: 46)

This prompts Magee to cite his own early work on race and homosexuality, as proof of his credentials as a liberal humanist. He also speculates (somewhat sulkily) about whether the first 18 months of Milligan’s life, when his
vision was presumed to be normal, might disqualify him as a spokesman for the blind, since he might retain some vestige of a visual memory from that period. Later, Magee consults with a neurologist who assures him that the loss of sight at such an early age would make Milligan’s brain indistinguishable from that of a person born blind. And so the discussion continues.

Along the way, Magee makes some claims about sight that seem to me to be far from universal. For example, he states that:

By the sighted, seeing is felt as a need. And it is the feeding of this almost ungovernable craving that constitutes the ongoing pleasure of sight. It is as if we were desperately hungry all the time, in such a way that only if we were eating all the time could we be content – so we eat all the time. (Magee and Milligan, 1995: 104)

Magee asserts that when sighted people are obliged to keep their eyes closed even for a short time, it induces a kind of panic. To illustrate his point, he notes that a common method of mistreating prisoners is to keep them blindfolded, and this mistreatment can lead them to feel anxious and disoriented.

I suspect that his example is influenced by traditional metaphors that equate blindness with a tomb-like imprisonment. Surely a blind prisoner, accustomed to the privation of sight, might still have similar feelings of anxiety and disorientation, due to the threat, whether stated or implied, of impending bodily harm.

To his credit, Magee does allow that some blind experiences are shared by the sighted. Milligan describes how many blind people negotiate new environments, and can feel the presence of large objects even without touching them as ‘atmosphere-thickening occupants of space’ (p. 56). As Magee reports:

When I was a small child I had a vivid non-visual awareness of the nearness of material objects. I would walk confidently along a pitch black corridor in a strange house and stop dead a few inches short of a closed door, and then put out my hand to grope for the knob. If I woke up in the dark in a strange bedroom and wanted to get to a light-switch on the opposite side of the room I could usually circumnavigate the furniture in between, because I could ‘feel’ where the larger objects in the room were. I might knock small things over, but would almost invariably ‘feel’ the big ones. I say ‘feel’ because the sensation, which I can clearly recall, was as of a feeling-in-the-air with my whole bodily self. Your phrase ‘atmosphere-thickening occupants of space’ describes the apprehension exactly. I suddenly ‘felt’ a certain thickness in the air at a certain point relative to myself in the blackness surrounding me. ...This illustrates your point that the blind develop potentialities that the sighted have also been endowed with but do not develop because they have less need of them. (Magee and Milligan, 1995: 97–8)

Here, and in a few other places in the correspondence, Magee and Milligan
seem to be moving in a new direction. It is not merely that they discover a shared perceptual experience, but one that is not easy to categorize as belonging to one of the five traditional senses. Here, a ‘feeling’ is not the experience of texture or form through physical contact, but an apprehension of an atmospheric change, experienced kinesthetically and by the body as a whole. This seems to point toward a need for a theory of multiple senses where each of the traditional five could be subdivided into a number of discrete sensory activities, which function sometimes in concert with and sometimes in counterpoint to others. Helen Keller identified at least three different aspects of touch that she found meaningful: texture, temperature and vibration. In fact, she understands sound as vibrations that the hearing feel in their ears while the deaf can feel them through other parts of their bodies. Thus she could feel thunder by pressing the palm of her hand against a windowpane, or someone’s footsteps by pressing the soles of her feet against floorboards.

What these blind authors have in common is an urgent desire to represent their experiences of blindness as something besides the absence of sight. Unlike the Hypothetical, they do not feel themselves to be deficient or partial – sighted people minus sight – but whole human beings who have learned to attend to their non-visual senses in different ways. I have deliberately chosen to limit my discussion here to works by people who became blind very early in life. One of the most striking features of the Hypothetical is that he is always assumed to be both totally and congenitally blind. Real blindness, today as in the past, rarely fits this profile. Only about 10 to 20 percent of people designated as legally blind, in countries where there is such a designation, are without any visual perception at all. It is hard to come by statistics on people who are born totally blind, in part because it only becomes an issue when the child or her parents seek services for the blind, which tends to occur only when the child reaches school age. We can assume that more infants were born blind in the past, since some of the most prevalent causes of infantile blindness have been eliminated by medical innovations in the 19th and 20th centuries. Nevertheless, in the past, as now, the leading causes of blindness occur later in life and often leave some residual vision. Some may retain the ability to distinguish light from darkness, while others may continue to perceive light, color, form and movement to some degree. Some people may retain the acuity to read print or facial expressions, while lacking the peripheral vision that facilitates free movement through space. And regardless of the degree or quality of residual vision, blind people differ widely in the ways that they attend to, use or value these perceptions.

