



Blind Visuality in Bruce Horak's *Through a Tired Eye*

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ABSTRACT *This article proposes the concept of blind visuality as a response to the injunction to look differently at both visual images, and vision itself, posed by Bruce Horak's exhibition Through a Tired Eye. The brightly colored impressionistic paintings suggest an artist who revels in the domain of the visual, yet he describes his practice as a representation of blindness. This accessible exposition of blind visuality speaks to the broad question of what critical disability arts contribute to discourses about vision, visuality and spectatorship in the arts. I analyze Horak's paintings as examples of blind epistemology and haptic visuality, showing that this work evokes a way of seeing that blurs the boundaries between vision and embodied feeling. I argue that by expanding understandings of vision and multi-sensory knowledge, deconstructing the separation between vision and haptic perception, and challenging western ocularcentricism, blind visuality poses an alternative economy of looking that reflects disability aesthetics, shifts from individualism to relationality, and challenges understandings of perception/knowledge as a form of mastery.*

KEYWORDS blind epistemology; haptic visuality; disability aesthetics; critical disability studies; blindness; spectatorship

Introduction

On entering Bruce Horak's exhibition *Through A Tired Eye* (2019a), a painting of a giant, abstract eye is positioned in the entrance as if to announce that this exhibition is an interrogation of ways of seeing. The exhibition, mounted at Tangled Art + Disability Gallery, is part of *Crippling the Arts*,¹ a disability Arts Festival that took place at Toronto Harbourfront Centre in 2019. The painting disrupts normative assumptions about vision with a look back from the margins of sight. Indeed, in his artist statement, Horak (2019a)

¹ The presenting partners of the *Crippling the Arts Symposium* were British Council, Creative Users Projects, Tangled Art + Disability, Ryerson University, and Harbourfront Centre. The symposium was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

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writes that he paints blindness itself as a vehicle for vision, focusing on the auras, distortions and floaters through which the image appears for him, a blind person. This exhibition speaks to the broad question of what disability arts bring to discourses about vision, visuality and spectatorship in the arts. More specifically, with its injunction to think differently about both visual images, and vision itself, Horak's exhibition evokes "blind visuality," a concept I develop in this article to refer to crip ways of seeing/sensing that disrupt modern western scopic regimes.² In other words, blind visuality challenges the ways that vision orders the world.

Blind visuality is a political concept that challenges the socially constructed hierarchies that privilege vision and normative ways of seeing. It is distinct from "blind sight," a term I use here to refer to heterogeneous ways of seeing with blindness.³ The term "visuality" frames vision as a social act (Jenks, 1995, p. 1), not just a biological function whereby rays of light convert signals into images in the brain. The term originated in the 18th century, meaning "the visualization of history" (Mirzoeff, 2011). This situates vision within specific historical and cultural contexts, including the cultural meanings attributed to vision and blindness (Davis, 2008; Mirzoeff, 1998). Visuality refers to imaginary rather than perceptual processes. A wide variety of ideas, images and information are assembled in order to visualize history – more than any single person could perceive. This process reflects the hegemonic power of the authority that assembles it, an authorization that Mirzoeff shows "requires permanent renewal in order to win consent as the 'normal,' or everyday, because it is always already contested" (2011, p. 2). Blind visuality names one site of this ongoing contestation, informed by critical disability discourses of blind epistemology and crip aesthetics. Blind epistemology engages blindness as a way of knowing, rather than as a deficit or pathology (Healey, 2019; Jones, 2016; Kleege, 2018; Michalko, 2002; Thompson, 2017). Crip aesthetics is a judgement of beauty that embraces a variety of human bodies, sensory experiences and minds (Cachia, 2013; Chandler, 2017; Siebers, 2010). Analyzing the exhibition *Through a Tired Eye* as an expression of these concepts in disability arts, I integrate two concepts developed in art criticism and cinema studies respectively. The first is haptic aesthetics, which refers to artistic consideration of touch and other bodily sensations (Fisher, 1997). The second is haptic visuality, a way of seeing that blurs the boundaries between vision and embodied feeling by evoking physical memories of touch (Marks, 2000). The concept of blind

² My use of "crip" uses this reclaimed derogatory term referring to a disabled person as an analytic that works similarly to the "queer" of queer theory. Crip in this sense is a verb, rather than a noun, that deconstructs the binary between normal and abnormal, and resists social homogenization and compulsory ablebodiedness (Sandhal, 2003; McRuer, 2006; Lewis, 2015). See the "Editors' Introduction" to this special journal issue for a more extensive definition.

³ My use of "blind sight" is not the same as the medical term "blindsight," referring to some blind people's ability to detect and locate visual stimuli despite not being able to see it (Mazzi et al., 2016, p.1).

visuality weaves these concepts together to expand understandings of vision and multi-sensory knowledge, deconstruct the separation between vision and haptic perception, and challenge the ways that vision is privileged in western modernity. It poses an alternative economy of looking that reflects disability aesthetics, and contests modern individualism and understandings of perception/knowledge as a form of mastery.

