

# ÆSTHETICS OF THE SKIN (Notes towards a 'blind' aesthetic)

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Couldn't we imagine a tribe of blind people? Couldn't it be capable of sustaining life under certain circumstances? And mightn't sighted people occur as exceptions?

—Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>1</sup>

The skin is the largest organ of the body. If we had no eyes; would we be like earthworms, dependent on our skins for where we are, what we know, and how to move around? Is a life governed by touch merely a life of dark wits lived in a hole in the ground. Can blind people offer an *insight* that will help the sighted to find themselves in art?

Fine artists, and those given to enjoyment and criticism of visual arts in the conventional sense of the word, are seen as exponents of the trained eye. They, of all people, in all professions, pretend to know how to *look*, and how to draw the highest semiological and visual satisfaction from that *looking*. Their total dependency on *sight* has almost entirely negated the senses of touch, hearing, taste and smell in the artwork. *Visual touching* reveals what surface and substance *feels* like. This paper compares *visual touching* to *palpable sight*.

*Heterotopic* eyes are those which have been transferred anatomically to various parts of the body, such as the hands, wings, torso, arms and different parts of the head, in special beings, angels and deities<sup>2</sup>. When eyes are situated in the hand, for example, by association with the symbolism of the hand, they denote actions of clairvoyance and clairaudience. Blind people *see* by means of their fingers and hands. They carry their destiny at their fingertips. It is not easy for the sighted person to *look* at the world through the *eyes of the hand*, but, there is not a spot of skin on the body, that, if duly exercised, won't be able to *see* in the way that eyes have been

trained to *touch*. Our entire body is capable of *looking*. Jules Romains, in the 1930's, proposed the theory<sup>3</sup> of 'dermo-optical perception' and maintained that some blind people can sense colour or read through their fingers. One such 'visionary', Rosa Kuleshova, could read and sense equally well through her fingertips, toes and elbow.<sup>4</sup>

The mist of darkness or blindness is not essentially evil since it forms the primordial chaos, the visceral medium from which light emerge; darkness is unmanifest light<sup>5</sup>. One 'blind' device, the labyrinth, cuts the explorer off from visual contact with other certainties and signifies an essential mission of finding the *self* in the centre. The cardinal *métier* of the maze itself is to defend its centre. Reaching and breaching the centre becomes an initiation into sanctity and absolute reality.<sup>6</sup> In some medieval churches, like Chartres cathedral, a maze is mapped out on the floor and pilgrims must commit to and escape its entanglement by crawling on their knees, not seeing any reference points outside their immediate quandary. Here, memory committed to prayer is the 'clue', the ball of

string<sup>7</sup> of redemption. Cooper suggests that the bull at the centre of the labyrinth is the male, solar, generative force. Theseus' memory, symbolised by the ball of recollective string was held in the grasp of Ariadne, the fiducial female anchor. The convolutions of the labyrinth, the mists and miasma clouding the path are therefore proposed as the female, redemptive force.<sup>8</sup> The labyrinth is a kind of Paradise regained, an attaining of realisation after ordeals, a knot to be untied in the dark.

Like earthworms, the blind stalk the irreversible maze of their own predicament. Their ball of string – a memory of dark events, aided by a white stick – must return them to safety and transform their *nescience* into *prescience* and enlightenment. Their labyrinth at one and the same time, permits and prohibits. It is a symbol of both exclusion in making the way in – in foreboding, and of retention in making the exit difficult if not impossible. The exit for them is never quite the same as the entrance. They can't escape their physical blindness. They are forever in its maze, but, like the sighted, they can conquer their visionlessness. Only those qualified and equipped with a phenomenal knowledge can find the way back from the centre. The *blind* maze then becomes an enchanted forest.<sup>9</sup>

The blind person often enjoys the status of a *cryptaesthete*<sup>10</sup> – a seer or clairvoyant dependent on the senses. Biblical prophets, like Balaam, often closed their eyes when prophesying or had their eyes open and saw

<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein *Remarks on Colour* 1978: 63e. Written in Oxford and Cambridge a few months before his death in 1951.

<sup>2</sup> Cirlot *Dictionary of Symbols* 1962: 95.

<sup>3</sup> Trevor-Roper *The World Through Blinded Sight* 1970: 150, 171.

<sup>4</sup> A scientific attempt was made to explain cutaneous photo-sensitivity as the ability of nerve-endings in her skin to record chemical changes from light in the form of a mosaic. It was found that this sensitivity could be lowered by careful washing and extraction of *carotenoids* from her *stratum corneum*. American analysts thought that the phenomenon was due to pigments enhanced by melanin, or differential penetration of differing wavelengths. These attempts to substantiate the phenomenon proved futile and it remains a mystery. Other 'visionaries' to follow Kuleshova were the Russians Nilen Kulagina and Lena Bliznova and some girls from Barnard College in New York. Their claims as well as proof against them remain a controversy.

