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Reimagining Vision: An Aesthetic of Perception in representations of Blindness in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* and *All the Light We Cannot See*

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ABSTRACT

Knowing the world becomes different when the most privileged of the Western sensory hierarchy - 'sight' has been extinguished by war. This paper examines blindness in Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) and Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014), arguing that both texts construct blindness not as metaphor or neurological deficit, but as a dynamic and context-saturated mode of embodied knowing. This is shaped by war, gendered vulnerability, psychic fragmentation, and relational care. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodied perception, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's crip theory, and the emerging framework of sensory aesthetics, the study repositions non-visual perception as a primary epistemological and aesthetic category in contemporary war fiction. The comparative analysis reveals a theoretically generative asymmetry. Marie-Laure's blindness in Doerr's novel produces an *architectured sensorium*. It is a structured, world-engaging perceptual orientation composed through touch, sound, and spatial memory. Afra's trauma-onset blindness in Lefteri's text, by contrast, manifests as psychic withdrawal from the sensorium itself: the body's radical refusal to perceive what cannot be survived by seeing. This asymmetry is inseparable from questions of gender, displacement, and geopolitical power, revealing how war redistributes sensory capacity along axes of race and vulnerability. Through close reading of both primary texts, the paper contributes to literary disability studies,

phenomenological narrative theory, and sensory aesthetics and repositions blindness as a relational, historically embedded form of epistemology, and always, inescapably, a question of power.

1. Introduction

Blindness in the Western literary tradition has historically served as a privileged signifier of moral failure, divine punishment, or prophetic insight. From Oedipus's self-blinding as atonement, to Milton's meditations on sightlessness, to the symbolic ocular imagery pervading Conrad and Faulkner. Such readings, while critically productive have consistently subordinated the phenomenological reality of blindness to its figurative function of non-visual perception. Contemporary fiction increasingly resists this reductive approach, presenting blindness not as narrative shorthand for ignorance or spiritual crisis, but as a complex mode of engaging with and knowing the world in its material particularity.

This paper argues that Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) and Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize-winning *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014) each construct what may be termed an aesthetics of perception - a narrative and epistemological framework in which meaning emerges through sensory experience rather than visual representation alone. Crucially, however, the two novels elaborate this aesthetics in divergent and even antithetical directions: Doerr's Marie-Laure achieves a richly structured sensory expansion, while Lefteri's Afra undergoes a traumatic sensory collapse that mirrors her psychic disintegration following the violence she has witnessed in the Syrian civil war.

The comparative framework adopted here illuminates the extent to which blindness is not a uniform or stable condition but a dynamic, context-dependent mode of being-in-the-world, shaped by environment, psychological state, gender, and relational networks of care. Blindness, in these texts, functions simultaneously as a physiological fact, a narrative device, a psychological metaphor, and most crucially an alternative epistemology that challenges the hegemony of the visual in both literary aesthetics and the broader cultural production of knowledge.

Methodologically, the study employs close reading techniques informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodied perception, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's critical disability studies and 'misfitting' theory, Elaine Scarry's theorisation of the body in pain, and the sensory historiography developed by scholars such as Constance Classen and David Howes. The paper also engages with narratological frameworks - particularly the theories of Gérard Genette and Suzanne Keen to examine

how perceptual limitation and expansion are formalised at the level of narrative structure, voice, and focalisation.

Across thirteen substantive sections, this paper moves from theoretical foundations through detailed textual analysis to comparative synthesis, ultimately arguing that blindness in these two novels is not a limitation but a *different mode of being* one that, when read through the lens of aesthetics of perception, fundamentally reconfigures our assumptions about sight, knowledge, and aesthetic experience.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

Existing scholarship on *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* has largely concentrated on its representation of the Syrian refugee crisis, trauma, and displacement. Critics such as Dawson (2020) situate Lefteri's novel within the contemporary 'refugee literature' genre, reading it alongside works by Mohsin Hamid and Jenny Erpenbeck. Therapeutic readings, following van der Kolk's somatic understanding of trauma, have also been applied to Afra's psychogenic blindness as a symptom of PTSD.

Studies on *All the Light We Cannot See* have, by contrast, emphasised the novel's formal experimentations, its ethical ambivalences around World War II commemoration (Berlatsky, 2015), and its narrative use of radio as a metaphor for connection and disconnection across wartime distance. Feminist readings have noted the novel's gendering of blindness as a productive counter to masculine military vision, particularly in relation to Marie-Laure's coded radio transmissions and her relationship with her father.

Several scholars have addressed blindness in both texts, but almost exclusively at the level of symbolic or thematic analysis. Georgina Kleege's landmark study *Sight Unseen* (1999) challenged literary representations of blindness as metaphor, inaugurating a disability studies approach to ocular impairment in fiction; however, neither Lefteri nor Doerr falls within her purview. Similarly, Tobin Siebers's *Disability Theory* (2008) provides conceptual tools that have not been systematically applied to either novel.