Horak's exhibition invites both mainstream and disability arts audiences to reconsider the scopic regimes that invisibly structure aesthetic judgment and assumptions about the nature of knowledge. Where blindness and vision are often treated as dichotomous, the exhibition contests the presumption that blindness knows nothing about seeing. Pairing the words "blind" and "sight" or "visuality" is provocative in mainstream and critical disability studies contexts alike, although for different reasons. Many people outside of disability contexts presume that blind people, by definition, cannot see, and in this respect blind sight and blind visuality appear to be oxymorons. Those working in disability spheres, especially people who address blind experience and knowledge, are more likely well attuned to the fact that blindness is a nuanced, highly variable and socially constructed experience. Yet they are confronted by a persistent privileging of vision in western theories of knowledge and art. So why highlight vision in a critical discussion that seeks to decentre vision? First, this article was conceived in response to the framing aim of Horak's exhibition: he paints to answer the question "how do you see?" that is often posed to him as someone who is legally blind (2019a). Second, my inquiry derives from my situatedness as a nondisabled, sighted scholar concerned with questions about how disability-informed critique shapes concepts like visuality and aesthetics in the realm of the political. Rather than approach these questions as a disability expert – a category fraught within ableist history and power/knowledge dynamics – I want to understand how blind visuality unsettles taken for granted norms about vision, visuality and knowledge. My research participates in feminist and critical disability methodologies that seek to dismantle patriarchal, ableist and imperialist hierarchies of knowledge. I ask what is significant about blind visuality for the broader sphere of visuality – the imaginary assemblage of images and ideas that tell a particular story about human history and ultimately what it means to be human? What role does blindness play in this story, according to what authority, and how does attention to blindness change a conversation that is framed as being about "visuality" in the first place? Blind visuality is an analytic that embodies as well as reflects an ethics of non-mastery, that is, of knowing by yielding, by respectfully being-in-relation with others.⁴ Blind visuality challenges not only cultures of sense, but also the ways that we conceive of ourselves as knowers and political actors in a world of others.

⁴ This relational ethics of non-mastery is informed by Dolleen Tisawii'ashii Manning's published and unpublished work on Anishinaabe epistemology (2014, 2017).

Crip Aesthetics and Blind Epistemology

The interconnected spheres of crip aesthetics and blind epistemology are at the centre of this investigation into blind visibility. Aesthetics refers to concerns with sensorial beauty and artistic taste. These are ways of knowing the world through sensory perception, and so have an epistemological dimension. Defining aesthetics as “the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies” Tobin Siebers delineates disability aesthetics as the embrace of beauty that is by normative standards “broken” (2010, p. 3). This extends understanding of what it means to be human, since as Siebers writes, aesthetics “defines the process by which human beings attempt to modify themselves, by which they imagine their feelings, forms, and futures in radically different ways, and by which they bestow upon these new feelings, forms, and futures real appearances in the world” (2010, p. 3). Amanda Cachia points to the emergence of a disability arts movement that critically and consciously employs disability aesthetics to speak to the complexity of sensing, knowing, being human as well as making and accessing art (2013, p. 261). She argues that artists and curators in disability arts “fold digital practices, access, intersectional identity politics, complex embodiment, disabled phenomenology and more into their art-making, alongside disrupting sensory perceptions and ideas of access” (2013, p. 261). Thus, on the one hand, disability aesthetics shadows narrow normative notions of beauty in modern art with the persistence and beauty of human variability (Siebers, 2010). On the other, disability aesthetics is a critical intervention by an art movement that intentionally engages disability themes from critical perspectives informed by disability identity and experience (Cachia, 2013).

Crip aesthetics troubles conventional ways of knowing disability and it draws on a myriad of embodied, cognitive and sensory experience to expand what it means to be human, and what it means to know the world. As such crip aesthetics is a dimension of what Johnson and McRuer refer to as cripistemology (2014). This is “a way of knowing and unknowing disability, making and unmaking disability epistemologies and the importance of challenging subjects who confidently “know” about “disability” as though it could be a thoroughly comprehended object of knowledge” (2014, p. 130). This term combines “crip” and “epistemology” to designate a theory of knowledge specific to critical disability understandings. These understandings derive on the one hand from the materiality of embodied, cognitive and sensory difference, and on the other, reflect a project of interpretation and meaning making that, like queer theory, contests normativity and proffers an analytic that sets “normal” understandings and perceptions askew (Johnson & McRuer, 2014). Blind epistemology is a subgroup of cripistemology concerned with perception as a source of knowledge, under the particular biological and social conditions associated with blindness. According to Catherine Jones, it “demands a rethinking of how we form knowledge” and a skepticism of western ocularcentrism (2016, p. 3). In

other words, blind epistemology challenges the ways that vision is centered, and given precedence, as the most important route to knowledge in western culture. Blind epistemology is a way of knowing that presupposes a more careful interrogation of the relationship between sensory experience and knowing that considers the heterogeneity of the human senses, and of human experience and perspective more broadly.

Normative visuality is constructed, in part, from particular ideas and images of blindness that are based on myths and stereotypes associating blindness with lack and pathology. Enlightenment thought equates vision with knowledge and rationality, and blindness with ignorance, misery, and emotion (Healey, 2019; Jones, 2016; Kleege, 2018). These myths, like other tropes about disability, make their way into art discourses in ways that are often unthought. As Georgina Kleege shows, the figure of a blind person is a common trope in visual art intended to symbolize ignorance. Blindness is likewise treated as an analogy for the artistic process – positioned as a void to be conquered by the act of creation: “the painter stands like a blind man in the darkness of the white canvas” says the narrator of the documentary *The Mystery of Picasso* (Clouzot, 1956, as cited in Kleege, 2018, p. 64). Similarly, James Elkins writes, “a drawing ... begins in blindness, with a pure white sheet” (1996, as cited in Kleege, 2018, p. 64). Under such conditions the practice of a blind painter is unintelligible.

Such stereotypes of blind ignorance are based on erroneous assumptions about blindness and vision. The myth that blindness is the opposite of sightedness rests on a presumption that blindness is a complete absence of vision (Healey, 2019; Kleege, 2018; Michalko, 2002). This absence signifies a lack. As Rod Michalko writes, “this opposition imagines blindness not merely as opposite to sight, but as the negation of it, generating a conception of blindness as lack – lack of knowledge, lack of normalcy, lack of ability” (2002, p. 27). The opposition further implies something about normative vision, its perfection, completeness, and all-knowingness. Crip aesthetics and cripistemology deconstruct the sighted/blind dichotomy and refer to the heterogeneity of human sensory experience. In this frame, blindness is not a problem, rather the hegemony of sight produces the discrimination and difficulties experienced by blind people. Blindness is instead a mode of perception with its own capacities and potentialities (Michalko, 2002).