<sup>5</sup> Cooper *An Illustrated Encyclopædia of Traditional Symbols* 1990: 54, 106.

<sup>6</sup> Cirlot 167

<sup>7</sup> The word *clue* derives from the old English *clew* which meant 'a ball of string'.

<sup>8</sup> De Vries *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* 1981: 288, Cooper 93.

<sup>9</sup> Cooper 93.

<sup>10</sup> *Cryptaesthete*, from Greek, κρυπτος for 'secret', 'vault', or 'underground chamber', and . αισθησις 'perception by the senses'.

nothing.<sup>11</sup> Respect for the blind visionary is reinforced by the fact that their gaze is directed upward and beyond, into the 'other', while they are fondling abstruse items at navel-height. The most convenient height, ergonomically speaking, where objects can be held meaningfully and comfortably, is on the lap, in the area of the navel. The navel or *omphalos*, is still linked to the 'mental' activities of the lap. Lap-top computers are *omphalic* devices. Those aware of meditative energy emanating from the lap are *omphalopsychics*, – 'visionaries of the lap'. Adam and Eve, not born from human parents, were not equipped with navels. They had a different kind of energy to us, because, at first, they did not need to work. Medieval paintings show them as *anomphalous* – without a navel. Like for them, *touching* leads to the discovery of our own body and skin. *Omphalopsychites* were a group of quietists who practised gazing at the navel as a means of inducing hypnotic reverie. The word *meditate*, from Latin *medius*, meaning 'centre' or 'middle' designates 'a being in', or 'return to' the 'centre'. The *omphalos* is regarded as the cosmic centre, the centre from which the universe is nourished; the navel of the world; a place of refuge and a centre of truth and meditation.<sup>12</sup> *Omphalic* touching of objects is done with the two hands and the stomach. Zen masters are duly proud of their ventripotent profiles (speaker demonstrates *omphalic* touching).

Intense concentration of mental and psychic energy in one object, especially an object held closely, is better described as *cathexis*<sup>13</sup>. *Acathexis*<sup>14</sup>, on the contrary, is a pathological absence of emotional feeling for something of significance. The *cathectic* energy that flows from the unconscious, attaches itself to goals, activities, persons or objects. Freud linked *cathexis* to an electrical charge, and the language of *cathexis* speaks of 'charges' and 'currents' that 'flow' and become 'bonded' to objects.<sup>15</sup> Works of art are 'courted' by those who make them as much as by those with an affection for them. Without induced *cathection*, no implied meanings, no emotional or intellectual content can be imparted to, or appropriated from an object. Those objects touched by the blind are uniquely charged when *cathected*, with electrical charges flowing from perplexing hand-skills. Objects of culture are imbued with a *cathectic* legacy, left within them by care and love. The imagined energy resident within an object is a *numinous* energy. The Roman *numen* was a divine presence thought

to preside within objects. Numinous objects are infused with a sense of presence, inherent spirit and authority. The blind are a distinguished society that palpably convert their private, constantly introspective *cathectic* reality to constitute a unique *omphalopsychic* world-view. Objects change, to differ in meaning and in importance, depending on how intensely they are fondled, cared for, and physically engaged in. Thus, they loose or gain the power to affect us. Erich Neumann (1905-1960) defines the *mystical* as an encounter of the *ego* with the *archetypal* which he qualifies as the *numina*, and with the *pleromatic*<sup>16</sup>, which he describes as the *unformed numinous*:<sup>17</sup>

The mystical phenomenon is (...) always dependent on the man to whom it manifests itself: the epiphany of the numen is dependent on the personality's stage of development and the scope of revelation in which the numen can manifest itself is contingent on the scope of the personality which receives the revelation.

The shaping of the numinous out of the undefined and anonymous into the numen, with its unique utterance, runs parallel to that development of man which leads from the unconscious and anonymous to the conscious and unique.

The *numinous* nature of the art object is an imaginary one<sup>18</sup> motivated by perceptible appearances, but, through this, objects are 'believed' as 'alive' or 'capable'. The extend to which an object might be 'spirit embodied' varies. Paul Jennings' philosophical school, *resistentialism*<sup>19</sup>, founded in 1948, is very much concerned with 'what things think about men' rather than with 'what men think about things' – it suggests that things are plotted against men.<sup>20</sup>

