**A transcript of content from *(Critical) Blindness Studies : Current Debates and Future Directions***

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**Roundtable #2**

**Decentering Sight: Blindness and Sensory Experience**

Chair: Céline Roussel

Moderator: Hannah Thompson

Speakers: Max Ubelaker Andrade (University of Massachusetts)

Charlotte Makepeace (University of Leeds)

Bertrand Verine (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3)

**Céline Roussel** 00:00

Hello, everyone. Thank you very much. So I'm very happy to join you today. I do know some of you. So my name is Céline Roussel. I shall chair this session. I am French, but I live in Germany, I'm 32 years old. I'm coming here from Munich since we shall talk today about the decentering of sight and blindness and sensory expansion will provide you with no more visual Insight. But I just want to say, but I've changed, my replaced my day teacher's costume with my evening teacher's costume. So we are welcoming Max Uberlaker Andrade, Charlotte Makepeace and Bertrand Verine. Charlotte will start this session. Charlotte, you are writing a PhD thesis and you work on the topic of blindness and knowledge of senses in modernist literature. You are a PhD candidate at the University of Leeds since 2019. And we are eager to hear from you and you also benefit from your guide dog; you're a guide dog user. So Charlotte, the floor is yours now.

**Charlotte Makepeace** 01:49

Hi, I'm Charlotte. I'm a university candidate at Leeds University. I am 26 years old. I have long blonde hair and I am about 90% certain I'm wearing a blue top but it may be green or it may be purple. My so my PhD looks at blindness knowledge and the senses in modernist literature. I'm a second year; I did some maternity leave so I'm slightly out of kilter with the rest of my cohort. So yeah, so far the paper that I uploaded for this is the only chapter I've kind of written in substance and I look at modernist authors such as D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield. I've only written on DH Lawrence's short story "The blind man" so far. So my research looks at how, how we figure blindness, both today and kind of in modernist literature. So I've been looking at the history of blindness and kind of the tropes that came up in the previous round, the previous panel, seeing is knowing, castrate, the castration complex, compensatory sense, or kind of inspiration versus burden. So I look at how all of those came into being, and how they are being kind of particularly prevalent or subverted in the modernist period. But equally, how looking at those kinds of texts that are far removed from our time now still has an impact on kind of the lived experience of a blind person. So obviously, I'm a guide dog user, and I am registered blind. So I'm currently trying to work out how to kind of ... add blindness into my methodology. So I'm looking at like David Bolt, Robert McCrewer, to see how my experience as a blind person impacts what I'm researching and writing about. And kind of the main gist so far is I've been looking at how DH Lawrence undermines the seeing is knowing trope because he's very suspicious of sight as it's linked to, you know, kind of the more rational, cold scientific ideas of knowledge and he puts forward a more sensory type of knowledge as something more intimate touch based, based in the darkness. So he creates a very interesting system of kind of bodily, sensory, visceral feeling, as opposed to kind of, I guess, like the cataloguing epistemiology that goes along with sight. I think that's everything That's okay. Thank you very much.

**Céline Roussel** 05:02

Thank you very much. It is indeed a pleasure to hear you sharing your PhD work and to see that numerous PhD work is being done. I shall leave the floor after these few words of introduction to Max Andrade who shall present his work. So the floor is yours. Thank you.

**Max Ubelaker Andrade** 05:39

Thank you so much. So, I'm glad to have resolved my technical difficulties. So it's... Can everyone hear me? Okay. Yes, wonderful. Okay, so, so it's, it's really wonderful to be here today. My name is Max Ubelaker Andrade. I'm speaking to you today from Woburn, Massachusetts in the United States. I'm sighted, I'm 42 years old, white, I have a slim build. Right now I have a white linen shirt on with thin blue and green vertical lines. I have brown hair that reaches just past my shoulders, and in the background are a set of bookshelves with, with my books.