While blind visuality refers to a crip politics of the senses rather than vision per se, it is also connected to blind sight. Indeed, blind sight helps shape the contours of blind experience for the vast majority of blind people.⁵ Even people who are totally blind sometimes “see” sparks, shapes, flashes of light and visual hallucinations (Rose, 2015). There exists a myriad of different ways of seeing with blindness. Horak talks about experiencing tunnel vision, light sensitivity, floaters and auras in his vision (2019a). Kleege describes

⁵ Only about three people in every 10,000 are born with no visual perception (Kleege, 2018, p. 4).

being able to distinguish between light and dark and perceive motion. She writes that “forms appear amorphous with unstable outlines that seem constantly on the verge of merging into their surroundings ... I can make sense of the wavering forms and blurry blobs before my eyes mainly because I have a good sense of what’s out there” (2018, p. 4). Devon Healey, in contrast, describes her blindness as an oil spot, “a shimmering swirl of colours” or “little galaxies” that “move as if they had such purpose, as if they were doing something, creating something” (2019, pp. 167-168). Where what falls within the range of “normal” vision remains fairly homogenous, blind vision draws attention to the variability of human sight, and to the coextension of sight with the other senses. This subverts a hierarchy in western cultures that usually places vision first (San Roque et al., 2014) – at least a particular kind of “normal” and distanced vision.

Blind perspectives contribute to aesthetic discourses and cultural knowledge. Kleege (2018) provides numerous examples of blind artists and audiences who offer complex insights to what it means to look and see. These insights are examples of what Hannah Thompson refers to as “blindness gain” (2017). She is here reworking “deaf gain,” a concept developed to oppose constructions of deafness as a loss, referring to the “unique cognitive, creative, and cultural gains manifested through deaf ways of being the world.” (Bauman & Murray, 2014, p. xv). Thompson describes how her blind way of seeing enriches and enhances her perception, by compelling a “close reading” that orients her to the specific, rather than the general, highlighting the “tiny details” of a literary text rather than its broader context (2017, p. 8). She cites Maxime Du Camp’s “short-sighted school” and “long-sighted school” of literary description to show how blind readers, writers or literary characters expand the sphere of literature by literally seeing texts differently. Du Camp writes,

Short sighted people see the tiny things, they study each contour, prioritize each thing because each thing appears to them in isolation; they are surrounded by a kind of cloud onto which each object is projected in apparently excessive proportions; it is as if they have a microscope in their eye which magnifies everything. (1994, as cited in Thompson, 2017, p. 9)

The point here is that blindness enhances, rather than diminishes the visual domain, contrary to normative assumptions.

In addition to offering multiple ways of seeing differently, blind epistemology and crip aesthetics de-centre vision and situate it in relation to other senses. The discussion of blind visibility that follows draws significantly from theories of hapticality – the sense of touch and the felt sense of the body that is associated with blindness to the point of becoming a cliché. While many blind scholars and artists draw attention to haptic experience, it is important to also caution that the cliché of blind tactile proficiency is inaccurate and can reinforce stereotypes about blindness. While many blind people develop heightened awareness and skill at interpreting

tactile perceptions, their capacity for touch is the same as sighted people's (Kleege, 2018, p. 10). Kleege points to the figure of the hypothetical blind man used by modern philosophy and cognitive science as a "prop for theories of consciousness" to show how the analogy between vision and touch is problematic (2018, p. 14). Descartes, in the famous example of the Hypothetical Blind Man, makes an analogy between vision and a blind man who uses two sticks to find his way as he moves around in space. By treating touch as analogical to sight, Descartes reifies sight as the dominant sense. The blind man's hands, extended by sticks, are just an inferior version of the all-knowing eye. Of this example, Kleege writes, "thus it is established that if the sighted theorist is all eyes, the Hypothetical Blind Man is all hands ... the focus is riveted on his tactile perception to the complete exclusion of all his other senses" (2018, p.17).

Kleege does not dispute the importance of physical touch in blind experience and crip aesthetics. Indeed, she writes extensively about tactile and kinesthetic art works and museum touch tours, elaborating with obvious pleasure the sensation of feeling what the artist felt, imitating their motions as her hands follow the contours of a work, and standing in the positions they must have adopted while creating it (2018, p. 63). Such tactile sensing knows differently than sight does, expanding aesthetic experience and bringing about different understandings. She cites Helen Keller's evocative writing about her tactile experience as a blind art audience, in which her touch is able to "see" in a way that challenges the classical idealization of symmetry and order. Keller instead perceives the beauty of variety and disorder, writing:

Eloquence to the touch resides not in straight lines, but in unstraight lines, or in many curved and straight lines together. They appear and disappear, are now deep, now shallow, now broken off or lengthened or swelling. They rise and sink beneath my fingers, they are full of sudden starts and pauses, and their variety is inexhaustible and wonderful. So you can see I am not shut out from the region of the beautiful, though my hand cannot perceive the brilliant colours in the sunset or on the mountain, or reach into the blue depths of the sky. (2003, as cited in Kleege, 2018, p. 64)

The examples of Helen Keller's tactile knowledge of the painting, and Kleege's experiences on museum touch tours, show that touch does not merely imitate what the eye sees by tracing out forms with the hand, and then imagining them in the "mind's eye" in visual form (2018). Indeed, Kleege suggests a "mind's hand" or "mind's body" might be a more accurate description for the images she forms in her mind of what she perceives with her senses (2018, p. 76). Touch knows what it feels in its own terms. Unlike the eye, the hand does not seek out the outline of a drawing, instead "the hand embraces the object in its multifaceted complexity" (p. 64).