*Resistentialism* resorts under *hylomorphism*, the scholastic theory that primordial matter caused the universe, and the theory of *hylozoism*, that declares matter and life as inseparably connected. Matter, venerated beyond the status of advanced life, becomes the supreme objective in *hylotheism*, the doctrine that God and matter are identical,

resulting in the deification of inanimate manifestations. *Animatism*, also called *pre-animism* is the belief that all things are animated by spirits or souls. Robert Marett (1866-1943), the anthropologist, says that it is an older form of object worship, and that it developed into more 'civilised' *animism* with its emphasis on dreams, trances and an advanced spirit world.<sup>21</sup> This religious tendency is not very different from the *cathectic* one. Rosaries are *cathected*. Touch-dependency is a form of *apotropaic*<sup>22</sup> *fetishism*<sup>23</sup>. A *cathectic* aberration known as *hypercathexis* is marked by an excessive desire placed upon objects. Its sufferers are driven to compulsive and obsessive association with the object of their choice; e.g. in *floccination*, an excessive plucking of bits of wool; *trichotillomania*, the morbid pulling out of hairs and breaking them into smaller pieces; and *carphology*, an inordinate fondling of bedclothes, or the insatiable popping of bubblewrap. Customary *cathexis* is practised by everyone and introduces respect and care for objects as 'meaningful', 'worth keeping' and 'worth looking-after'.

*Palpable* is from Latin *palpo*, 'to stroke or touch gently in the form of a caress'. *Palpus*, for 'hand-palm' is akin to the idea of 'fondling with lovingkindness'. The Romans referred to an adept flatterer as a *palpus*. The palpable experience is grossly overlooked in sculpture. *Overlooked* being the operative word in a visually literate society. Texture, for example, is more properly defined as 'what something looks as if it feels like', than simply 'what it feels like'.<sup>24</sup> Sculpture is merely *imagined* to pertain to the sense of touch. It is a *haptic* experience only in concept, the Greek *haptikos* or 'ability to touch' is invited by the art object, but today's astute *onlookers* prefer only to take the invitation *at face value*. In observing visitors to art galleries where touching the work is still allowed, it is evident that only superficial, cursory *palpation*, if any, takes place. Touching can change the work for the better. Sighting will not offload a *cathectic* presence, and artworks slowly 'pine away'.

The blind's survival depends on the sense of touch. The knowledge they obtain like this is not cursory, or even by choice. Unlike members of the visual society they are not able to be immediately aware of distant space, of extensive disjunction and position and of massive or minute size. To them, knowing these orientations is a different, often

<sup>16</sup> In gnosticism, the *pleroma* is fullness and abundance bestowed by the *Pleroma*, the Divine Being, a synthesis of all divine powers and emanations (Greek *πληρομα* that which fills) OED.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell *The Mystic Vision* (Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks) 1982: 394. Essay by Erich Neumann entitled *Mystical Man* 1948.

<sup>18</sup> Although in contemporary usage the word *numinous* has assumed the meaning of an *imagined* 'life' in inanimate objects, the ancient Romans believed *numinous* qualities to be very real..

<sup>19</sup> Bullock *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* 1988 742. The school is preceded by the philosophical ideas of Freidegg, Heidansiecker, and Ventre in the previous century. The lack of a physical basis somehow disqualifies *resistentialism* as a credible theory.

<sup>20</sup> *Murphy's Law* is an example of *resistentialism*: 'If anything can go wrong, it will.' A slice of bread 'chooses to' land with its syrupy side facing downwards. Jennings' corollary under a *Law of Selective Gravity* states further that 'the chance of the bread falling with the buttered side down is directly proportional to the cost of the carpet.' Wallechinsky *Book of Lists* 1981: 481. *Les choses sont contre nous* (Things are against us).

<sup>21</sup> Notice the difference between *animism* and *animatism*. *Animism* is the belief in universal dreams and visions about spiritual beings and reflects the concern spiritual beings have for affairs of man. (from anthropologist E B Tylor *Primitive Culture* 1871). *Animism* is embodied in the doctrine of *animamundi*, Latin for 'soul of the world'. The *animatism*, sometimes referred to as *pre-animism*, is a more simplistic belief that all objects and things are animated by spirits or souls.

<sup>22</sup> *Apotropaic* 'tending to ward off evil'

<sup>23</sup> *Fetishism* was originally designated as the 'spirit-embodied object'. Taylor *Primitive Culture* 1871, ref. in OED.

<sup>24</sup> Feldman *Varieties of Visual Experience* 1980: 318.

<sup>11</sup> Numbers 24: 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Cooper 122.

<sup>13</sup> Greek for *cathexis*, *καθεξις*, signifies a retention or a holding-back. Melloni, in *Melloni's Illustrated Medical Dictionary* 1983: 84, defines *cathexis* as 'an attachment of emotional energy and significance to a person object or idea'. An example of *cathexis*, apart from the context in which the word is used in this paper, is the sexual energy or libido one person may invest in another.

<sup>14</sup> Reber A S, *Dictionary of Psychology* 1984: 4, 111.