And so I want to really just to thank everyone who has made this conference possible, especially Hannah, Marion and Vanessa. And so, in terms of my work, in 2019, I published a book on Jorge Luis Borges, titled *Borges: Beyond the Visible*, and the title was really meant to suggest two things. One is that it is fiction actively subverts the conventional visual expectations of the reader in really different and unusual ways. And two that these strategies of representation require readers to mistrust narrators and work through contradictions, and intellectual puzzles that really require sustained attention and work. So I should say that after the last session, I'm very interested in the criticism of Borges's representations of blindness, and in the proposed Borges bashing, so maybe there'll be time for that in the in the discussion. I at least, I personally am super happy with the idea of diminishing the fame of Borges or his monumental or emblematic status, both of which, for me really distort the understanding of his, of his own work. And obviously get in, can get in the way of an appreciation of all the diverse range of experiences of blindness and how blind people have been spoken about, right, in different eras and cultural contexts. I wanted to start, to start just by saying that one of the traditions that really informs Borges’ disruptive practice of visual representation is connected with his representation, with his relationship with someone named Macedonio Fernandez. This was a mentor of his, a friend of his father's in Buenos Aires, who really believe that the act of reading could be profoundly transformative, and that the self was an illusion, that we actively fashion based on our own complex relationship with external stimuli. And so when we enter into a different context, such as the really strange experience of reading, right, this, this immersive imagination of a literary reality, he had the sense that our selves change as well in some ways. And so he believed that if there could be a kind of fiction that could break away from the tools of realism, to allow people to pay attention to the condition of being in fiction, this could allow people to become more free to loosen the hold of the conventions of, of everyday life, right. And Borges shared a lot of these goals and devised stories, that borrowing from all kinds of theological traditions, especially those with iconoclastic practices or an iconic practices or traditions played with different kinds of visual allure, and often framed that... objects of visual allure traps and so these strategies of visual representation, always, or at least often differentiated between optical experiences and visual experiences. So the optical experiences are more tied to these kind of everyday conventions. And he was interested in shifting to this kind of visual zone which involved imagination, which involved a more kind of chaotic, spatial sensory organization of being. And so shifting the attention of the reader to what they are actually doing as they read, fashioning a world, a self, perhaps in their own mind is one of the first steps in this kind of destabilizing project. So he really loved this profound strangeness of reading, and bringing that strangeness into the fabric of his writing. And so, I found these aspects of Borges’ fiction are in close conversation with his own experiences of blindness. And with blindness. His father and paternal grandmother were both blind, and like them, his sight diminished, really slowly throughout his life. He considered himself blind when echoing some of the ideas from the previous sessions. In 1935, he was no longer able to use his eyes to read or write unassisted. So that context of work that context of reading were both represented a moment that he, that he would offer as kind of shifting into that identity. During the document that I shared, I present two really different stories of his and the first was written when he had some diminished sight and was anticipating being blind in the future. And the second was written after he identified as blind. I tried to tease out some of the differences in those two texts. So I would just briefly suggest that the kind of liberation but Macedonio was pointing to in this very philosophical and personal context, finds a really new resonance in Borges’s project, especially with the way that they, it opens up to this form of visual complexity, nuancing multi- , multi dimensionality that goes beyond or surpasses what's possible in a strictly optical register. So the reader, over and over again, is asked to let go of conventional vision or conventional understandings of sight in order to enter into these stranger zones. I’d really just love to emphasize the literary reorganization and transformation of the senses in each of Borges’ text is really crucial to the approach that I'm interested in, which is not really particularly one definition, one strategy. I've found that my practice is very descriptive. So, I try to approach each literary text with an attention to how sensory cues are transformed in the strangeness of this literary framework where things have to be imagined into, into being. And that kind of moment of openness requires for the conventional expectations and the centrality of kind of ocular knowledge to be left behind. And so there are very different ways that he does that in his texts, and amazing moments that involve that involves like, for example, moments when having an optical encounter with the actual text makes it more difficult to perceive what's being, what's being stated; really subtle ways in which the visual component of a story is subverted, interrupted, displaced, when people are drawn in with their desire to see and then having that revealed as a trap, stultifying and limiting. And so for me, it's not necessarily possible or desirable to articulate super direct causal relationships between Borges’s relationship with blindness and the complex ways he orchestrates the sensory information in fiction. But for me, it's super important for them to be in conversation with one another, in order to arrive at this deeper appreciation of what his fiction has the capacity to do. So. Those are my initial thoughts. And thank you for listening.

**Céline Roussel** 14:27

Thank you very much. You were kind enough to make to correct my mistake, because I forgot to introduce you. And really sorry, since you're destructuring things here, we're going to change this. So you are a deputy professor of Latin Studies at the University of Massachusetts and you are living close to the city of Boston in the USA and your research returns to visual aspects in literary texts, which is a very important viewpoint in this colloquium, and I hope we'll be able to talk about this later as we approach the three key questions of this conference. Thank you very much for providing us with an insight to your work and we shall deepen into another world with Bertrand Verine.

I will not make the same mistake and I shall introduce you as an honorary senior lecturer at the Université Paul-Valéry in Montpellier. Yes, so you are in Montpellier this evening and your work attends to the expressions of touch, a tactile expression, both in writing but also in spoken language. You are in charge of the scientific work for the TETRA tactile foundation, that’s lots of documents that are available on this web platform. And you're also in charge of culture at the APTV association. Association is the former AGTR: Blind Intellectual Association. So the floor is yours, actually.

**Bertrand Verine**

Thank you, Céline; it is a pleasure to meet again after so many locked down periods. So I live in Montpellier, I mean, here in Montpellier this evening. I am a Mediterranean person, average size, little hands, big nose, short hair, and I’m losing, losing sort of my hair actually. I usually wear black glasses in public because my right orbit was actually damaged by radiotherapy which didn't stop cancer when I was five years old. I'm now 62, so there is a life indeed after the loss of sight. I want to introduce my work now when I shall repeat some of the things that have been said by Selina and Corinne. I would like to talk about the *La nuit qu’on suppose* artwork, from Benjamin D’Aoust dating back from 2013. All the activists for the blind people say we're talking about biodiversity of the plants. But we could talk about the biodiversity of people as well. With many of the movie directors and writers people, Benjamin looked into the life of the blind people and ocularcentrism was important and the people who could see his movies said that it was a great movie, but the illustration of the biodiversity of the people, it was actually one of the great benefit of this movie, because he made so much work to make come up with this movie, so as to illustrate culture, different senses of touch, but this, in this movie, is evidence that yes, indeed there can be a life after blindness but moreover, there is life next to blindness and that is a discovery or recent discovery in humanity’s experiences are taking place in psychology, which proves that a majority of blind people have a memory, an understanding, but a privilege is hearing and some of them, privileges the touch sense. Some works maybe [...] very interesting looking at the contributions of the senses of the hands, and the tactile vocabulary for craftsmen but also people collecting seaweeds, for instance, are overworked and so we cannot always see the object actually handled. So biology and humanities in the 20th and 21st century are rediscovering that human perception is multisensory. This is obvious. But this obviousness is hidden by the hierarchy of senses in the Western world. In reality, various habits of languages and technologies are dedicated to the sight mainly, very few being dedicated to the other senses of a human being. So that movie illustrates and promotes biodiversity of our senses. And I'm working on this as well. And I hope to provide some arguments that there are many ways to deal with blindness. I have identified three important families, which can be used in different ways, are combined, First of all: nostalgia of light and the fact that one can be fascinated by the loss of sight, using emotions, feelings, imagination, the culture, and the use of other senses. I am trying to work on this topic, ie using a diversity of senses, especially when it comes to the touch. I have two main objectives: I want to understand why in the 20th century, it was more or less hidden in the Western world and to know and to understand, by which means and especially through literature, we can have a mindful body, so that everyone, blind people, sighted people alike, can use that sense.

