Blind Imagination: Pictures into Words

by Georgina Kleege

I ask, "What are we looking at here?"

Inevitably there is a pause, and then the description begins: "It's a black-and-white photograph of a man. A full-face portrait. He's a youngish man, maybe around thirty..."

"How can you tell?"

"His face looks...fully formed. A younger face would look softer around the chin and...there's not much in the way of wrinkles. His hairline seems to be receding slightly, or maybe he just has a naturally high forehead. Or else it's the way his hair is combed straight back. There's not a lot of hair, or else it's a light color, probably light brown or dark blond."

"What else? Give me a gut reaction."

"He looks very intelligent."

"Why?"

"He's wearing glasses, smallish, roundish, metal frames."

"Glasses make people look intelligent?"

"It's not just that. His gaze is very direct. He is gazing directly at the camera."

"You can see that through his glasses. There's no distortion?"

"No. His eyes are clearly visible. And it looks as if he's looking directly at me."

"And this makes him look intelligent? Maybe the photographer just told him to aim his eyes that way."

At some moment in this conversation my informant could become frustrated and say what Louie Armstrong reportedly said when asked to define jazz: "If you gotta ask you'll never know." And it's true, because I am legally blind. I am not totally blind; I can distinguish light from darkness, and identify most colors. I cannot distinguish such details as features on a face, pattern on fabric or print on a page. Forms appear changeable, without stable contours. On top of my vague and inaccurate perception there is a good deal of distortion, pulsating or swirling patterns of colored dots, and occasional flashes or sweeps of color that have nothing to do with what's before my eyes. So while my visual perception can be entertaining, even aesthetically pleasing at times, it is completely unreliable. Since childhood when my blindness was first diagnosed, I have known that my eyes will usually deceive me, so I need to come by knowledge by other means, either through other sensory information or else through the testimony of others' eyes.

When I ask others to describe an image—an author's book jacket photo for instance—their words may help me resolve some of the chaos before my eyes, but I do not expect that their description will help me form an accurate mental picture of it. In fact, I doubt that anyone reading the description above would be able to pick the photo in question out of an array of photos of thirty-year-old, clean-shaven men with glasses and fair hair. Rather, my informant's words expand my understanding of human faces, in general, the specific aspects that make one readily distinguishable from another. I am reminded that a face at thirty is more "fully formed" than a face at twenty and less wrinkled than a face at forty. The questions I ask come from information I've gathered from previous descriptions—for instance that eyeglasses can sometimes distort the look of the eyes behind them. I ask for a gut reaction because I've learned that images can compel viewers to make instant judgments about the people pictured—why else put the author's photo on the book? I have to admit that I sometimes feel that people are a little gullible about photographs; after all, even I know how to put on a particular face for the camera, and that there is much a photographer can do to enhance and alter the image for different effects. I also know that the same photograph will prompt a wide range of

responses from different viewers, so I often question multiple informants. In fact, this can make a good parlor game, though for my purposes there's a risk that people's descriptions will influence each other, so I do better to question them in isolation. When an adjective recurs in every description, I feel I may be close to something like universal truth, or at least a truth universal to the people I know, which may not be the same thing.

I do not suppose that I gain access to objective reality in this way. Generally, I learn more about the people speaking than about the image before their eyes. Different people notice different things. Some are quick to form snap judgments while others are more tentative. Knowing the traits and tendencies of my informants allows me to weigh their words. When I want a verbal description of something, I tend to choose people who are good talkers. It helps if they are accustomed to describing things to a blind person, practiced at translating their visual perceptions into language that will be meaningful to me. Their habit of translation and the questions I ask while they're doing it make them examine what they see with extra care, challenge their own assumptions and impressions, then revise the words they speak.

Other people, who consider themselves highly visual, may be as observant but may have a harder time expressing what they see. I was discussing Audio Description with a filmmaker acquaintance. We were referring to the new and still rather experimental technology where blind audience members at the theater or cinema use special radio receivers to hear a verbal description of the action, costumes and settings. The filmmaker said, "The problem is that every image would take so many words to describe adequately, that there would be no way that the Audio Description could keep up with the action."

I have to take her word for this, and to some extent I do, but I become resentful when the presumed impossibility of translating visual experience into language becomes an excuse for exclusion. If a picture is worth a thousand words, I'd settle for a hundred, even ten or twelve. Like many other blind viewers, my problem with Audio Description is not that it’s inadequate, but that it can distract me with more information than I generally need. At the movies I can usually follow the action from the dialogue

and sound effects. Occasionally I need to know that a character has accidentally dropped her glove, or is holding a gun, or bears a striking physical resemblance to another character. But lengthy verbal descriptions of the glove, the gun or the character's appearance are usually unnecessary.