<sup>15</sup> Reber 111.

extreme effort of memory called *mnemotaxis*<sup>25</sup>. Cognisance of colour is out of the question. Think of how impossible it must be for a blind person to appreciate size, distance and aerial space in a cloudy landscape with far-away mountains and fields, or how impossible to grasp the complexities of the architectural interiors and exteriors of constructions like the Sistine Chapel or the Eiffel Tower. The sighted are able to experience *teloramic*<sup>26</sup> vision without effort. *Teloramic* visual tasks are undertaken at more than two meters. The blind can only perform palpable tasks within arms reach. They learn about the true nature of something by touching it piece by piece, and then through memorising the series of touch-experiences, come up with a comprehended view of the extent of the thing. Because they forfeit the advantages of sight, their reliance on touch, hearing, smell and language is understandably exaggerated. Whereas the sighted person develops a philosophical *world-view*<sup>27</sup> as a metaphoric extension of the ability to see, the blind person's *world-view* is an extension of what can be held in the hands. The sighted survey their world visually, but, the blind literally *behold* and *embrace* theirs. *Behold* can be a politically correct term for 'taking in', or, for what Kant in his 'Critique of Pure Reason' calls *intuiting*<sup>28</sup>. In talking to blind people, it transpired that they detest the term *behold*. They simply say that they are *looking* at things, or that they *see* the world around them. They want to be no different than anyone else. They also hate being called *visually challenged* – they are *blind*.

Visual experiences are often of an *anoetic* nature, that is, they are a form of consciousness with sensation, but without thought. Many sighted people go through life, turning a blind eye', so to speak. They look at things without seeing or registering them. *Anoesis* can be helped. It is the result of unwillingness to commit to cognitive sensation<sup>29</sup>.

*Autopsia*, a kind of opposite experience to *anoesis*, is the perception of external objects when none are present. It is often mistakenly believed that the blind must have a mind clouded by apperceptive misconception. *Apperception*, the 'mind's eye' – its perception of itself and its own preconceptions – is perhaps more true of the 'never-never world' of the *anoetic* and

*autoptic* sighted than of the probing blind. This is so because the sighted don't really *look*. They only imagine to have *looked* by virtue of what they *see* in their mind's eye, thus inventing an illusionary world as the one they thought they had *seen*.

Kant refers to the things that underlie experiences of the physical world and of our own mental states as 'the phenomena of outer and inner sense' respectively.<sup>30</sup> The 'phenomena of inner sense', that are not themselves objects of possible experiences are more specifically designated as *noumena* (*things-in-themselves*, or German, *Dinge-an-sich*). *Anoesis* and *noumenon* are derived from Greek *νοῦσ*, for 'mind' or 'intellect'. A *phenomenon* is that of which the senses or the mind take note and is distinguished as an immediate object of perception.

Kant's view<sup>31</sup> of how knowledge is acquired in the structure of the human experience, is founded on subjective experiences such as are produced by external entities that affect the senses. The term 'objects' is generally used by philosophers to refer to external entities that affect the senses, but, when it is used to imply 'receiving representations' then it leads to *sensibility*. Such mental 'representations' are comparable with Locke's 'ideas' and Hume's 'impressions'. Kant's *sensibility* supplies the mind with *intuitions* that are always *sensed* within the mind. Once supplied, they may become thought by means of the activity of the understanding – *Erkennen des Erkannten*. In this way a subjective sensory experience is recognised through already existing, objective conceptual knowledge.

*Matter* and *form* in appearances are not one and the same thing to Kant. *Matter* is what is given in sensation, and *form* resides 'in the mind'. He maintains that the *forms* whereby sensations are received are 'Space and Time', and that they are in the mind *a priori*, that is independently from any sense experience. He calls them 'pure forms of intuition':

... all our intuition is nothing but representation of appearance ... the things we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them as being, nor are their relations so constituted in themselves as they appear to us ... As appearances they cannot exist in themselves and apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us.<sup>32</sup>

*Aesthetics*, as a science of appreciating, is directly dependent on the ability to feel, – to sense. *Aestho-physiology* is the scientific study of the organs of sensation. *Aesthetics* in art is uncomplicatedly regarded as *the science of beauty*, as if *beauty* were the only perceptible factor. Whewell tries to address this preoccupation with *beauty* over all the other things also discernible and computable by the senses. He proposes the term *callaesthetics*<sup>33</sup>, for the simplistically perceived *beautiful*. It

derives from Greek, *καλλος*, meaning 'beauty', and *αισθησις*, for 'perception by the senses'. In art, appreciation is more often *not* associated with form and concepts 'easily' distinguishable as 'beautiful'. *Kalopsia* is the somewhat naive inclination to *see* beauty in everything, or the state in which things appear more beautiful than they really are. Perspicacious art also concerns itself with tragedy, suspense, deontology<sup>34</sup>, casuistry<sup>35</sup>, remonstrance, issues of good as well as unconscionable morals and many more. These are increasingly difficult to label as *beautiful*, even paradoxically so, and it seems that reference to them must include some real or pretended sensory essentials. In conceptual art, *projicience*, that is the localization of a sensation in an external environment, has been relegated into an unimportant position.