**Céline Roussel**

Thank you very much for your introduction, that helps us to use very relevant terms when talking about the biodiversity of people. I can recognize your character, your personality, I think, yes, that phrase that expression biodiversity is very interesting, indeed, yes, life after the loss of sight, but [...] life also, next to blindness, that is true. You have recently published a book completely dedicated to the sense of touch, which is a true literary exploration, looking at a wide range of topics and texts pertaining to touch. And you have devised and thought of different categories, or criteria, such as temperature and other criteria. Thank you very much.

I will use the next five minutes to make a summary, that is expected from me and then I will do right now with great pleasure. Thank you to the three of you. This session is dedicated to the questioning of the language structure best on sight, decentering sight, that is what's at stake here, so, you're doing this all differently. And this session, and this roundtable, is looking at the different senses that can be explored that are also illustrated in the different to work of arts, texts, which show why it is important to analyze the text under this viewpoint- what it can bring us for the understanding of blindness but also the understanding of literature so... this viewpoint is really interesting knowing what the literary text can do to the sight of the vision is important. Max Uberlaker Andrade, you highlighted that in Borges there is poetics that calls to the imagination of the readers bears on contradictions. And sometimes the texts are meaningful, sometime less, something it is really interesting but highlights the power of the reading, the power of the text, to challenge the language structures which are conventional, which are standardized and but in Borges challenges the power, the overall power of vision hence leading to decentering viewpoints about sight so I think your three texts are really very interesting though very personal as well. I was stricken by the fact that there's always two viewpoints two angles in your works; you link to visual works to your personal experiences; that this could be obvious for you Bertrand and also for you Charlotte Makepeace because you are blind people, but I have also found that dimension in Max Uberlaker Andrade’s work. So as for this viewpoint of daily activities, Bertrand Verine, you have devised competitive exams for some texts and some blind people were requested to talk about the experience; to write up about daily life you have also carried out another experiment, psychological experiment actually. And you were inspired by the description of a group of people and I know quite well your work and I know that your research work is based on your life experience which provides you with meaningful and relevant information. I have to say that in the text that you submitted Max I also found something which is interesting you discover progressively the meaning of Borges’ text, it is like a quest. An endless quest and you also discovered this; through your daily life, in an encyclopedia, you discovered something too key to understand Borges’ text. And Charlotte, you also question the different terms we use on a daily basis. Idioms of course, seeing, seeing as understanding, of course, this viewpoint is also used by other authors such as John Martin Hull. And I looked it up for you because I think he is talking about this question in his journal *Touching the Rock* (1993). At the beginning of his text, he highlights the fact that our language depends on our vision, in how much of our language is dependent on, how much is through sight. And he adds later the whole structure of [...] So I think that your contributions deal with a matter that is to verbalism, which is you dealt with at education debates, ie that blind people with privilege, some structure of language not necessarily based on their life experiences, but I think you give or you, you privilege the multi approach of senses. And I would say to sum up in one word, the feeling I had when reading all your works, I had the feeling that you Max, you're shaking you, this disruption with the visual convention in your text. I was really impressed by the important number of adjectives, verbs, you used to describe the language in Borges's text destabilizing, subversion, dissolving, the act of seeing is voided, delayed, erased-- the text talks about erasing the description of the visual field and you prompt us to diversify the interpretations so when dealing with blindness, so I think you're really challenging us. So, Charlotte, your text is turned on the relationship that exists between the conventional sight and knowledge and in the text that you analyze, you can see that the act of not seeing is a knowledge in itself. Bertrand, I looked for a verb that could illustrate your work and I found the verb bringing more, -you provide to enrich, to enrich the text, I think you can enrich things, so I am really impatient to open the discussion to know where you what you think about this blindness studies? What is your position about these blindness studies? We can discuss this now, so the first question I shall ask is where do you situate to work within French-speaking Disabilities Studies? Max, do you want to start? So, yes, for you.

**Max Ubelaker Andrade** 32:12

I would, I would, I would love to, I think that the way that I situate my reading practice and my writing practice is, is first to establish, I think different dimensions, different dimensions of, of, of experience, right? For me, I take, like, relatively seriously, this idea that, of different contexts, or different contexts. So sometimes for me one particular poem, one particular story, even one particular autobiographical text, operates, really under its own strange logic. And so wherever possible, I tried to not impose the same framework, right, so to try, to try to feel what is what is happening in each and each text by itself. And so for me, that requires a critical attention to the conventions that, as people have mentioned, are very ubiquitous; this palimpsestic kind of weight around us. And so that's the first thing that I, that I would say. I said, I'm also very cautious about one particular narrative of blindness for Borges himself, right, because there's this whole progression of different experiences that he has with blindness across his life in his everyday context. And in each story, in each poem, it has this different articulation, which a lot of times we have to really mistrust and find our ways around. And so I, especially as a teacher, as someone who teaches these texts as well, engaging in a dialogue where I work to have students be aware of the expectations or conventions that they might be projecting on the text is a major component of what I do. And for that, I think that I'm deeply indebted to Disability Studies. The, the second thing that I would just really briefly say, not to speak too much, would be to be that these pockets of different sensory transformations, these, these, these zones that people can step into, I do feel that I believe that they have this capacity to loosen people's understanding of our different possibilities of being instead of adhering to the rigidity of pre-established characters, and so I think that it has a role even outside of the everyday context to, to, to do that work. So I have those initial thoughts.

