Blindness as a challenging voice to stigma

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The title of this presentation is inspired by John Hull’s autobiographical work (2001), in which he unfolds his meditations upon the experience of gradually losing his sight. Suggesting that blindness is “a calling from stigma to stigmata” (ibid. 234), meaning from the stigma of blindness to the stigmata of western society, he challenges us to consider what blindness is to sight as it is experienced in visual contexts. What follows is drawn from my research on blind people, acting in an athletic association of Athens. In particular, I will refer to their ambivalent handling of a stereotypical image attached to blindness. This is the concept of ‘insight’, which is used by the blinds as a means of individualization and differentiation from the sighted and, at the same time, as a label they wish to get rid of. According to Homi Bhabha, the stereotype, as the major discursive strategy of the hegemony, is “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (1994: 66). What I am suggesting here is that blind people’s ambivalent treatment of the stereotypical ‘insight’ is a response to Greek society’s conception of blindness either as ‘false perception’ or as ‘insight’. As such, it could be seen as an attempt to postpone the anxious repetition Bhabha is referring to and to articulate the experience of blindness in their own terms.

What society sees in blind people and ranks them in the category of the disabled is their visual deficiency. What blind people see in the absence of their sight is a different perception of the world and a different mode of acting upon it. This is an articulation that asks us to go beyond deficiency. Hence, in order to approach the power relations developing between the sightless and the sighted beyond the notion of deficiency, we need first to problematize the notion of visual absence. This leads us to the anthropological discussion on the visual sense as a panoptic gaze and as a means for society’s technification. So far, to counterbalance the hegemony of sight – in terms of its given quality as the more valid access to reality – anthropologists have attempted to
explore sight in contexts that reveal either its omissions, or its physical connection with the other senses. Both approaches are taken in order to rehabilitate the sight, in view of the danger for it to be totally denounced as a mode of perception (Grasseni 2006: 1 – 16).

I will not refer that much to the point of the optical omission, as I consider it a false question from its beginning: it implies the existence of a totality, the redemption of which calls for another totality, although from an anthropological point of view this time. Thus, it ends up losing its critical strength. I will rather refer to the anthropological efforts to ‘awaken’ the other senses, so that human perception is not reduced to sight. Among other anthropologists, Nadia Seremetakis (1996) proposes that the interpretation of the senses and through the senses constitutes “a rehabilitation of truth”. Interpreted senses are considered indexes of the cultural diversity vanished by the procedures of visual homogenization of modernity (97). Instead of viewing senses as isolated from each other and as placed in hierarchical order in terms of truth, Seremetakis approaches perception as having a multisensory and a memorial dimension. The senses are channels, connected to each other, through which the world enters dynamically into the body. Meaning, stored into memory, is revealed unintentionally through the senses and is expressed in forms of performance, material culture and somatic determinations. Like language, the senses are social and collective institutions, but not reducible to it. In this way, the truth that emerges is beyond linguistic expressions (ibid.: 40 – 49).

Considering senses as acting beyond the intentional and the conscious, and as revealing an hyper-linguistic meaning, the anthropological project for the rehabilitation of sight seems to follow the western metaphysical shift from the appearance to the depth of reality, from the visible to its invisible dimension. The multisensory perception, as another privileged sensory access to the world, turns the whole body to a visual modality, and presents the subject as being able to perceive a more “authentic” reality, which is concealed under the distorted surface. Is it possible then for the analytical concept of multisensory perception to call into question the objectivity of sight, when it itself proclaims another objectivity, that of the embodied sight? The senses are called upon to “name an absence” (ibid.: 31), a vacuum, that the hegemony of sight creates and conceals at the same time. In this framework, the senses are made to appear as apt answers to questions posed by the visual regime. Yet, they are deprived of modes of
articulation, since their meaning cannot be told, seen or conceived with the objectifying materials culturally available. Thus, by retaining the visual criteria of knowledge legitimization, the embodiment of vision does not recognize the participation of the other senses in the discovery of ‘truth’. Put otherwise, it leaves no space for other sensory modalities to be performed.

Having said this, blindness, as the exact opposite of sight, cannot be seen as the vindication of its non-hegemony. Instead, it seems that the conceptualization of blindness as an ‘insight’ transforms both the western society’s and anthropology’s desire of accepting visual difference to a normalizing procedure of blindness. If we are to perceive blind people as subjects acting in visual contexts and blindness as a different sense of reality, we need to remove our analytical focus from modes of ‘sight’s’ rehabilitation to the procedures these people are engaged in, as they seek recognition of their sensory difference. What I am suggesting then, is that the ambivalent way in which blind people treat the ‘insight’, that is the ‘physical’ possibility of finding out a more authentic reality, can be heard as a contesting discourse of subjectification that goes beyond the visual deficiency.

A stereotypical image that goes with blindness is that blind people can see with ‘the eyes of the soul’. The following short story, swinging between a real fact and an anecdote, is indicative of both western society’s treatment of blindness and blind people’s answer to this treatment.

There was a priest. Every morning he met a blind man, telling him: You are so happy that you can see with the ‘soul’s eyes’. You will have for sure a place in paradise! After many mornings, the blind man answered the priest: Since you are so unhappy, why don’t you go to a doctor and have your eyes ripped off, so you can also enter the paradise?

As a way of denouncing the ‘soul’s eyes’ stereotype, blind people may refer positively to another symbolic representation of blindness’ possibility to talk about the more authentic dimension of reality. I am referring to the phrase of the Argentine author Borges. Himself blind towards the end of his life, he said that what is lost with sight is ‘just the unimportant surface of things’.
Looking at the historical course of the disability movement in Greece, offers a first step to the interpretation of blinds’ ambivalent faith to the notion of ‘insight’. In 1976, blind people proceeded to the occupation of ‘Blinds’ House’, an institution for the education and the housing of blinds from all over Greece. One of their main demands then was the recognition of their right to self-administration. This meant that the administration of the institution should be released from the army’s and the church’s hands and also from the practice of charity that characterized it and upon which it depended largely. This shift would signify both the beginning of the blinds’ de-institutionalization and the opportunity for them to prove their ability of coping with the blindness’ difficulties and leading a life of their own. In this framework, the current denouncement of the ‘soul’s eyes’ metaphor can be seen as a performance of the blind people’s past struggling against charity and for independence. Inspired by the Christian obligation to ‘save’ the weak, this stereotypical self-presentation reassures the society’s anxiety about what is perceived as social deviation. On this ground, what many blind people articulate both as a complain and as a demand towards the society is that the later should see ‘the man behind the blind’.

Returning to Borjes’ phrase, its positive conceptualization of insight seems to be grounded on its open character in terms of the many different receptive ‘completions’ it offers. It symbolically represents the depth of things, which is not reduced to one but to many different meanings. Any eyes, blind or not, that ‘know how’ to discern beneath the one-dimensional – hence distorting – surface of the world have access to all these receptive completions. Contrary to the ‘soul’s eyes’, an idea that prevents blind people from ‘touching’ this world, the concept of a multidimensional depth gives them space for modes of articulation and action other than those designated by the prevalence of sight. This concept should not be seen as an acceptance of the stereotypical image of ‘insight’, but as an effort for social recognition of blindness’ difference, a difference that emerges from an absence. As such, it ‘chooses’ to be articulated in a mainly visual and totalizing context, the dualism between the distorted surface of reality and its real depth. Paying attention to blind people touching or hearing this dualism can be a challenge to sight’s hegemony, since it can reveal some of its ‘blind’ spots, concerning both western society’s visual faith and its treatment of the Other.
Bibliography