Descartes' Hypothetical Blind Man seems oblivious to other sensory features of the landscape he inhabits: "the scene Descartes imagines is unnaturally silent. In the real-world trees emit sounds even on a still

night...vegetation and soil exhale telltale scents, and the temperature changes as he leaves a wooded area or approaches water” (Kleege, 2018, p. 15). Compare Descartes’ imaginary blind man to Healey’s description of blind flaneurship in which the sensory landscape of a city street is marked by the musicality of sound and flows of movement:

The heartbeat of a blind person moving in the street is contrapuntal to the rhythm of the street. Both rhythms represent a melody, but a melody different from one another. The rhythm of blindness is sometimes contrapuntal with that of the city or any other environment and at other times discordant. Blindness forces a blind person to “figure out” (almost always by hearing and feeling) the rhythm of the city; a traffic flow, the pedestrian flow, the rhythm of the sound, the rhythmic movement of the city. Sometimes an environmental rhythm presents an opportunity for the blind person to know the space through which she is moving. (2019, p. 119)

Healey transforms the everyday experience of walking down the street to an experience of *crip* aesthetics: a dance choreography and soundscape. She focuses on proprioception, her body moving through space, encountering other bodies, surrounded by the musical rhythms of the street. These features are present for sighted people that walk or roll through city streets, but blindness draws a focused attention to what many people take for granted. Healey describes various dimensions of haptic experience, including the body’s sense of movement and force, connecting this further to hearing.

For Healey, blindness is not an experience limited to the eyes, rather it is felt, embodied and lived. She describes the experience of becoming blind, the way this experience was felt in her body, before she was able to identify that something was different in her vision:

Before I ever saw my blindness, I felt it... I would shift my ribcage forward allowing my eyes to focus on an image, bringing them (my eyes and the image) closer so that I could capture the details that I knew were there. Text on a poster, a price tag hanging from a sweater, the keys of my laptop, handwritten notes – each required the movement of my upper body bringing my eyes closer so that I could see. I began using my neck muscles to support the dropped weight of my head as I hovered over images to see. The new physicality of my sight, almost an intersection of sight and my body, brought with it muscle pain, neck cramps and even muscle spasms. My muscles felt tight and strained. I was unusually tired at the end of the day but my sight, ironically, my creeping blindness was not yet something I noticed. I was just a bit more tired. I attempted to correct, what I had interpreted, as neglectful posture; sit up straight became my mantra, squinting, my new habit. (2019, p. 32)

Healey did not at first notice her “creeping blindness,” instead interpreting this felt experience as a concern of the body. She adapted her movements, changed her posture, gradually becoming aware that there is a connection between her moving body and her vision. She could no longer take for granted the relationship of her body to space, the movements of the body that

“seek to close the distance between the eye and the world” (2019, p. 34). She troubles the presumption that the eye crosses a distance to bring the world close, since in her experience, the world became distant as her sight changed. Instead, she explains, “my body brought me to the world” (p. 35). She thus describes her experience of blind vision as an embodied movement.

Finding herself disconnected from the ways of seeing that she formerly participated in prior to becoming blind, Healey describes the onset of new ways of knowing and sensing. Herself a cultural producer in theatre and performance, she interprets the felt experience of blindness as a poetics as well as an epistemology. Returning to the scene of the blind flaneur in “Blindness in V Acts,” she notes the “taken-for-granted demands” of city life that her experience of blindness both imitates and resists, that “orient one’s sense of belonging in the street” (2019, p. 125). With her changing sight comes new insight. She notes that the rhythm of the street is based on the visual hegemony of sighted people, who don’t even seem to notice the rhythms and flows created by their “normative expectations” (p. 125). Blind people must sensorially navigate this space, their “polyrhythmic” difference either syncing into harmony if they can mimic sightedness to such an extent that they can pass as sighted or offering “discordant” notes and “contrapuntal beats” (p. 125). For Healey, this difference evokes an expanded awareness, and is the site for creativity and knowledge (p. 131). In blind visuality, vision and touch do not keep their distance at opposite ends of a sensory spectrum. In blindness one sees, feels, moves and hears simultaneously, summoning a heightened awareness of the ways that sensory experiences combine, signaling their vast variability in human experience. Healey’s experience of blindness can be understood as a kind of “haptic vision,” a way of seeing with and through felt experience. This is different from the concept of “haptic vision” derived from cinema studies that we shall consider shortly, which refers to visual images that evoke a felt sense, as opposed to felt sense evoking images. I will return to this distinction later.

Kleege’s, Healey’s, and Thompson’s rich descriptions of the qualities of blindness, its gains and particularities, begin to give a sense how epistemology – ways of knowing – are tied to phenomenological experience of the world. In other words, we know the world through our sensory perception of it. We can begin to understand the limits of the reductive, narrow theory of knowledge inherited from the Enlightenment that gives (normative) vision such an elevated and exclusive place. Instead, people with a wide variety of sensory experiences come to know the world in a myriad of ways. The senses work together, and different senses do not work in the same way. Yet visuality – the visualization of history – is authorized by normative structures that eclipse this richness. Blind epistemology demands a dethroning of vision as the master sense against which all other senses are judged or compared. Attention to touch, movement, smell and sound in crip aesthetics adds dimensions of art criticism that are often left unconsidered. Blind audiences, as well as blind artists, contribute to cultural knowledge

with their particular ways of sensing and perceiving. Indeed, as Kleege writes, “the integration of blind perception and experience will change the foundational assumption of the culture; change how the human condition is defined” (2018, p.1).