**Céline Roussel** 35:23

Thank you very much. In the context of disability studies, everybody is being pushed to be aware of their representations. And the work that you are doing with students is to make them aware of what they project onto a text, onto something. And in that there is an obvious parallel with one of the pre-suppositions regarding disability studies. And the fact that you deploy, analyze the way a text or experience, experiential text is deployed and this joins the biodiversity that you were talking about earlier, Bertrand? Maybe someone would like to pick up Bertrant? Charlotte? Would you like to follow on from that answer?

**Bertrand Verine**

I'll go ahead then. And I immediately said to Hannah and Marion, when they got in touch that I felt I was in parallel with the studies; I didn't feel that I was in the heart of Blindness Studies, Disability Studies, because I was living in blindness. And I had trouble looking at blindness from outside, from a scientific view, point of view or position. So in the text that I put up, that Marion put up for me, thank you, Marion, I had to find another, another point from which to come at the issue; it's very linked to personal contingencies, the negativity, the struggle between blindness and seeing and vision. We all have to deal with it on a daily basis. But I wanted to, particularly in literary terms, and in general discourse, I wanted to find some positivity. Therefore, I decided to define blindness as a positive ie.

accessing certain experiences in life through other ways, sensory ways, other than sight. That is what being blind means to me. I'll stop there for the time being.

**Céline Roussel**

You were very accurate, you're very clear in your positioning regarding French studies, French Disability Studies. Charlotte, maybe you want to also answer that question- how you position yourself with regards to these different research projects. We should be able to hear you I think

**Charlotte Makepeace** 39:05

Fantastic. I use Disability Studies quite heavily in my PhD. My work kind of intersects Disability Studies and modernist studies, I guess. I think there's been a real maybe lack of research about kind of this specific moment in history in relation to blindness studies. In that, we have, you know, World War One, the invention of the telescope, the X ray, the microscope, the interiority that comes with modernism, that desire to deconstruct and aestheticize, I think it opens up some really kind of fascinating questions about sight and the decentering of sight and the sensory, the haptic and I feel it's been, you know, there are books that are looking at it, but um, that it tends to be more, you know, chapters as opposed to a huge focus. And I think it's a really interesting cultural moment. And I'm also using Disability Studies to kind of try and situate myself amongst my work, because as a blind person, I'm trying to find a language to express my lived experience in an academic sense. Like I said, I'm looking at David Bolt, Robert MrCruer. I feel like I'm so used to talking about my blindness, you know, in an informal setting, maybe you know, amongst friends or talking in those kinds of situations. It feels like quite a leap to then find a way to express myself in a more kind of formal academic way, using my experience to further my research, as opposed to it just kind of being a side note. I want it to be a really primary focus of my research, because looking at blindness in modernism, from the, from the perspective of blind person I feel offers offer something very interesting. See, I'm using this, I situate myself quite firmly on disability studies.

**Céline Roussel** 41:07

Thank you. Do you share that positive definition that of blindness that Bertrand Verine- Do you share his positive view of blindness? Are you in agreement with that definition? Does that resonate with your experience and your experiences of what you've read?

**Charlotte Makepeace** 41:36

I definitely, I definitely like to align myself with a positive definition of blindness. I think a lot of my research, I'm hoping, can be kind of generative, and kind of provoke that sense of change. And I think that exploring where these kind of negative or damaging stereotypes come from, you know, tracking their history and language and looking at ways to, so I’ve been kind of looking at how metaphor how a lot of metaphor relies heavily on these damaging versions of sight, ie, you know, seeing is knowing or that being a dim idea or a bright idea. They were looking at all of that. And I think that we can create a more positive sense of blindness if we understand where the negativity comes from. And I guess I'm trying to create a positive sense, and I'm trying to use my lived experience in a positive manner. But I do find quite a lot of negativity. I think, obviously, with a lot of the authors I'm reading it's, it's quite troubling. It's quite distressing at times. Some of the, some of the representations are not the most positive, but I think talking about it can bring something positive out of it.

**Céline Roussel** 42:54

Thank you for your answer. I’d like to ask the same question of Max. What is the definition of blindness that Borges’ writing provides?

**Max Ubelaker Andrade** 43:16

Yeah, so I would, am I muted? Sure, yeah. Okay. So I would I think that I would explore kind of different simultaneous ways of asking that question with him, because I think that if we move into his fiction, and some of the stories, there are lots of ways in which sightedness is positioned as an impediment, truly, as a way of being excessively tied to this everyday mode of existence, which means that readers might be excessively tied to their conventional everyday selves, and less able to participate in an expanded sense of being basically, right. So one of his most famous stories involves a magical object that will grant people with sight, perfect sight, this total, this total vision. But in the story, it slowly gets reframed as a trap, because it's, it makes people profoundly uncreative. It stalls the ability to be surprised, that it functions as a way of misunderstanding, the nature of creativity, of curiosity, of constructing one's own world because everything is provided so passively to these people, right? So sightedness is sometimes associated with this kind of passive consuming of reality, without, without questioning. And at the end of that story, there's a kind of a hidden version of that, of that magical object that's buried inside of a pillar of the Amr Mosque in Cairo. You And this is an object, that is the same, it connects to this universe. But in order to be apprehended, one has to touch it, and put one's ear close to it. So in a sense it can sense, it's rumbling and imagine a world and everyone's gonna imagine that world in a different way. So there's this kind of shift, and it's kind of buried inside of the story. So a lot of people when they read Borges might say, oh, yeah, he's the inventor of the this, this wonderful object, which we associate with his genius, this, this total vision. But when read a bit more closely, there's a critique of that and it's seen as a trap as something that is makes people boring and so and there's a lot of moments in his, in his stories. Yeah, so, So that's something that so in his in his fiction, or the a lot of these moments, in his, in his kind of everyday writing about his own relationship with blindness, we'll find a different, different version of things, right, where he has been speaking to a particular audience about trying to dispel some of the stereotypes and some of the, the expectations of people in a more conversational mode. In some of his interviews, or with friends or recorded talks, he'll use a sense of humor, which a lot of times we don't find in his stories, laughing, you know about how people treat him as though he's this kind of magical being and how his editors want to present him as a blind author instead of as a short sighted, as a severely short sighted one, because it sells more copies, things like that. So there's different modes of articulating this identity. And for me, it's very important not to hold on to one to really open up to the particularities of each moment and instead of interpreting the ideas, to as much as possible, sense the cues that are given or not given in each particular text and let that logic guide my approach.

