

Notes on Blindness: Sensory Cinema and the Beauty of Cognition

Films are often thought of in primarily visual terms.

When we go to 'see' a film our expectations are of moving images with an accompanying soundtrack. But what's remarkable about cinema is the way certain films make you feel. The best films are multi-sensory experiences where you empathise so strongly with the lead character that you don't just see and hear their story, you also 'feel' something of their world. This is what [Notes on Blindness](#) achieves with extraordinary impact.

Notes on Blindness is part documentary/part biopic and it tells the story of John M. Hull. Hull became blind in his mid-40s, registering as a blind person in 1980, when he already had a young family and an established career as a writer, academic and theologian. In an attempt to understand blindness, Hull documented his experiences on audio tape as he established a new perceptual relationship with the world around him.

The original recordings Hull made to articulate his thoughts and feelings, which also captured poignant interactions with his family, provide the actual dialogue heard within the film. The actors lip-synch to Hull's tapes, giving an authentic and direct connection to his highly personal reflections and adaptations to the loss of sight.

In his studies of sensory responses within the brain, Oliver Sacks makes a number of references to Hull's experiences which are characterised (by Hull, in his 1990 book *Touching the Rock*) as 'deep blindness' - a scenario in which there is a profound loss of visual images and memories as well as the very idea of seeing, so that even concepts such as 'here', 'there' and 'facing' seem to lose meaning.

At certain times in the film, you feel Hull's sense of becoming lost within blindness. The helplessness of hearing one of his children cry in pain but without being able to help, and the distance he feels from a family Christmas (despite, or perhaps because, he is sitting in the same room) when spontaneous moments of joy seem to take place in some other far away, well-lit, space.

And yet, the brain is a remarkable organ capable of reallocating sensory processes.

As Sacks has suggested (in *The Mind's Eye*, 2010), an underutilised visual cortex might divert its functionality from processing light to processing sound and touch. This observation about reallocated functionality tallies with Hull's own insights. In his darker moments, Hull questions what is happening now that his experiences of optic stimulation have ceased. He fears that part of his brain is perhaps dying and describes a sense of cognitive suffering: a sort of hunger for visual stimulation that is impossible to satiate, generating a feeling of aridity and loss.

It is profound to hear Hull calmly but sensitively relate these sensations.

It is then elating when, over time, he is able to assert that 'cognition is beautiful' - explaining that in an entirely positive way there has been a 'strange kind of change in the state of my brain'.

As Hull adapts to blindness he seems to develop a remarkable level of hyperacuity in his other senses, enabling him to build a conceptual understanding of space, place and environment through hearing, touch and other sensory information. Hull's inner resources are expanded and, through a partly religious experience, his mind becomes 'almost blown... with new ideas and connections' as he perceives a sense of faster networks and a new form of personal clarity.

The [Virtual Reality](#) experience that is currently touring the UK alongside *Notes on Blindness* provides a compelling accompaniment to the film: as Hull's commentary maps his cognitive engagement with a particular place and the sensations or emotions of the moment, an impressionistic landscape of sounds constructs depth and space.

The result is an immersive experience that creates a distinct sense of relating to the world as its contours emerge from an initially pitch black, silent nothingness. One of the philosophical issues Hull constantly explores, both within the recordings that feature in *Notes on Blindness* and more broadly across his wide ranging body of work, is: 'can we have insight into other people?' He suggests this is a core question upon which our humanity hangs.

The experience of *Notes on Blindness* and its phenomenal ability to share something of John Hull's perception of the world certainly makes it seem like this is possible.

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