Haptic Aesthetics and Haptic Visuality

Blind epistemology and crip aesthetics each draw attention to the importance of haptic perception and haptic aesthetics. From the Greek *haptesthai*, meaning “to touch,” and *háptein* “to fasten,” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989) haptics is “the sensibility of the individual to the world adjacent to [one’s] body by use of [one’s] body” (Gibson, 1966, p. 97). This includes tactile touching by the sensory neurons located in the hands and under the body’s skin, as well as kinesthetic and proprioceptive senses – sensations of body movement, muscle force, and body position. Where vision is a distal (or distance) sense, hapticality is “proximal.” It is in contact with, or near the body (Fisher, 1997, p. 6). This different quality relays a difference in meaning. Fisher’s description of the distinction between vision and touch is helpful here:

Where the visual sense permits a transcendent, distant and arguably disconnected, point-of-view, the haptic sense functions by contiguity, contact and resonance. The haptic sense renders the surfaces of the body porous, being perceived at once inside, on the skin’s surface, and in external space. It enables the perception of weight, pressure, balance, temperature, vibration and presence. (1997, p. 4)

Kleege’s tactile explorations in museum touch tours, and Healey’s rhythmic movement through city streets, highlights various dimensions of hapticality. Some of these involve physical contact with objects by the hands and body, others explore space with one’s entire body and multiple senses. This is very different from the distance, objectivity, and transcendence evoked by optical vision. Vision and hapticality take place in socio-political contexts wherein these different meanings are connected to different material effects. When a spectator feels an artwork with their hands, they are immediately adjacent to the work, feeling the textures of its surfaces, its shape and temperature, the extent of its resistance under their palm or fingertips. Because of this proximity, hapticality is associated with relational properties such as intimacy, emotion, and materiality. Yet Fisher points out that hapticality is not entirely disconnected from distal senses. Recall Healey’s rich descriptions of her body moving through space, bringing the world to her, as she navigates the choreography of other bodies in public space through proprioception, rhythm and sound. Haptic perception, as Fisher writes, “can elucidate the energies and volitions involved in sensing space” with an “affective touch” that does not necessarily involve actual physical touch (1997, p. 6). For Fisher such affectively charged haptic awareness is already a part of the

experience of viewing art in a gallery or museum, where bodies perambulate from one exhibit to the next. It is especially pronounced when interacting with specifically haptic work, such as vibratory and tactile art, which are often featured in crip curation practices.

Haptic visuality is a concept in cinema studies that brings the qualities of haptic aesthetics to the visual field of the moving image. In "Skin of the Film," Marks (2000) addresses a particular kind of cinematic image and visual experience that she identifies is present in intercultural cinema. Her contribution is significant, merging two kinds of sensory experience, and blurring the boundaries between categories. For Marks, certain images and ways of looking are integrally haptic: in such instances the eye does not merely gaze, it touches. To develop the concept of haptic visuality, she distinguishes between images that are optical, and haptic images. Optical images, with their distance and perspective, establish a clear demarcation between an object being represented and its ground, as well as a clear distinction between the viewer and the object being looked at. The haptic images Marks refers to are structured by closeness rather than distance, and the eye's movement over the textured surface of an image, rather than its penetration into the illusion of three-dimensional space. Such haptic images can be found in grainy, faded stock footage, close up shots so detailed they obscure the whole, or extreme close shots imbued with intimacy (Marks, 2000). Haptic images do not contain all the resources necessary to interpret them. Instead, the gallery-goer actively engages in a perceptive and contemplative process that draws on their own memory and imagination to complete the image (Marks, 2000). Marks writes:

The works I propose to call haptic invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what she or he is beholding. Such images resolve into figuration only gradually, if at all. Conversely, a haptic work may create an image of such detail ... that it evades a distanced view, instead pulling the viewer in close. Such images offer such a proliferation of figures that the viewer perceives the texture as much as the objects imagined. (2000, p. 163)

A haptic image is like an extreme close up or an abstract painting that the eye cannot penetrate, but only brush across. The eyes relax and soften their focus, and the images' poetic meaning unfolds. Haptic images are not immediately decipherable, easily consumed, and readily mastered. What is important is the image's material presence, rather than its power to represent objects or narratives, or its capacity to invite identification with a figure (Marks, 2000). Haptic visuality, in contrast, refers to the image's reception, the spectators' "inclination to perceive" it (Marks, 2000, p. 162). As Marks describes, "in haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch" (p. 162). She writes "haptic looking ... is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze" (p. 162).

While Marks does not address blindness beyond a few brief references to films that visually and narratively play with metaphors of blindness (2000, p. 138), her observation that “a haptic work may create an image of such detail ... that it evades a distanced view” is strikingly close to Thompson’s description of short-sighted reading. Marks is not engaging with critical disability discourse here, yet the similarity is more than merely coincidental. She is critiquing the imperialism and Eurocentric bias of the same modern scopical regimes that marginalize disability and cast blindness as pathology and lack. In addition to decentring vision and disrupting normative vision, both these intercultural and epistemological critiques blur the boundaries between vision and other senses. Yet attention to critical perspectives of blindness adds new dimensions that deepen and expand the meaning of haptic visuality. Significantly, blind epistemology draws attention to the fact that the hapticity of vision is not just analogical – one does not see as if the eye is touching the surface of the image – but rather hapticity is fundamental to the act of seeing. In delineating a felt sense of vision, Healey’s analysis reminds us that the eye is located in the body, so that any experience of biological vision has a haptic dimension. The body brings us close to, or further away from the object of its sight, it carries a moving eye, around which a world rolls and flickers, warms and cools, hushes, roars and murmurs. The body is situated, its positioning frames one’s perspective (Haraway, 1988). It becomes dizzy, invigorated, nauseous, excited, bent, stretched or strained, depending on what and how it sees.

Haptic visuality is thus both a way of seeing with, and through felt experience – a felt sense that evokes images – and it refers to visual images that evoke a felt sense. Both of these senses of haptic visuality inform the understanding of blind visuality developed in the sections that follow. Haptic visuality is neither restricted to blind experience, nor essential to it; yet the overlaps between blind epistemology and haptic visuality are significant. Each disrupts hegemonic cultures of looking that prioritize optical visuality, and in so doing shift the values associated with visual domains from distant, transcendent individualized qualities to intimate, material, and relational ones.