**Céline Roussel** 46:54

Thank you again.

**Audience Member**

My interpretation is direct; I'm not used to using this facility. I wasn't able to find the way to put my hand up virtually.

**Céline Roussel**

Selina, you asked a question? I would like to pick up again on what Max said. You have shown us, you have defined vision in a convincing way. May I hand over again to all three of you. How would you describe blindness studies? One of the main questions of this conference. I don’t know which one of you could answer first.

**Bertrand Verine**

Yes, I could answer that. As little as I know about it. I'm not an English speaker. So I've only read short bits and pieces. Because of my limited knowledge of English, only the bits and pieces that have been translated into French. We are still stuck in the binary seeing / non seeing situation. I have tried to move the goalposts and head towards other forms of sensoriality including by toppling in a slightly provocative way, for about a century, after an 1850 to 1950, people who, seeing people became what we could say, as a caricature, blind to their other sensations, to their other senses. Touch, hearing, smell, and taste disappeared to an extent, these senses, this this disappearance of the senses interests me, this disappearance at least, at the academic level, with a reluctance in literature that appears very early. And then bit by bit so it acquires more and more important importance over and above other senses; there are a few writers that are particularly obvious in this area Stefan Zweig, Jean Giono but you can find others, you can find traces of this much earlier. For example, Stendhal and Victor Hugo, are maybe very massively visual. Balzac, however, introduces frequently little touches of smell and noise and feel and touch, extraordinary, extraordinary touches throughout his work, but I'm not quite at the heart of the questions; it’s very interesting, nonetheless. Thank you.

**Céline Roussel**

I have a technical issue here. I had a technical issue with interpreting. I wanted to be much more enthusiastic to the answer that you gave, Max, as to your definition, of blindness, but also of vision. I think your approach is very complementary to that of Bertrand as we have a tendency to define blindness and the poly-sensoriality that stems from it, but we also need to talk about the traps, the snares of vision, that what you talked about are very convincing, like you talked about. So like, so many different interpretations and the ambivalence that I find particularly interesting. The slight irony that you found the key to his text, in an edition of the Encyclopedia, where you found an, in an article, an image that appears in a text of Borges, whilst the text itself has the, theological concept of Islam as refusing pictures, refusing images, I think there is a, it's slightly ironic there, that is typical of Borges. And I think that you showed it, well, how we move in the, we find our way forward in the labyrinth of the text, and how the universe of his fiction must not be understood in a visual optical way, but also by efforts of interpretation. When we are faced by texts that are based on poly-sensoriality, we also can be led towards different interpretations and sliding meaning. And different sensorialities and certain tactile figures need to be interpreted. I think your work really echoes that.

**Max Ubelaker Andrade** 53:35

There's a, there's another moment, that's, that's really wonderful that just to share very briefly, in which in in the story, the “Library of Babel,” there's a without explaining the whole story, of course, it has to do with this, this library that contains all of the possible texts, that, you know, all the possible texts that could be, could be made from a variation of a certain number of symbols. So they're 25 symbols. And so the idea is, in this infinite library, every single possible text is there. And most of them are gibberish, because they're just re-combinations of, of letters, right. But there's one text that's hidden inside the story. Because the people who live in this library, which is as large as the universe are, it's like a hell because they, you know, they are surrounded by all these books that are that are impossible to read. They're, they feel like everything's already been said, it's this horrible situation. But if one is not reading the actual text in a book, it is much easier to understand what one is reading is actually a manuscript, right, that someone has written on the back of one of these books, and that the, the, the handwriting would be radically different from these perfect symbols that repeat themselves over and over again in this kind of hellish landscape. And so, being able to for a sighted reader, they're reading regular symbols that are interchangeable, similar to these other books. So that the difference of the manuscript that one is reading evaporates for sighted readers. But for someone who's simply listening to the story, for example, that same kind of tension doesn't show up. And so this this key text is much more available as a as a text that contradicts the logic of the rest of the story. So this kind of a counter example of what the sightedness of a reader prevents or can get in the way of understanding, the difference between this manuscript and the one that one is reading. And the rest of these perfectly perfect organisations of printed, printed letters

**Charlotte Makepeace** 55:59

I think you raise a really interesting point there about kind of, like actually taking the kind of sighted reader into mind because I found that I, I work largely through speech programs or audio books. So I've had a very strange experience of listening to DH Lawrence not read, not read in a Nottinghamshire accent. And so you get a very strange sense of dialect or like to read James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, I've had to read parts of it in braille to kind of understand syntax and the structure and the layout of the sentences, which again, just doesn't, I couldn't access through an audio book, but I could access haptically which someone else could have access through sight. I think you raise a really interesting possible aspect of blindness studies: about how we come to the text as much as what we read in it.

**Céline Roussel** 56:57

Thank you for this for sharing all this and your thoughts. It helps us to bridge the gap, a rather unexpected gap between literary fiction of Borges and the very practical modern accessibility of texts; Reading as a trap, visual reading as a trap, is something that is very interesting, thank you. I would like now, to take one, one question; you can choose whether or not you answer I would be interested to know what you think about verbalism. How do you position yourself with regards to this question of verbalism? Is this something that it for you is a topic of debate that should be discussed? Or is it just a notion that can be relegated to sociology without having any real influence on our literary analyses? I would be curious to know your opinion on this question. Or maybe to state it slightly differently, we often hear behind the word verbalism the fact that we should ban or privilege the use of expressions that based on sensorialities that are other than sight, then some people who would ban expressions based on sight. How would you react to that?