*Aesthetic*, in view of its allegiance to *αισθησις*, 'perception by the senses', and its unfortunate label as 'the science of beauty', spells out only a portion of what is actually meant by the *aesthetic experience*. The *aesthete* with special faculties of appreciation is also a *cognoscente*. To *cognosce*, is to make an inquiry or to take cognizance of – to investigate. Something *cognoscible* is capable of being known. It appears therefore that as much as *aesthetics* is too reliant on physicality, so too is *cognoscibility* too heavily reliant on cogitation – on reason. Appreciation of form in a non-visual way must include all of the complexities mentioned above for it to be meaningful to the blind. How do the blind 'read', understand, or appreciate the link between meaning and form in art?

*Acænaesthesia*<sup>36</sup> is the inability to experience by means of the all senses together. The word is used by psychologists to describe a lack of awareness of one's own body, resulting in general ill-feeling. Its opposite, *cænaesthesia*<sup>37</sup>, literally means common feeling. The normal availability of all senses in *cænaesthesia* gives the body its collective sense of being alive, of being aware. Multi-sensory appreciation of works of art is less attainable because of the prejudices ascribed to the sense of vision, but the sighted, when impaired in their sense of touch, are not as concerned as the blind are about their loss of sight. The sighted might be said to suffer from unconscious *acroænaesthesia*<sup>38</sup>, the loss of feeling from the hands or fingers. Since they are not aware of that loss, they don't regard sight as compensation. The blind are obliged to consciously compensate for *their*

<sup>25</sup> *Mnemotaxis* is a technique providing movement and orientation that enables one to find one's way around by memory of past experiences and not by sight alone. It is the most complex of five types motorial response to the environment and relied on substantially by the blind. Migratory birds often use this technique, but then, they also have the aid of full vision! The blind memorise a series of occurrences by enquiry, listening, touching, smelling and sometimes a minimal sense of light.

<sup>26</sup> *Teloramic* from Greek *τηλε* far off; *οραμα* view.

<sup>27</sup> More commonly,

*Weltanschauung*, from the German.

<sup>28</sup> Collinson *Fifty Major Philosophers* 1987: 91

<sup>29</sup> *Sentient* 'perceptive of the feelings or senses'

(Latin *sentire* feel); *sentience* 'capability for

perceiving'; 'awareness without thought'.

<sup>30</sup> Bullock 590

<sup>31</sup> Collinson 90.

<sup>32</sup> As quoted in Collinson 91 from Kant's,

*Critique of Pure Reason* A42 B59.

<sup>33</sup> OED.

<sup>34</sup> *Deontology* The study of duty, obligation, ethics that examine the relation between obligation and permission. (Greek *δαι* it is right).

<sup>35</sup> *Casuist* One resolving cases of conscience, *duty*; *casuistry* General ethical principles used for particular conduct (L *casus* case).

<sup>36</sup> Reber *Dictionary of Psychology* 1985: 5 (Greek *α* not or without; *αισθησις* perception; *κοινος* common).

<sup>37</sup> Reber 112.

<sup>38</sup> Reber 8 The word may also denote a loss of feeling in feet or toes (Greek *ακρον* the highest or furthest point).

loss by developing an acute sense of touch, known as *acroaesthesia*<sup>39</sup>.

Tactile appreciation of form is nowhere as acutely exercised as in the consummation of a physical human relationship. Works of art, even three-dimensional works of art, function on such a predominantly visual level that they seem to render capably ambidextrous hands rather inactive. Courtship rituals begin as visual acts and are thereafter increasingly intensified on a haptic level until they are fitfully fulfilled in an intimately palpable union. There, *sight* often ceases to play any part. So severe is the dominance of touch over sight in the closeness of lovemaking that many couples prefer to remain lifelong *scotophiliacs*<sup>40</sup>, keeping the most intimate moments absolutely intimate. Familiar, subjective handling, touching or feeling that also demonstrates affection, is best described as *contractation*<sup>41</sup>. Appreciating fondly is preceded by a more neutral touch and sight aimed at empirical discovery and learning. Such neutral, objective, scientific touching is known as *stereognosis*<sup>42</sup>. Although *contractation* has fallen prey to disuse, it might again be best revived to designate *touching* as a kind of appreciation in discriminatory connoisseurship of all extrinsic form. Thereafter, *expert touching* – Kant’s *intuiting* – varies from the assertive boldness of heavy massage to the feather-light boldness referred to by Gardner<sup>43</sup> who teaches his characters’ *audacious*<sup>44</sup> hands their ‘delicate tricks of love-making ...’