Although the situation of the Hypothetical is rare, his defenders are quick to discount anyone with any residual sight or with even the remotest possibility of a visual memory. In traditional discussions of blindness, only total, congenital blindness will do. In a review of my book *Sight Unseen*, Arthur Danto (1999) asserted that I had too much sight to claim to be blind. He quoted a totally blind graduate student that he once knew who said that he could not conceptualize a window, and that he was surprised when he learned that
when a person’s face is said to glow, it does not in fact emit light like an incandescent light bulb. Danto does not tell us what became of this student or even give his name, using him only as a modern-day version of the Hypothetical. Then he goes on to relate the history of the Molyneux question.

If only the totally blind can speak of blindness with authority, should we make the same restriction on those who talk about vision? Is there such a thing as total vision? We know that a visual acuity of 20/20 is merely average vision. There are individuals whose acuity measures better than 20/20, 20/15 or even 20/10. Such individuals can read every line of the familiar Snellen eye chart, or, as in the case of Ted Williams, can read the print on a baseball whizzing toward their bat at a speed close to 90 miles per hour. How many scholars of visual culture – I wonder but will not ask – can claim such a level of visual acuity?

What visual studies can bring to these discussions is an interrogation of the binary opposition between blindness and sight. Clearly, it is more useful to think in terms of a spectrum of variation in visual acuity, as well as a spectrum of variation in terms of visual awareness or skill. The visual studies scholar, highly skilled in understanding images, who loses some or even all of her sight, will not lose the ability to analyze images and to communicate her observations. Professor Mitchell’s classroom exercise, ‘Showing Seeing’, assumes that some students will be better at the task, while others might improve their performance with practice, and in all cases their aptitude would have little (if anything) to do with their visual acuity. The skill, as I understand it, is in the telling as much as it is in the seeing – the ability to translate images in all their complexity and resonance into words.

And as we move beyond the simple blindness versus sight binary, I hope we can also abandon the clichés that use the word ‘blindness’ as a synonym for inattention, ignorance or prejudice. If the goal is for others to see what we mean, it helps to say what we mean. Using the word in this way seems a vestigial homage to the Hypothetical, meant to stir the same uncanny frisson of awe and pity. It contributes on some level to the perception of blindness as a tragedy too dire to contemplate, which contributes in turn to lowered expectations among those who educate and employ the blind. It also contributes to the perception among the newly blind themselves that the only response to their new condition is to retire from view.

I will leave you with a futuristic image of blindness. In Deborah Kendrick’s story, ‘20/20 with a Twist’, Mary Seymour, chief administrator of the department of visual equality, looks back on her life from the year 2020. In this blind Utopia, the major handicaps of blindness have been eliminated; private automobiles were phased out a decade earlier and technologies to convert print to Braille or voice had become ubiquitous and transparent. Of course, Mary reflects, it was not always like this. Back in the dark ages of the 1980s and 1990s, Braille proficiency had ceased to be a requirement for teachers of blind children, Braille production facilities and radio reading services were shut down, and blind children were no longer being educated at all. Mary
and other blind people who had grown up in an earlier, slightly more enlightened period, banded together to lead a non-violent, visionary rebellion to bring down the oppressive regime. They tampered with the power supply – since darkness is no impediment to blind activity – scrambled computer transmissions and disrupted television broadcasts. All across the country, television screens went blank while the audio continued, interrupted periodically by the revolutionary message: ‘You, too, can function without pictures.’

The rebel leaders were captured, however, and forced to undergo implantation of optic sensors which, the captors reasoned, would transform them into sighted people who would see the error of their ways and abandon the cause. But the rebels persisted. The power supply was shut down completely. The government fell, and the captured leaders were liberated in triumph.

Significantly, the optic sensors did not transform the revolutionary leaders into sighted people. Rather, each acquired only a facet of visual experience. One gained the ability to perceive color. Another developed a sort of telepathic vision, allowing him to form images of places at great distances. Mary’s sensor gave her a kind of literal hindsight, making her able to create a detailed mental picture of a room, but only after she had left it. These bits and pieces of vision serve as a badge of the former rebels’ heroic past, and allow them to perform entertaining parlor tricks, but are otherwise easy to disregard.

This is a far cry from the Hypothetical. In Deborah Kendrick’s image of the future, blindness is a simple physical characteristic rather than an ominous mark of Otherness. If the Hypothetical once helped thinkers to form ideas about human consciousness, surely his day is done. He does too much damage hanging around. It is time to let him go. Rest in peace.

References


Georgina Kleege is the author of *Home for the Summer* (Post-Apollo Press, 1989), *Sight Unseen* (Yale University Press, 1999) and *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller* (Gallaudet University Press, forthcoming). Her work appears frequently in such journals as *Raritan, Southwest Review* and *The Yale Review*. She teaches creative writing and disability studies in the English Department at the University of California, Berkeley.

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