**Bertrand Verine** 58:52

Terrifying, terrifying. Okay, I think that this debate is ancient really. I don’t think the basis of this debate are not sound, is not very good actually. It didn't start well because the border existed and it was not really well mastered, the border between blindness and the perception of reality and the cognitive structuring and intellectual structuring. Therefore, this led, that at a given point of time, some authors had thought that blindness had to be associated with autism or other disorders, especially in young children or infants. So really, the basis were wrong. And for some linguistic matters, linguistic reasons, that is a traditional recurrent issue, the real references and the meaning of the words were confronted. At the end of the 20th century, language, words had some, were supposed to have specific meanings. This is why I really love the text by Giono which I mentioned in my contribution to this colloquium, because Giono introduce the idea that there are several ways to talk about things, to name things. As for verbalism, as such, on the one hand, we are all verbalist at a given point in time, because we hear about a reality that we have not experienced. And it can be also very useful for communication purposes. And I like to tell that story, you may have seen that I have been careful not to talk about the color of my shirt, of my hairs because to me individual colors are meaningless. To me, colors are terms, names, expressions, that are being used to communicate with sighted people; but allow us to communicate quickly with sighted people rather than using tactile, touch sensations or expressions. So my shirt, you know, I think it is white but it has stripes. It has a given thickness, a given length. That's what I could say. But when I talk with my wife, who is sighted, I just talk about my white shirt, my pink shirt, and of course preserving biodiversity, you know, I said that, but it is my personal experience, that experience of the lack of vision, I know very well. And I respect the fact that people who have lost sight at a later stage in their life, they need to know the color of things because that recalls things to them. But to me, that doesn't mean anything. And one more thing that many psychologists would not consider that verbalism, the fact that I'm talking about the color of my shirt. Because they would think I would be reintegrated with the community of sighted people. So this matter was badly debated at the beginning, really. That I think that of speakers, I'm thinking about [unclear], who will be speaking on Monday, I think next week, who will be talking about this in a much better way than I am doing.

**Céline Roussel**

Thank you for helping us to untangling these threads really, so to speak. Thank you very much for your reaction. So I shall leave the floor to Hannah who will lead us in the Q and A session.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:04:16

We've got a couple of questions. I know Selina wants to ask the question, but I want to go first to Aravinda Bhat. It's lovely to see you again, Aravinda. Would you like to ask your question, please.

**Audience Member** 1:04:32

Thank you, Hannah. I hope I'm visible and audible. So I have listened to all the speakers and it has been wonderful. Also, special hello to Max with whom I've been in touch for nearly a decade. And my question is to him. So Max, you said that you distinguish between Borges’ optical experience and visual practice in literature? I don't know if I'm getting this correct. I'd like you to clarify that. And the second question, since, of course, this session is about decentering sight- however, I couldn't listen to the previous session, because here it is late in the evening and I was very tired, to join the previous session. So I believe there was discussion on Borges. However, due to my inability to join it, maybe I'm repeating some questions, but please, I'd be grateful for your answers. So my first question you did hear, the second one is, in what way do you think Borges’ experience of not being able to see, you know, the blind experience and his other sensory experiences come into his fiction, as well as his poetry? Now, I know that this is a very rudimentary question. But nevertheless, I'd like your response, because right now I'm at work on a book dealing with both Borges and Stephen Kuusisto. Thank you.

**Max Ubelaker Andrade** 1:06:39

Thank you for for both of those questions. I'm trying to figure out the best way to answer. So I, I think that the first thing that comes to mind is picking the last question first, because it's the most recent in my memory, is that, whenever, whenever I was first writing about Borges and the strategies that he uses, I think that I began to talk about how he interrupts or disrupts this, this visual allure, that he constructs strategically in his stories, to create an opportunity for people to appreciate what is happening in the moment of reading, which does not involve the eyes as much as it does involve this mental process of fashioning a world in a way that is not strictly optical, right, that might involve memories of sight might involve other kinds of aspects that might be connected with sight, but also could involve this kind of reconfiguration of the senses in the mind, right. So it's a really radical shift that he tries to create. And so first up, I was talking about how there was a push away from the visual into a more touch oriented or listening or to other kinds of senses. But it occurred to me that, in both sides of the shift that he's conditioning, there are dark, visual elements. And what I felt that he was really distancing him from more specifically, was an optical register in which the eyes are foregrounded as the main way of knowing instead of a more visual component in which the flexibility and chaos of an imagination is able to produce really radically different possibilities that go beyond those dimensions. So for me, it was an important differentiation to make.

The second thing that I wanted to say is that, in preparation for this conference, I really, I really did want to see what would happen in foregrounding blindness in a way that was different than in my process of writing. And I felt that one of the risks that I wanted to avoid was to express a certainty in causality or to put too much prominence on Borges’ blindness because there are many different factors that lead to the strategy. So I prefer to kind of have these things in conversation with one another without requiring this caused, that this was the reason for that. Because it, for me, it opened up a little bit more the space of not knowing, and the space of the complexity of creative, the creative process. So those are, those are two, two things that come to mind. One is it's very important for these things to be in conversation. I sometimes I'm not comfortable with causality because the way blindness can be over determined and over, over emphasized as, as a factor. And, and that's my effort to differentiate between the purely optical and a visual which can extend beyond that. So hopefully that answers your question.

**Audience Member** 1:10:12

Thank you. Hannah, I hope I can just end with one point here. I don't want to take up too much time of the session. However, I appreciate your view, Max, that you wanted to keep these, these various, you know, meanings of visuality, of visualization, in conversation in critiquing what his, his writings and his aesthetic approach. However, as a blind person, myself, I'm interested to know, if there is a way to talk about his lived experience of blindness, of not being able to see, in a way that it does not over determine his aesthetic approach. Now, as I began this last point, I don't want to take up too much of the time, so maybe we could have a conversation later. Thank you.