Analysis of Horak’s *Through a Tired Eye* and *New Works*

Canadian writer, director and performer Bruce Horak started painting in response to the question “how do you see?” that is often posed to him as a blind person with partial sight in one eye (Horak, 2019a). Answering this question was a key aim of the 2019 solo exhibition *Through a Tired Eye*, the culmination of a month-long residency at Tangled Art + Disability that exhibited from January 24 to February 24, 2019 as part of the *Crippling the Arts Festival* in Toronto, Canada. During the residency, Horak hosted multiple sessions at the gallery to paint portraits of friends and strangers,

recording the conversations as an audio component to the work. The venue, Tangled Art + Disability, is Canada's first accessible gallery for disability arts. This situates the exhibition both at the centre of Toronto's disability arts movement and independent art scene, since the gallery is housed in the vibrant art hub at 401 Richmond (Ahsan, 2016). Tangled Art + Disability, which grew out of the 2003 Abilities Arts Festival, is a non-profit organization that aims to enhance opportunities for Deaf, mad, and disability-identified artists, support their cultural contributions, cultivate disability arts, and enhance access to the arts for both artists and audiences with diverse abilities (Tangled, n.d.). Curators at Tangled present art in various modes that anticipate artists and audiences with diverse bodies, senses and minds, hanging paintings at different levels, using audio and captioning, and producing tactile versions of artwork (Ahsan, 2016). *Through a Tired Eye* is no exception. The exhibition engages with disability aesthetics in multiple ways, through the inclusion of audio work, tactile sculptures, a touchable painting, and a live performance, "mov[ing] art off the wall and into the space for an immersive, tactile experience" (Tangled, 2019). Such multisensory engagements together comprise an aesthetic experience inextricable from access concerns. Access is not a mere supplement that is added on as an afterthought. Rather, access is part of the meaning that is produced when an exhibition addresses a public presumed in advance to perceive and engage with art in a variety of ways. As such *Through a Tired Eye* does more than simply represent blind ways of seeing and knowing. It invites participation in blind visuality in a manner that critiques and transforms hegemonic visuality and conventional aesthetics. In this context, Horak's exploration of blind sight becomes a part of a wider political critique in both visual studies and the arts.

My analysis focuses on certain paintings featured in *Through a Tired Eye* (2019a) selected because they are examples of haptic images. These include the painting, "Through a Tired Eye" (54" x 44," acrylic on canvas, 2017), the series of 34 acrylic portraits completed during the residency, titled *New Works* (2019b) (each approximately 8" x 10"), and the tactile painting "New Brunswick Grove at Night" (2019c) (30" x 48" acrylic on canvas, 2019).⁶ "Through a Tired Eye" (2017) is installed on its own partition wall, centred at the entrance of the gallery. A pupil and iris, in white and grey with subtle charcoal detail, form the centre of the work, while erratic lines in white and bright colours, red, pink, yellow and blue seem to shoot out in different directions in a dynamic play, while black creeps in at the edges. The second example is the portrait series "New Work" (2019b) (acrylic on canvas), which are installed as a block of portraits with no space between them on one of the gallery's interior walls. The entire series seems to fragment at the

⁶ In metric measurement, "Through a Tired Eye" is 137 cm x 112 cm, the paintings in *New Works* are each approximately 20 cm x 25 cm, and "New Brunswick Grove at Night" is 76 cm x 122 cm.

bottom. The top three rows form a solid block with seven paintings each, followed by three diminishing rows from top to bottom (six, four, and finally three). Each of these 34 colourful paintings are discernable as portraits, but it is as if the faces and bodies are emerging from a brightly coloured haze. Hanging on the wall next to the paintings is a set of earphones. Through these, gallery-goers can listen to a sound component to the work, comprised of recorded conversations between Horak and the subjects of the portraits. The final example is a painting that is both visual and tactile. “New Brunswick Grove at Night” (2019c) is richly textured with gels and other mediums and marked with a note inviting audiences to touch it. A pond with a bridge, crosshatched in red and suspended across the silvery water is surrounded by thick brushstrokes of blue and green, dotted with yellow.

The central importance of the painting “Through a Tired Eye” (2017) in this exhibition is abundantly clear. This work gives the exhibition its name, announcing that it is an interrogation of ways of seeing. The painting also establishes Horak’s method and artistic vision for the exhibition. That the eye is *tired*, suggests a disability aesthetic and embodied vision whose blindness and fatigue condition a perspective, rather than a pathology. In his artist statement about the work, Horak writes that the painting began as an image of bare, stark trees against a clear sky. Painted at the conclusion of a seven-week artist residency on Toronto Island, Horak describes experiencing eye strain that resulted in “swirling and rolling patterns” of “floaters and flashers” that obscured his vision (Horak, 2019a). He set up a camera on time lapse and captured the process of painting these floaters and flashers over top of the original image. The time lapse video is installed on an iPad next to the painting, so that viewers can watch as the floaters and flashers fill the canvas, completely obliterating the trees and sky, leaving in their place what appears to be a giant, abstract pupil and iris, made of light. Hung on a partition wall placed at the centre of the gallery’s entrance, audience members cannot miss this work. It is visually dominating, confronting the audience with a look back from the margins of sight. Physically it obstructs the path into the gallery from the open hall; people are compelled to stop and consider the work, to attend to its demand to look differently, before going around it to enter the space. Yet the work is not about obstructed or occluded vision. The obstruction is a provocation, not a conclusion. Recall Kleege’s earlier description of the cliché of the blank canvas as a space of lack; a metaphorical blindness that the artist must overcome with an act of creation (2018). Horak paints his blindness as an active, shifting and moving excess of sight. His blindness fills the canvas, overflows the more static, distant, optical image that he began with. The brush strokes are filled with movement, as he “chases” the floaters and extends “the motion of [his] body in concert with what [he] see[s]” (Horak, 2019a). “Through a Tired Eye” (2017) thus captures the ecstatic moment where the artist surrenders to what blindness offers.