As in many everyday situations, the most useful visual information comes on a need-to-know basis. At the bus stop I may ask someone to read the number of the approaching bus but never for a description of the advertisement on its side. When I enter an unfamiliar place—a large hotel lobby for instance—what I need to know is that there are three shallow steps a stride ahead of me, and another six paces after that there is a large potted palm, though I can usually detect such features of the terrain with my white cane. The pattern of the carpet, the elegance of the chandelier overhead, the style of the furniture, even the number of other people present (which I may already sense from the sound they are making) can wait until later if ever.

But filmmakers attend to every detail in the images they create, arranging and lighting every object in the foreground and background with an eye to shaping viewers' conscious and subconscious responses. So it is understandable that they might be disturbed, if not insulted, by the very notion that all that visual richness could be reduced to a few descriptive phrases. Perhaps for this reason, films with blind characters tend always to include a scene where the blind person asks a sighted companion to describe something, usually some spectacular natural phenomenon—a sunset or landscape. Typically the sighted person, speechless before such awesome beauty, is not up to the task, and can only mumble a paltry adjective or two. Sighted viewers are meant to feel pity for the blind characters who are so cut off from the glories of the visible world, and admiration for the self-sacrificing sighted companions who have chosen to protect them, while blind viewers, who certainly don't need to hear these scenes described yet again, squirm in our seats.

In real life, just as sighted people vary in their skill at translating images into words; blind people vary in the level of their interest in visual matters. It may be that people who lose their sight later in life and retain visual memories, are more eager for visual details, while people who have been blind since birth or childhood may find this

kind of information less necessary or meaningful. The best descriptions for blind people come from those who can step back from the immediacy of their own experience and imagine the world perceived by other means. A friend described something that happened in her orientation and mobility class where she and other blind students were learning to navigate using white canes. A group of students stood at an intersection while their instructor told them how to interpret the traffic flow from the sounds they heard. He used the phrase "a T-intersection," then paused and asked, "Do you all know what that means?"

One student did not. He had been blind since birth and a Braille reader since an early age. A T in Braille does not resemble the Roman letter, and reading Braille is not a matter of tracing individual characters but of feeling the pattern of raised dots in sequence as the finger sweeps across the line. Like many totally blind people he may have learned to write the Roman alphabet, at least enough of it to sign his name. But perhaps he had no T in his name, so the metaphor was lost on him, as were others such as U-turn, V-neck and S-curve. The instructor was also blind and had spent enough time explaining things to other blind people to know how to handle the situation. He drew a T on the student's back, and instantly he understood. In inscribing the two lines on the student's body, the instructor was not attempting to form a mental picture in the student's mind's eye. Rather he was inviting him to re-orient his mind's body in space, to transform his body into a map of the terrain that surrounded him, where his spine corresponded to one street and the perpendicular of his shoulders represented the other. "We're here," the instructor said, touching the student's right shoulder blade, "and we want to get over here" drawing a diagonal to the top of his left shoulder.

One way for the blind to understand how something looks is to grasp how it feels. Once a friend was showing me some photo portraits in an art magazine. While she described them, she took my hand, and using my finger like a pencil drew over the page saying: "Here's his arm. Here's his back. His head is pointing this way, and this elbow is pointing this way." Having traced the general outline of the person's body she went on to sketch in details: "The light is coming from this side. So this side of his face, his shoulder, his arm, and his torso are lit while all this is in shadow."

This tracing method was helpful, but only gave me a partial idea. So at some point during this process I took my hand back and began arranging my own body in the postures of the bodies in the photographs. "So he has this arm like this?" I said.

"Yes," my friend said, "except his hand is jutting out this way," and pulled my hand into the correct angle. These were photographs of people who had been born with incomplete or missing limbs. They had posed themselves and been lit in a deliberate imitation of high fashion photography to make a point about the ways visual presentation can manipulate or determine viewers' expectations. The friend describing the images uses a wheelchair, and everyone else who witnessed her description was also disabled, so the issue of how disabled bodies are represented in visual culture was of interest to all of us. My friend's description added a new wrinkle to the general discussion, at once unmasking and underlining the visual messages of the images we examined.