**Max Ubelaker Andrade** 1:11:16

I hope so. I hope so. I think that there are so many different ways of narrating these things.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:11:23

I think that yeah, thank you- Thank you, Max. And thank you, Aravinda. I think that there's a very interesting connection to be made with something that Charlotte said about the way that she accesses texts. And, and kind of lived, like our lived experience as readers, and how non-visual reading defines and in the case of Borges, non visual writing, finds or has a relationship with the text, and which I'd really like to come back to if you've got time, but I'm going to ask Selina to ask her question. Now, Selina, do you want to unmute and ask your question, please?

**Selina Mills** 1:12:09

Hello, hello. And thank you to both speakers, particularly Max, because I feel that I've judged Borges slightly too much. Do you feel that, I suppose that I'm interested in and I sort of mentioned it previously at my round table, do you feel that he buys into the binary opposition? Would you think from what you've been saying, I think you might answer the question by saying that it's, it, he actually undoes it or challenges it. But do you think, I just wondered, as somebody who's like really focused on his work, I had always found him slightly indulging in blindness, in the sense of it is almost his unique selling point. And I wondered if you felt that or if he felt, I mean, that could just be my reading of it.

**Max Ubelaker Andrade** 1:12:59

I mean, he definitely mocked the idea that this was a selling point, that people wanted to package him in that way. And so I think there's some, that's a factor that he was aware of. I think that, would never, I mean, I think that he did also explicitly write that about his, the very idiosyncrasies of his own experience with blindness and about how it's very different from the expectations of other people. He wrote about how the, was described as, as modest in the sense of like, not wanting, not wanting to speak for people who had other experiences with blindness. And so I think he, he strategically positions himself in a way where he says that this is for him another form of life and a form of being, another style of life. But also, some of the work that he does more in that zone of speaking directly about his blindness in a nonfictional zone is to try to, I think, just speak to his own experiences without, without having people put on these kinds, of these kinds of stories on it. So I’m thinking ...

**Selina Mills** 1:14:34

Exactly, the the thing I was thinking about, as we were all talking was, we need a word. You need a word to say I can't see or I can't, I cannot participate in this way or I can do it a different way. So what I just slightly worry about it and I open this to the whole room and it might be part of the whole critical blindness discussion and it might be something we have to come back to at the end which is: We do need something we need some placeholder that describes a state of being, and possibly allegories and might acknowledge, I mean, it might be negative or not, because every language, every word can be used and manipulated and mistreated and misused. So I'm just putting that out there. And I wondered if Borges, I don't think Saramago, for example, does it, if he just treats blindness as that negative, whatever it was, other writers seem to play with it. I'm just wondering, just generally, and I don't know, if Hannah and Vanessa have a view about this, but is, what are we going to do? If we don't use the word blindness? What do we do?

**Max Ubelaker Andrade** 1:15:45

It reminds me of a kind of a Buddhist system of saying, like, of course, the, you know, the self is not real. And yet, we do have to remember a social security numbers, you know, where we do have to, you know, carry, you know, the driver's license around whenever there was a context, you know, to do that, or, you know, it's, it's important to enter into a context in which traditional identities are going to be very useful. And so ...

**Selina Mills** 1:16:13

I mean, I had to become legally blind. I mean, I saw this whole thing hilarious, you know, am I, was I like, illegally blind before, you know, sort of like, you know, it was I running riot, with my illegal blindness.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:16:27

Can we bring in, can we bring in David, David Anderson, just because I sense you might have something to add, David. David Anderson, do you want to come in?

**Audience Member** 1:16:35

Thank you very much. Great conversation. Thank you to all I guess, I mean, I started sort of harping on the same thing; ecology is part of what I tried to bring to blindness studies and I, the overall question I have is just for each of you with the, with the authors, and artists that you're engaging with, like I know a little bit about Borges; there's a poem of his that starts with the tombstone, and it's about a river. And it's this neat correspondence between going back and forth through time and how the river itself kind of writes itself into the poem. And I love this conversation about sensoriality and multi or poly sensuousness. And also, Bertrand talked about a biodiversity and talked about touching kelp, you're not using your eyes to do it. And it made me think also of like, non human species sensoriums. So bats, dolphins, and butterflies, I found out the other day with eyes on the ends of their genitals. So I'm curious if authors, if any of you and the authors you work with and the ways you think about the senses and this idea decentering sight- Does the nonhuman world, does nature, does ecology creep in? And I love Selina’s question about like, what, what word do we use and, you know, I was born visually impaired, and then I've always been legally blind. I've been under the authority of the state all this time. But in my work, I've tried to think about like this engagement with non normative sight, of non normative sensing, sensing people and their engagement with the natural world and I was just curious, like, Bertrand;s work really I would love to hear more about specifically but all of you- Yeah, does nature help to decenter sight or not at all? If that happens I hope I'm not driving the conversation the wrong way.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:18:25

That's great. Well, let's, let's go Bertrand. David Anderson was asking, what role does nature and the world of animals play? Is the world of animal, is the animal reign? Could it give us another way of understanding senses, our senses?

**Bertrand Verine**

Yes, definitely. I am not an expert, but I have read a bit on this topic. And I believe that Charlotte could probably talk to us, for instance, about the wonderful novella by Virginia Woolf called *Flash*, which is the autobiography of a dog which is a quite interesting experiment where there is a complete decentering because this dog, is does not interpret the world through sight very much at all. There is a horrible, but prodigious, wonderful book by a writer, writer of a Lebanese, Canadian and French origin Wajdi Mouawad which is called *Anima* which is told by a lot of different animals and it is exercise in decentering. And it is a nightmarish book, horrible book. You need to be healthy when reading that book. And I'm sure there are others.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:20:29

I’m just thinking about the kind of flip side of David's question, which is the danger of associating blindness with the kind of base animality. I think it's one of the tropes in David Bolt’s book that's, you know, blindness is kind of linked to the, to the senses, but in quite a bestial way. So I wonder how we can navigate the, the kind of the, the advantages of nature and ecology without falling into that trap.