Other useful equivalents for demonstrably physical touching are: *paizogony*, from Greek παίζω, for, ‘to play with’, and γωνη; for ‘generation’. *Paizogony*

is associated with procreative foreplay and brings creative and appreciative processes in direct alliance. All animals indulge in *paizogony* before and during copulating. As an ‘appreciation-by-touch’ term it belongs more to the realm of ‘touching-in-order-to-make’. It can also mean something akin to ‘play-before-you-like’. *Sarmassation*, from the Greek, σαρξ for ‘flesh’, and the French, *masser*, ‘to apply massage to’, indicates touch as a sensual ‘fleshing-out’ of things. The word’s link to physical indulgence is patently obvious. *Paraphilemia* is even more directly linked to sexual foreplay. Παρα– the prefix for ‘beyond’, or ‘throughout’ and φιλω, ‘to love’, ‘regard with affection’, or also ‘to kiss’, makes the term describe a physical activity complementary to lovemaking itself. Affectionate appreciation of the tactile art-form might find very suitable paradigms in *sarmassation*, *paraphilemia* and *paizogony*. Sculptors often believe their work to be a sweetheart, deserving of palpable union. They ‘caress’ some of their forms into being, and they ‘make love’ to their work.

Looking at sculpture, perhaps, like most desires evoked by visual physical beauty, remains a promise that can be consummated in *touching*, a *touching* that won’t easily be allowed by watchful owners. The body is meant to *tantalise visually*. Thereafter, with the necessary consent, it is destined to become an object of *cathexion*. Tantalus, the son of Jupiter, divulged heavenly secrets and for his punishment, was placed in Hades, forever to see nearby food and drink which drew back whenever he attempted to *reach out and touch* it, so that his hunger and thirst remained eternally unsatisfied.

The blind, without visual access to magazines or books, appear to forfeit pornography. Yet, with the new scanners that translate text into Braille, they are at least able to read of sexual exploits. In the film ‘Sneakers’<sup>45</sup> one of the characters who is blind, is shown ‘reading’ a ‘Playboy’ magazine with both text and image translated into a kind of Braille. It is interesting to note, that appreciation of pornography is really an act of visual touching that often progresses into physical acts of touching. To the blind, forewarning and tantalisation are here awkwardly restrained. The predominance of sight to touch in lovemaking can be like wearing thick, clumsy gloves, similar to those used by welders. These are a kind of substitute for the dark glasses that the blind habitually wear. Imagine making love whilst fully clothed and wearing the thickest of gloves, – as had been the practice amongst zealots in the Medieval Ages.

The state of blindness is all too often *viewed* as a form of punishment. Confinement to a dark room was once recognised treatment for the deranged.<sup>46</sup> In Greek myth, blindness was the normal punishment for mortals who had seen a ‘chaste’ goddess bathing. Those disciplined for seeing the goddess, were often

compensated with the ‘inner eye’ of the seer or the prophet.<sup>47</sup>

Dark glasses are worn by the blind to conceal their shame.<sup>48</sup> Trevor-Roper<sup>49</sup> does not romanticise about the blind person’s resignation to life-long palpability, especially if the state of blindness is irreversibly induced of the person’s own volition. He makes much of a unique, predominantly sexual guilt, that drove many sighted individuals into acts of self-mutilation and masking. These acts can be as amiable as the apparently innocent use of dark glasses that serve as vicarious symbols of the hymen in an attempt to retrieve a lost virginity and thus redress guilt, or they can be harshly manifest as desperate energuminal bids to remove peccancy. Actions of permanent self-castration and the self-enucleation of eyes are performed in apparent obedience to scriptural precepts that ask for offensive parts to be excised.<sup>50</sup> Autotomes<sup>51</sup> and blind people thus created, declare so their vulnerability to visual awareness. Edipism<sup>52</sup> such as that of St Lucy<sup>53</sup> of Sicily (d. 304), who is remembered for her own enucleation of both eyes,<sup>54</sup> demonstrates contrition after she had looked on a man lustfully. Fortunately, God accepted her ablation and restored a new set of eyes to her. We are not certain whether these were in fact new eyes, or whether they were metaphoric ones, but the restoration of her ‘eyesight’ caused her to be venerated as the patron saint of ophthalmology. Are drastic acts such as these also possible as the consequence of tantalising contractation, or are they the domain of visual blame?