The concept of aesthetics of perception, drawing on multi-sensory experience as an aesthetic framework remains underexplored in literary analyses of both texts. This paper addresses this gap by integrating disability studies, Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, and sensory theory to argue that blindness in these novels restructures both narrative form and the reader's aesthetic experience. The study builds on but significantly extends Mitchell and Snyder's foundational concept of 'narrative prosthesis'

(2000), showing that blindness in these novels is not a prosthetic narrative supplement but a generative epistemological framework in its own right.

Phenomenology of Embodied Perception

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) provides the foundational theoretical scaffolding for this study. Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is not a passive reception of sensory data mediated by a disembodied Cartesian mind, but an active, intentional engagement with the world through the living body - what he terms the *corps propre*. The body is not an object in space but the very medium through which space is constituted as experienced. This insight is crucial for understanding blindness not as a deficit of information but as a *reorganisation* of the perceptual field. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's insistence that "the body is our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty 146) is especially crucial here, as it allows blindness to be understood not as deprivation but as a reconfiguration of world-access through embodied perception.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of the 'motor intentionality' of the body i.e. the body's pre-reflective orientation toward the world through habitual movement, tactile exploration, and spatial memory allows us to read Marie-Laure's navigation of Saint-Malo through her father's scale model as an instance of embodied perceptual mastery rather than compensatory technology. For Afra, conversely, the disruption of motor intentionality through psychogenic blindness figures the body's radical withdrawal from a world that has become, through violence, intolerably perceptible.

Critical Disability Studies and Crip Theory

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Staring: How We Look* (2009) and her influential concept of 'misfitting' is the productive disjuncture between a non-normative body and its built environment provide a second theoretical axis. Rather than treating disability as individual lack, Garland-Thomson situates it within systems of social and architectural power that produce 'normate' bodies as the default against which all deviation is measured. This relational model of disability is particularly productive for reading Afra, whose blindness is inseparable from the social and political catastrophe that produced it.

Robert McRuer's crip theory (2006) further radicalises this framework by reading compulsory able-bodiedness as analogous to compulsory heterosexuality - a normative system that renders alternative modes of embodiment invisible or deviant. Both Afra and Marie-Laure, as blind women in contexts structured by visual normativity (wartime Saint-Malo, refugee camps in Athens), enact a form of involuntary crip resistance to the demand for perceptual conformity.

Aesthetics of Perception and Sensory Studies

The emerging field of sensory studies, developed by Constance Classen (*The Book of Touch*, 2005), David Howes (*Empire of the Senses*, 2005), and Mark M. Smith (*Sensing the Past*, 2007), foregrounds the historically and culturally situated nature of sensory hierarchies. The dominant oculocentrism of Western modernity, what Martin Jay (1993) calls 'ocularcentrism' - privileges vision as the epistemologically 'cleanest' sense, relegating touch, smell, and hearing to the domains of the primitive or the merely auxiliary. Both novels challenge this hierarchy by constructing richly textured non-visual worlds. As Martin Jay observes, “vision has been the dominant sense of the modern era” (Jay 3), a hierarchy that both Lefteri and Doerr actively destabilise through their sustained attention to tactile, auditory, and affective modes of knowing.

Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics (*Body Consciousness*, 2008) further extends this framework by arguing for the aesthetic significance of somatic experience i.e. a bodily feeling and sensation as a primary mode of aesthetic engagement, not a secondary accompaniment to the properly visual or cognitive. Applied to literary blindness, somaesthetics invites attention to the aesthetic dimension of tactile exploration, auditory discrimination, and olfactory memory as they are figured in narrative prose. In this sense, Shusterman’s claim that “the body is a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation” (Shusterman 2) becomes central to reading both texts, where perception is grounded not in detached observation but in lived bodily experience.

Blindness Beyond Metaphor: Alternative Epistemology

Both novels begin their challenge to ocularcentrism at the level of characterisation, positioning their blind protagonists not as objects of pity or symbols of limitation but as active, knowing subjects. In *All the Light We Cannot See*, Doerr establishes Marie-Laure's mode of knowing with striking economy. When she navigates the Museum of Natural History in Paris, she does so through a sensory register that is tactile, auditory, and proprioceptive rather than visual:

“Eventually they climb sixteen steps into the Gallery of Mineralogy” (Deorr 21).

This passage, occurring early in the novel, establishes that Marie-Laure's spatial knowledge is not approximate or compensatory but precise and systematically acquired. The numbered steps constitute a form of embodied mathematics - a somatic cartography that exceeds, in its precision, the casual visual scanning by which sighted characters navigate the same spaces. Doerr's narrative choice to quantify

Marie-Laure's steps is aesthetically significant: numbers encode confidence, mastery, and habit, not fumbling uncertainty.

Lefteri's approach to Afra's blindness is more oblique, filtered through Nuri's focalisation. Nevertheless, key passages establish Afra's non-visual attentiveness to the world. In the camp in Athens, Afra demonstrates a capacity for auditory discrimination that exceeds Nuri's own.