**Bertrand Verine** 1:21:12

Yes, that joins in on the question of a species specific vision of life, and rebuilding the discourse on bestiality that we often meet.

**Charlotte Makepeace** 1:21:36

The modernists do something quite interesting, in, we've mentioned *Flush*, and obviously that is a book about an animal but it's, it just shows a different way of knowledge and a different way of experience in that you know, you have an animal who accesses the world through the smell, through touch through hearing, as opposed to sight being the most important. I think it was really interesting kind of way of looking at that order. And obviously like for DH Lawrence, nature is hugely important. This city is linked to sight, intellectualism, to industrialism, to coldnesss to rationality, whereas nature is the sensory, the feeling, almost accessing the world through touch becomes a higher power for DH Lawrence, I guess it completely reverses that idea of the bestial being linked, or, you know, kind of blindness being linked to the base or the animal; he completely flipped that like, not necessarily in a disabled advocacy way. He does it in a really interesting way, which ties into the conversation.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:22:50

But the other thing about DH Lawrence is the sex. Right? And that is associated with nature and with the senses.. So there's, that again, there's a really fine line between kind of celebrating the sensory and, and this kind of over sexualization he was criticized for and his misogyny as well.

**Charlotte Makepeace** 1:23:17

Yeah, obviously can't get around the misogyny. I think a lot of it I think people view him as over sexualized. I think actually, a lot of it was just him trying to write intimacy in a way that was medically provocative. So I think, again, obviously, it's kind of that haptic approach, isn't it in, that it's sex, but it's all about touch. And it does descend to the visual again, and it is animal, but Lawrence wasn't doing it. Like we might perceive it as negatively. But it wasn't negative to him, it all tied into his philosophy on feeling and darkness.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:23:50

So you're, you're really working to reclaim Lawrence, as well as reclaiming blindness. It sounds like.

**Charlotte Makepeace** 1:23:57

Evidently. It wasn't my intention when I set out. I think he's just doing something fascinating. I again, I don't think he's a disabled advocate. I don't think we should necessarily be living up to standards of Lawrence. It's just interesting conversations to be happening.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:24:12

Charlotte, can you say a little bit more about... I was asked, because earlier I think in the first session, you asked a question about how you can navigate your blind identity as an academic. And I think you actually answered your own question when you said, about your what, what listening and touching words rather than reading them sightedly, brings to your, your analysis. And I wonder if you could say a bit more about how you could use your, your way of reading to, to actually provide a new kind of analysis which will push the boundaries of modernist scholarship.

**Charlotte Makepeace** 1:25:01

Yeah, so I'm really interested in kind of concepts of sensory reading; obviously on a very basic level, I access to Braille or audiobooks see, but you know, the haptic and the auditory, but equally, like I had a wonderful seminar tutor on my MA, who used to do walks around Dublin to all the points of *Ulysses* and they need like cheese toasties, because they did that in the book and they go, and it was, it was a sensory walk around Dublin. And he was reading passages out, and it was just such a wonderful way of accessing what Joyce intended to be a completely sensory experience. So I think you're right, that probably does bring a real aspect to research and kind of blindness studies is this different way of accessing and it not being a negative, you know, oh, I can't read print, but it opening up entire new avenues of discovery.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:25:53

Absolutely, thank you. That's, that's, that's, I think one of the really exciting things that has happened as, as literature has become more accessible through audio, and it's become much easier for everyone to access audio, I think we can lead the way in, in kind of showing how we can, we can show that you can separate reading from the visual, you know, and that we're not we're not just listening, we're actually actively, you know, creating meaning as people do when they when they use their eyes to read.

**Charlotte Makepeace** 1:26:36

As opposed to the assumption how many times people and the amount of times I've been asked if I'm illiterate, and what people actually mean is how do you read? I’m capable of doing it I just do it in a different way than you.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:26:46

It has its own advantages, and that that brings back what Max was saying about... Max your way, your very way of reading closely and letting this text itself kind of dictate your approach. I thought that resonated as well. And Bertrand... do you have some way of linking in your way of reading with your analysis?

**Bertrand Verine**

Yes. And for that, I alternate different ways. Basically, I approach texts through audio. And once I want to deepen it, I print it out in Braille, or I read it with my Braille tool. But there is always a time when I come back to paper, one way or another. And I should point out that it's not the same materiality, unlike what is often read in a lot of magazines-- fingers are not eyes. So reading braille is not the same materiality as reading with eyes. You don't do it at the same speed, you do not have the same concept, overall concepts. What is wonderful with Braille is to be careful, is to pay attention to detail. Even if you read fast, and I do read Braille fast, you are more careful of each word, you pay more attention, that you do not look at the whole page, the brain globalizes the entirety of it, but that is a very precious way of accessing the text.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:28:57

Is this the value, the added value that blind reading brings to texts? I think, in terms of practically, kind of literally, but also, metaphorically, we've shown throughout this session that blindness can enrich reading and interpretation in, in many different ways. Okay, we, we now have, well, first of all, I'd like to thank all the speakers and the audience for their questions. I'd also like to thank Céline for her brilliant, the brilliant way, clever way in which she brought all your work together and drew out similarities and differences. We've now got half an hour, 30 minutes, to have a break. Ideally, some food, and we start again in about half past with the third, the third round table. So go and have a rest and I look forward to seeing everyone back in half an hour and thank you again very much.