Paradoxically, dark glasses also allude to the forbidden fruit that becomes desirable because it is not allowed to be *touché*. Their effect on the sighted is a form of *aknephascopia*<sup>55</sup>, a condition described as ‘twilight vision’ resulting from an inability to see clearly when daylight begins to dim. Optometry or ophthalmology is the study of defects of the eye<sup>56</sup> and of remedial actions. *Typhology*, from the Greek, τυφλος ‘blind’, studies irreversible, continuing blindness, and is quite different to the study of the problems

<sup>39</sup> *Acroaesthesia* is acute sensitivity in both hands and feet. Reber 8.

<sup>40</sup> Scotophiliacs are ‘lovers of the dark’. Scoto- is derived from the Greek σκοτος which means ‘darkness’. Trevor-Roper 146 and 170 links visual awareness at the time of lovemaking to exhibitionism. He says that ‘the English, with their non-conformist consciences, and in contrast to the Latins, are said to be largely scotophilic, preferring their intercourse in the darkness.’ He mentions that a quarter of the woman attending a certain public hospital did not know whether their husbands were circumcised or not.

<sup>41</sup> *Contractation*, from Latin *contractatio*, adapted from *contracto*: to touch or handle *closely*, esp. of frequent handling. Horatius Flaccus, the poet, used it for the kind of touch that defiles. Later, a kind of looking that defiles as the touch would. Tullius Cicero, the philosopher, extended the meaning to include ‘to handle or dwell upon mentally’ in the sense of *mente voluptates*, mentally pleasant and agreeable, as voluptuous form. Smith **Chambers Murray Latin-English Dictionary** 1991: 157, 814.

<sup>42</sup> *Stereognosis* from Greek στερεος solid; γνωσις to know. *Stereopsis* is the visual perception of depth or three-dimensional space. The blind practise *stereognosis*, and the sighted more predominantly *stereopsis*.

<sup>43</sup> Paraphrased from Saussy 111, as quoted from Gardner’s, *Jason and Medea* 50, in **Curious and Interesting Words** 1986: 19.

<sup>44</sup> *Audacious* is Saussy 111’s word for ‘slightly bold’, a term that, with *audacious* which means ‘bold’, is taken from the Latin *audacia* for ‘boldness’, ‘courage’, ‘intrepidity’ or ‘daring’.

<sup>45</sup> Universal City Studios **Sneakers**, starring Robert Redford: 1992.

<sup>46</sup> De Vries 129.

<sup>47</sup> De Vries 52 refers to Euenius in Herodotus.

<sup>48</sup> Thompson **The Dictionary of Visual Language** 1980: 23 says that the blind person is represented by the visual shorthand of the dark glasses and the white stick.

<sup>49</sup> Trevor-Roper 146

<sup>50</sup> Matt. 5:29, Mark 9:47—And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

<sup>51</sup> An *autotome* is a ‘self-pruned’ eunuch.

<sup>52</sup> *Edipism* is the intentional self-inflicted injury to the eye or other parts of the body.

<sup>53</sup> *Lucy* or *Lucia* is ironically derived from the Latin *lucidus* which means ‘light’, ‘bright’ or ‘clear’.

<sup>54</sup> Trevor Roper 147 focuses on St Lucy’s culpability, but Farmer **Oxford Dictionary of Saints** 1992: 304 appears to euphemistically avoid this.

<sup>55</sup> *Aknephascopia* from κνηρας darkness, evening dusk, twilight.

<sup>56</sup> The complexity of diagnosing true, continuing blindness is too daunting for the lay person. If a person claims to be blind, they are blind.

of transient and curable blindness.<sup>57</sup> Proscribing the touching of sculpture is like viewing it through dark glasses. As a symbol, *aknephascopia* reinforces the shielded view the sighted have of the blind; it masks a perceived inability to deal with the blind problem and testifies of veiled attempts at confessing culpability and receiving absolution. The side of the dark glasses we are looking from makes a big difference in this analogy. In looking out at the world, from inside 'glass masks', a sense of guilt is implied. From the outside, as onlookers, looking to try and see behind the 'glass masks' of others, the implication is one of a sense of desire.

Dark glasses worn by the sighted can constitute an absence of the *desire* to see clearly. Fear of being looked at is more apparent with the blind; the fear of being touched, more apparent with the sighted. Some fears, usually by inexplicable *aetiology*<sup>58</sup>, result in the withdrawal of sensual participation. *Aphophobia*<sup>59</sup> is an excessive fear of touching or of being touched. It must be a rare occurrence to find a blind person suffering the fear of exercising touch. The sighted's wearing gloves does not quite seem the same as wearing dark glasses, but then, just as glasses are used to mask appearances, so too can gloves. The sighted can be more easily made to withdraw into darkness, but, *achluophilia* or the love of darkness is not always coupled with an aversion for looking. Many sighted fear the day that they will not be able to see and are therefore also afraid of the dark<sup>60</sup>.