If I seem unduly interested in the visible world, it may be because I was born with normal sight and so draw from a store of visual memories to interpret both what I still see, however imperfectly, and what others say about it. In fact however, my memories, even from the time before I lost my sight, are not especially visual. When I attempt to summon a mental picture of my childhood home or my parents' faces, for instance, there may be some visual aspects—a color, a quality of light—but these are never isolated from remembered sounds, scents or feelings, and received knowledge about a specific time or event. The visual elements of my memories are as fleeting, fragmentary and untrustworthy as what I can see today. I suspect that much of my interest in visual matters comes instead from the fact that both my parents were visual artists. This is not to say that either of them spent a lot of time describing what they saw to me; words were not the mode of expression they preferred. But from them I learned a lot about what artists look at and what they say about it.

When I visited museums, galleries and other artists' studios with my parents they tended to comment almost exclusively on the artists' technique, the choice and application of media. Today, when I hear that the paint on a particular canvas is "lightly feathered" or "thickly spattered," these phrases summon for me something like a tactile

memory, the texture of paint under a brush or palate knife, or the satisfying splat of flung paint hitting canvas, mingled with the scent of oil paint and turpentine, as if I had been the one doing the painting. It is no accident that the two paintings I'm thinking of—one by Morris Kanter, the other by Jackson Pollack—are abstract. My parents, their teachers and friends were all abstract expressionists, so this was the first style of painting I was exposed to as a child. Since these works strive neither to tell a story nor to represent objects found in nature but rather to explore ideas about light, color, energy, rhythm and texture, my response, which is triggered by words and much more tactile than visual, is perhaps not so far-fetched. Certainly it is as apt as the response of a sighted museum visitor who complains that any five-year-old could do a better job.

Every period and genre of art has its own conventions, vocabulary, idioms and syntax, so understanding art involves some degree of decoding or translating visual elements into words. For this reason, museums go to the trouble of producing elaborate labels, catalogues and taped tours to tell visitors what they are looking at, to train their eyes to decode the language of images.

In recent years, many art museums have begun developing programs for blind visitors. This is a response both to civil rights legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, and to the rise in age-related vision impairments of an aging population. In many instances, museums offer docent-led or recorded tours that read the wall texts and provide other verbal descriptions. Unfortunately, art educators often make condescending and reductive assumptions about the kind of art that will be understandable to blind people. They tend to gravitate toward representational works that tell a story, and resort to the easy clichés of art appreciation. These assumptions disregard the fact that many blind people, particularly those who choose to visit an art museum, may retain some residual vision or visual memory, as well as a good deal of knowledge about visual culture.

A while ago, a friend who has been blind since birth called me to discuss the color orange. She said that since childhood it had pleased her to know that oranges are orange, and for this reason she associated the word for the color with sensations related to the fruit: its form, its smooth but slightly pocked texture, its taste, and the

scent that spurts up from its broken skin directly into the nostrils. She also associated the word with good health and bright, morning cheerfulness—qualities touted by the orange juice industry. For these reasons, any mention of the color always made her happy. Then, she went shopping for clothes with a sighted friend. Her friend told her that the sweater in the style she wanted was available in several colors, including, orange, so naturally that was the one she wanted. Her friend made a disapproving noise then said, "Better not. You don't look good in orange."

My friend was shocked, dumbfounded. How could a color that had for her nothing but positive associations, be anything but flattering and attractive? But her friend was so adamant it made her uncertain how to articulate her confusion. And besides, time pressed, so she chose another color and they left.

She called me because she knew that I have read and written about color perception, as well as other visual matters, so she thought I could answer her question without being either embarrassed or patronizing.

I did the best I could. I told her that, as I understood it, light reflecting off the orange sweater would alter the appearance of her skin tone in a way supposed to be unpleasant. This explanation is something of an educated guess. While I would be able to perceive the orange of the sweater my ability to judge skin colors is impaired. When I look at a face the features and facial hair tend to blur together in a grayish haze, making the color of the skin appear to me darker, greener or grayer than reality, so I am never certain what the original tone actually is. Thus I have no direct experience of the effect the colors of the person's clothing might have, but could only assume that orange would cast a yellowish glow, and make her appear jaundiced.

"So orange would make me look sick," my friend said. We talked about how when people visit friends in the hospital they always comment on their color. "His color is much better today," they say. I gather that this has something to do with circulation, that disease, stress and drugs can drain blood from the face, while normal blood flow would intensify the skin's pigments. Or is it the other way round? Both my friend and I knew what it feels like to blush or flush, and had at one time been surprised to learn that this sensation is visible to others.

"What about safety orange?" my friend asked, returning us to the original subject. She was referring to the shade of orange used on road cones and barrels to indicate construction, and elsewhere to indicate hazardous substances or conditions.