Horak adopts a similar method in the portraits he paints during his residency at Tangled. He describes his process here as follows: “I begin with the auras that I see, using them as a base-tone for the painting. I add the distortions and floaters and over the course of the sitting, a figure emerges in the paint” (Horak 2019a). The impressionistic brushstrokes that seek to capture the halos, auras, and floaters produce an image that is obscured, floating at the surface of the canvas, without clear demarcation of figure and ground. Like the first painting, these images are imbued with qualities that are often attributed to touch: they are immediate and up close, textured and abstract, with a density that spreads across the surface. In *New Works*, (2019b) the images appear unfocused and pixelated, and the faces blend in with the background to such a degree that I had to squint with one eye to see the faces form. Close up each painting is a swirl of colour and texture in which auras and floaters take form as distinct objects within the field of vision. Only by stepping back do the faces come to view, framed by glowing halos, accented and obscured by bright squiggly lines. Yet I also found myself pulled in close, to experience the forms, shapes, textures and movements of the brushstrokes, without the context or distance to masterfully “know” what I see. By prompting this physical, kinesthetic relationship with the work and the other people in the gallery with whom I had to negotiate movement, I had a sense of being with the work – and being in the world with others – as opposed to gazing from an objective distance. These close, textured, and relational qualities are all features of haptic images (Marks, 2000). They compel a particular, haptic way of looking that moves across the surface, yielding to the image. Horak invites such a reception by painting what he sees through blindness. It is an injunction to look at and experience visual images differently, in response to an image that establishes a dynamic bodily relationship with its audience.

The painting “New Brunswick Grove at Night” (2019c) offers a different kind of haptic experience, for it is intended to be literally touched. The textures of this work are enhanced through the use of gels, inviting a different way of looking/feeling that is accessible to people with a range of vision and experiences of blindness. As my earlier description makes evident, the quality of actual touching is distinct from haptic vision, which treats touch analogically – one sees in a way that shares some touch-like qualities. When I touch it, I can feel the raised edges of the brush strokes, the ways these cluster and disperse, rumple and smooth out. My fingertips follow the contours, seeking the movement of the painter’s hand that left these marks. My eyes follow a different pathway. They are drawn first to a silvery white pool of light in the lower left corner, and then move upward, following bands of golden, squiggly lines whose trajectory narrows as the highlighted area moves toward the upper right corner, like a stream of light or plume of smoke. Touching with one’s fingertips, hand, or body is not the same as touching with the eyes in Marks’ (2000) sense. From an access perspective this makes all the difference. “New Brunswick Grove at Night” is accessible

to blind audiences without the supplement of a sound work or audio description. But interacting with this painting also makes clear that touch is also just different than sight. My eye travels across the painting in a certain way, it forms an image from an abstract collection of strokes in bright and dark colours. I can see that this is a painting of a pond with a red bridge if I step back and soften my eyes. But my touch tells me something else, it moves me differently, places me in direct proximity to the work, and connects me to the art with my body. I can sense a topography of textures that are undefinable as a figure of any sort; I surmise a different meaning and make a different kind of judgement. Both the tactile, and visual apprehension of these works involves a shared work of perception and contemplation. The image is completed by the spectators' own memory and imagination. Whether or not one is actually touching it, the haptical qualities of the painting overflows beyond the boundaries of the image, to include and provoke the spectators' embodied experience.

"Though a Tired Eye" (2017), the portraits in *New Works* (2019b), and "New Brunswick Grove at Night" (2019c) each evoke a felt experience of visuality, rather than the distanced, optical modes of looking that dominate western visual culture. The brush strokes emphasize the surface of the canvas, rather than the depth of perspective. They erode, rather than demarcate clear boundaries between figure and ground. Horak's paintings sensuously draw on the spectators' experience as a body that touches, moves and has contact with other bodies within the particular context of crip aesthetics and Tangled Gallery. The paintings evoke a disability aesthetic not merely because the artist is blind, but because the work subverts stereotypes about blindness as a deficiency in vision, representing the particularity and richness of blind sight, and treating sensory difference as valuable in itself. It is this critique of visuality that transforms the experience from a merely optical experience of looking, or physical experience of touching, to the critical position of blind visuality.

Thinking about haptic visuality in the context of crip, and particularly blind aesthetics invites both similar and some different insights than we find in the sphere of intercultural cinema that Marks (2000) is concerned with. In part this is related to the difference in media and the embodied experience of viewing cinema, which is almost always a distant experience, even when the shot is closely framed. One cannot touch a film projection, and the closer one sits, the harder it is to see it. In contrast, the visual arts audience member perambulates through a gallery, it is their roaming body and moving hand or eye that brings motion to a painting or sculpture. The gallery-goer can change their perspective, move further away or closer, and they can reach out and touch the work. This opens the possibility of a wider interpretation of "haptic" than in the cinema context. In particular, the challenge posed to modern visual culture by haptic visuality is highly relevant to crip aesthetics. At the same time, crip aesthetics brings a new dimension to the concept though a consideration of the felt experience and visual heterogeneity of

blind sight, challenging modernist understandings that centre the normatively sighted eye, and with it, the individual subject.

Conclusion: Toward an Alternative Economy of Looking

The exhibition *Through A Tired Eye* (2019a) offers a different perspective on vision, one that speaks to the political stakes of an alternative economy of looking. The paintings provoke a physical and interpretive engagement that press the spectator to yield to the artist's way of seeing through blindness.