*Dark glasses* as metaphor for an inability to see clearly in spite of an otherwise perfect vision occurs in the Bible<sup>61</sup>. There, impaired looking implies ignorance that is later replaced by a state of being fully informed. Excavations show first century glass to be

<sup>57</sup> Some complex types of *acroia* or *cecity* (general scientific terms for continuing blindness) are defined from Cline D, *et seq.* **Dictionary of Visual Science** 1980 as: *amaurosis*, a neurological blindness where the eye itself is not really defect; *hemeralopia*, blindness during day-time with vision only possible in dim light or at night; *hesperanopia* or *nyctalopia*, well-advanced night-blindness; *diplopia*, advanced double-vision; *acamatathesia*, a kind of mental deterioration of senses (psychic blindness); *hemianopsia*, blindness in one half of the visual field; *hemiablepsia*, blindness in one eye; *meropia*, partial blindness or reduced vision; *obcecatio*, partial or incomplete blindness; *monoblepsia*, condition of one eye seeing better than both combined; *nepholopia*, reduced vision resulting from cloudiness of the cornea; *parablepsia*, false or perverted vision as hallucination, illusion; and *asthenopia*, fatigue of vision.

<sup>58</sup> *Aetiology* the study of causes, especially in medicine.

<sup>59</sup> *Aphophobia* from Greek ἀφή 'touching', 'the sense of touch'.

<sup>60</sup> *Achluophobia* from Greek ἀχλυσ a 'mist', a 'mist over the eyes of the dying', 'gloom', an inordinate fear of darkness.

<sup>61</sup> 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.' 1 Corinthians 13:12.

impure, its turbid opaqueness well suited as metaphor for encumbered sight.<sup>62</sup> The body is typified as 'the dark medium of spiritual vision.'<sup>63</sup> All of us, even to the very best, are very limited in vision, perceiving no more than slight impressions of the whole. We only see the skin of some selected things, and that not very well. Dimming the already impeded eye seems odd. The 'dark glasses' of scripture are revealed as a mirror, its clarity delayed in time. With its resolution restored, it will render a *face to face* semblance, a total visual access. Mirroring is an autobiographical way of looking. If dark glasses are associated with a lost virginity, mirrors, as unbroken looking-glasses, have traditionally been associated with intact virginity<sup>64</sup>: 'crack the glass of her virginity and make the rest malleable.'<sup>65</sup> To the blind, their 'mirror' is either cracked into *obcecatio* or totally shattered into blindness. The sighted have the mirror of art to view themselves in, but what medium will mirror touch for the blind? Where do they obtain their self-portrait? What metaphor do they understand in the place of 'mirroring'? Cirlot mentions that mirror-symbolism is linked to water as reflector and the Narcissus myth.<sup>66</sup> *Catrophobic* vision is one where the person is afraid to look in the mirror. Mirror-symbolism is one of thesis and antithesis. Like the echo, the looking-glass stands for twins.

[The mirror is] a door through which the soul may 'free' itself 'passing' to the other side: this is an idea reproduced by Lewis Carroll in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. This alone is sufficient explanation of covering-up mirrors, or turning them to face the wall on certain occasions....<sup>67</sup>

'Darkly' in the Bible text is translated from the Greek, ἐν ἀνιγμῶτι, more properly, 'an enigma' or 'riddle'. Finding and fearing ourselves in art, like the blind in their labyrinth, are enigmatically coupled to the vaguely reflective illusion we have of ourselves in the present. At times, we must cover-up our 'mirror' for a time, we must turn it 'face to the wall'. We need to cloud the elements of finding and losing, of clarity and obscurity, of feeling and *feeling*, of seeing and *seeing* by rediscovering our own redemptive blindnesses.

In my twenty odd years of teaching art, I have often encountered tactile presentations. I was usually blindfolded at such times, and asked to risk sticking my hands into secret holes, to probe extraordinary philosophical substances of objectionable or pleasant nature. It was not uncommon for me to have to wash or care for my hands after fondling dirty juices and stinging prickles. In spite of that experience, I believe that touching provides for a more intimate sensory experience than sight. Touch eliminates distance whereas sight enforces it, touch is committed to an

immediate encounter whereas sight is illusionary and superficial. The foremost experts in the field of *touch aesthetics* must be those who are physically blind, those to whom we must *look* to rediscover our own skin.

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<sup>62</sup> Barnes **Notes on the new Testament** 1974: 775.

<sup>63</sup> Spence, Exell **Pulpit Commentary; Vol 19 Corinthians** 1962: 430.

<sup>64</sup> De Vries **Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery** 1981: 323

<sup>65</sup> Shakespeare **Pericles, Prince of Tyre** 4, 5; b.

<sup>66</sup> Cirlot **A Dictionary of Symbols** 1962: 201.

<sup>67</sup> Cirlot 201, 202