"It would probably be better to call it danger orange," I told her. We went on to discuss shades of color. She said that she understood this through an analogy to sounds—louder and softer volumes, higher and lower pitches—which seemed as good a way as any to me.

I could have told her that Helen Keller claimed that pink was her favorite color because it made her think of the tender softness of a baby's cheek and the warm summer breezes of her childhood home in Alabama. Keller had no color perception either, but perceptively drew on cultural conventions that associate pink with infants, especially female infants, and then linked those general associations to the place and climate of her own infancy.

Instead, I told my friend a story about my mother, how when I was a teenager I went with her to visit the studio of a friend of hers who had recently died. She spent a long time staring at his palette that had been left untouched, at a particular shade of green he'd mixed for the painting he was working on before his final illness. She didn't say it, but I sensed that the color spoke to her as eloquently as if she'd heard his last words.

"What shade of green?" my friend wanted to know. “Bottle green, grass green, acid green?"

"I don't think it was a green found in nature,” I said. "I think that's why it was interesting."

I doubt that this conversation gave my friend a clearer understanding of orange, or green or any other color for that matter. We were talking around the topic, amassing and comparing anecdotes related to it, without ever quite putting a finger on the thing itself. Still, I think the discussion was mutually satisfying. Our tone alternated between bemusement and mystification. Sighted people say the strangest things, but we were used to that. I could say that our conversation had something of the quality of a meeting

between two seasoned anthropologists comparing field notes of the quaint customs and outlandish beliefs of the natives we devoted our lives to studying. But the metaphor implies we thought of ourselves as belonging to a different culture, and we do not. We live in this world and use the language of the people who share it with us. The fact that the words we use may evoke personal memories or associations makes us no different from the people around us who can actually see what we're talking about.

More importantly, I resist the metaphor because I know how damaging it has been. Once philosophers began to speculate about the nature of human consciousness, blindness has posed a vexing problem. Since vision is by far the predominant sense in most human beings, blindness, assumed to be the polar opposite of sight, has seemed an alien condition, something not quite human. This view of the blind has caused fear, prejudice, discrimination and disabling pity. And while the blind today enjoy legally-mandated access to education, training and employment opportunities, old attitudes linger, and crop up in unexpected quarters.

Different people process information differently, but they are still people. I recognize that many have trouble grasping concepts without visual aids. So, to show what I mean here, it might help to include some illustrations. First, there should be the actual book jacket photo discussed on the first page, then one or two of the magazine photos my friend described to me. There should also be some reproductions of the paintings I mention. These would have to be in color and of high enough quality that the texture of the paint is visible. Finally there could be a staged re-enactment of my other friend's shopping trip—note the garish orange of the sweater, note the look of horror on the friend's face. But what about blind readers who would have to track down someone to describe these images? So I'll do without. Anyway, I'm not convinced these images would improve on the images already in the reader's mind.

While human beings may be primarily visual creatures we are also intensely verbal. Human language evolved to enable diverse individuals to bridge the gaps that separate them. Still, there are those whose only response to the blind is to draw a blank and say, "words cannot express what I see." I know that words do not do justice to pictures, and yet they are the best I can do. I cannot always experience images without

words, but I can experience words without images. When the words are well chosen they make something happen in my brain that is not entirely visual but is nevertheless vivid to me. And it happens without extraordinary effort, every time a friend phones to describe her new sofa, her desert vacation, or the birds on the branch outside her window. And it happens every time I sit down to read, as I imagine and hope it does for all readers, sighted and blind alike.

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Georgina Kleege was born in New York City in 1956. At age eleven, she was diagnosed as legally blind due to a rare form of Macular Degeneration. She attended regular schools and received a B.A. in English literature from Yale University in 1979. She is the author of a novel, *Home for the Summer* (Post-Apollo Press 1989) a collection of personal essays about blindness, *Sight Unseen* (Yale University Press 1999) and *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller*, (Gallaudet University Press 2006) an epistolary exploration of Keller's life. Her interest in the visual arts stems from the fact that both her parents were visual artists. She has spoken about blind access to the visual arts at the Tate Modern in London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and helped to organize the "Blind at the Museum" exhibit and conference at the Berkeley Art Museum in 2005. Her essays and short fiction appear frequently in such journals as Raritan, Southwest Review and The Yale Review. She has taught creative writing, literature, and disability studies courses at the University of Oklahoma and The Ohio State University and now teaches in the department of English at the University of California, Berkeley.