His blind sight invokes a mode of reception that Marks refers to as haptic visuality (2000). This involves ways of yielding to haptic images in a relational, dynamic engagement with the work. Situated in the context of crip aesthetics and blind epistemology, the exhibition reflects a mode of critique I refer to as blind visuality, contributing to wider discourses countering norms about vision, visuality and knowledge in fields such as critical disability, feminist and decolonizing methodologies. Coupling "blind" with "visuality" counters narrow interpretations in which these concepts seem to exclude each other. In my formulation, they instead both supplement and deconstruct each other. Blindness infuses visuality with heterogenous ways of seeing and perceiving. Blind visuality refers to a myriad of ideas, images and information, assembled not only to "visualize history," but to re-imagine and re-authorize it through multi-sensory images and an anti-normative imperative. There is nothing inherently problematic about optical vision: indeed, such distance-based ways of looking have many uses and potentialities. Likewise, we cannot presume that haptic aesthetics and perception necessarily offer a better or more pure way of knowing. Haptic visuality can be as problematic as the normalizing gaze of optic visuality when it claims to offer more natural or complete access to truth or reality (Marks, 2000, p. 143). The point is that by expanding and transforming hegemonic cultures of visuality from a narrow, normalizing ideal, blind visuality opens up possibilities for new social and political meanings.

Blind visuality challenges not only the dominant culture of sense, but also the ways that subjects are conceived as knowers and political actors in a world of others. Normative sight is a cultural effect that prioritises the distant viewing of optical images. Such optical vision implies disconnection and transcendence, qualities that embody Enlightenment thought. Optical distance enables the viewer to "organize him/herself as an all-perceiving subject" (Marks, 2000 p. 162) and think of the self as "disembodied [and] represented by (optical) vision alone" (p. 176). The viewer becomes the author of a centralized discourse, a point of view that establishes a monolithic claim to truth about what falls within the purview of their sight (Berger, 2008). The blind person, in such constructions, can hardly know anything at all. The point of view of the subjects of optical vision comes to seem universal, rational, and objective. Their perspective carries an appropriative

force, as though the viewer has a kind of mastery over all that is seen. Optical visibility is thus tied to modern individualism, with its role in capitalist social and economic arrangements, the appropriating forces of imperialism, the medical/scientific gaze of eugenics and the medical model of disability (Davis, 2008; Michalko, 2002; Mirzoeff, 2011; Smith, 2012), that is, to projects of dominance and subjection (Smith, 2012). The idea that objectivity is derived from the “god’s eye” view of a detached observer isolates vision from embodied contexts and material realities (Haraway, 1988). It further presumes all humans share an identical, normative capacity of sight, disconnected from complex networks of sensory perception. Such ocularcentric epistemologies confuse appearance with truth, overlooking the way that conceptual frameworks of seeing are influenced by material conditions, power, and ideology (Davis, 2008; Michalko, 2002; Mirzoeff, 2011).

Blind visibility critically re-orientates these relationships and hierarchies of knowledge. In blind visibility, there is no singular, preferred way of seeing or perceiving. Vision, rather than being cast as an ideal way of knowing, is put under continual contestation. Other senses, such as haptic perception, imbue perceiving, knowing and seeing with different qualities than the individualized perspective of distant, optical vision. I focus in particular on haptic perception in this article, led by the distinctively haptic qualities of Horak’s paintings “Through a Tired Eye” (2017) and *New Works* (2019b), and the touchable painting “New Brunswick Grove at Night” (2019c). Together these offer examples of both haptic visibility and haptic perception. Where optical visibility isolates its objects and focuses on them representationally, haptic visibility co-presents with its objects relationally. This is a mode of “speaking not about, but nearby” the object being visually represented (Minh-ha, 1982, as cited in Marks, 2000, p. 164). As a relational form, aesthetics plays a performative role in how people are produced as subjects in relation to others and social discourse more broadly (Fisher, 1997, p. 4). Haptic aesthetics is a sensuous way of knowing, in which audiences yield to their environment, a body among other bodies. Likewise, the gaze that allows a haptic image to be comprehensible shares qualities with touch and cooperates with the body’s kinesthetic perceptions. Such a gaze has little to do with the capacity of the biological eye to see “normally” or “perfectly,” nor to possess its objects with a singular claim to truth. It is an intimate, sensory and interpretive view, rather than a distant and informing one. By bringing the image closer to the body and its multiple senses, and by bringing the body closer to the image, haptic aesthetics and visibility produce a relationship between self and other/object that Marks describes as “yielding-knowing” (2000, pp. 151-152).

Haptic aesthetics and haptic visibility thus incline toward relationality in an alternative economy of looking/sensing that acts back and reconstructs aesthetic and political discourse (Fisher, 1997, p. 6). Attention to haptic sensibilities produces more inclusive and accessible galleries and has cultural

effects. Where in the history of western representational practice and Enlightenment thought more broadly, the individualized visual subject seems disembodied and all-perceiving, the haptic subject is embodied, socially located, and situated in the world proximal to other subjects and objects. As such, hapticality lends itself to multiple perspectives rather than monolithic truth claims, and ways of knowing characterized by yielding to one's environment, rather than appropriating and mastering it from an objective distance. Haptic aesthetics is experienced, rather than apprehended, and audiences participate actively in its processes of knowing (Fisher, 1997, p. 6). Horak, Tangled Gallery, and the disability arts movement more generally participate in creating an alternative economy of looking that is part of a broader movement of aesthetic resistance. Blind visuality shifts from cultural attitudes of distance and disconnection to embodied social location, from individualization to relationality, and from appropriation and domination to yielding to others and environments. Here, blind epistemology resists dominant discourses of optical visuality, and crip aesthetics meets haptic aesthetics in practices of embodied, relational perception. This call for a more complex, multi-sensory understanding of aesthetic experience, and of vision itself, shows some of the ways that blind modes of seeing and perceiving challenge and transform aesthetic hegemony and by association, the political imaginary.

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