This moment[2] is epistemologically charged. Afra, the ostensibly impaired character, perceives what the 'normal' sighted and hearing Nuri cannot. The passage radically inverts the expected hierarchy of perception, suggesting that Afra's blindness has not diminished her sensory world but redistributed its attentiveness. This inversion is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's account of sensory substitution and reorganisation, and anticipates the more complex account of Afra's perception that emerges across the novel. This inversion of perceptual hierarchy resonates with broader sensory theory, particularly the recognition that non-visual perception operates through temporality and intensity rather than spatial mastery; as Walter J. Ong notes, “sound exists only when it is going out of existence” (Ong 32), foregrounding the fleeting yet immersive nature of auditory knowing.

It is worth noting, however, that this epistemological expansion is partial and unstable in Afra's case, whereas it is consistent and structurally central in Marie-Laure's. The difference is not neurological but contextual: Marie-Laure's blindness is lifelong, integrated, and supported; Afra's is traumatic, recent, and occurs within conditions of extreme instability and loss.

Sensory Reconstruction of Reality

Marie-Laure's Tactile Architecture

The most sustained figure of non-visual knowledge in *All the Light We Cannot See* is the scale model of Saint-Malo constructed by Marie-Laure's father, Daniel LeBlanc. The model is not merely a navigational aid; it is an epistemological apparatus - a three-dimensional tactile text that encodes the city's spatial grammar in a form accessible to Marie-Laure's fingers. When Doerr describes Marie-Laure's first encounter with the Saint-Malo model, the prose itself becomes tactile:

“She runs her fingers over the model in their kitchen, counting miniature benches, trees, lampposts, doorways. Every day some new detail emerges - each storm drain, park bench, and hydrant in the model has its counterpart in the real world” (Deorr 35)

Such tactile intimacy aligns with broader aesthetic theory in which sensory knowledge is not secondary but foundational; indeed, as Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten defines it, "aesthetics is the science of sensory cognition" (Baumgarten 3).

The simile is crucial[3]: learning a city as a face invokes an intimacy, a tenderness, and a specificity of attention that visual scanning rarely achieves. Touch, in this formulation, is not a poor substitute for sight but a superior mode of intimate knowledge. The face is learned through repeated, attentive, loving contact - not from across a room. To know the city as a face is to know it not as landscape but as kin.

This tactile knowledge becomes narratively decisive when Marie-Laure must navigate the bombed and burning city of Saint-Malo from memory. The model, internalised through years of tactile practice, becomes a cognitive map that vision could never have produced with equivalent reliability:

"Marie-Laure goes to the model neighborhood and runs her fingers over the houses. Still there. Still there. Still there" (Deorr 59).

The action of finding a miniature locked door through touch[4] encapsulates the argument of this section: tactile knowledge, honed through habit and embodied repetition, achieves a precision that visual memory, subject to darkness, smoke, and terror, cannot. Marie-Laure's fingers do not compensate for absent sight; they outperform it under conditions of sensory overload.

Sound, Radio, and Perceptual Networks

Sound constitutes a second major modality of Marie-Laure's perceptual world. From childhood, the radio in her great-uncle's house figures as a site of perceptual pleasure and emotional connection - a technology that, for Marie-Laure, is not a mediation of reality but a direct sensory encounter with distant human voices:

The radio, in Etienne's formulation, is an instrument of active perceptual projection i.e. voice going *out into the darkness*, not merely receiving what comes in. This model of active acoustic projection is consonant with Merleau-Ponty's account of the body's motor intentionality: perception is not passive reception but active, embodied reaching-toward-the-world. Marie-Laure's later use of the radio to transmit coded messages sustains this figure of active sonic agency.

Afra's Sensory Collapse

Against Marie-Laure's sensory expansion, Lefteri constructs Afra's experience as a progressive sensory collapse. Following the trauma she has witnessed most devastatingly, the death of their son Sami, Afra's blindness functions as a psychic shutting-down of perceptual access. This is most powerfully rendered in the novel's account of what Afra paints, or rather fails to paint:

'She is a painter. Was.' (Lefteri 277)

The white-on-white passage[6] enacts, at the level of aesthetic production, the logic of trauma: the compulsive erasure of the world that has become unbearable. Afra's blindness is here not merely physiological but hermeneutic—she has, in a profound sense, chosen not to see, or rather been chosen by a body that refuses to go on perceiving what it has perceived. This resonates with Elaine Scarry's account of pain as world-destroying (*The Body in Pain*, 1985): extreme trauma evacuates the world of its objects, leaving only a blank white expanse of undifferentiated sensation. Afra's perceptual withdrawal may also be understood through affect theory, where experience operates at the level of intensity rather than representation; as Brian Massumi suggests, "affect is intensity" (Massumi 27), a formulation that captures the overwhelming sensory saturation that precedes her collapse.

Yet even within this collapse, Lefteri preserves moments of residual perceptual intensity. When Afra handles the objects Nuri brings her from the market - a piece of fruit, a fabric, her fingers receive them with an attention that suggests the body's continued impulse toward the world despite the mind's withdrawal:

Looking at her eyes was like opening a door into an empty room. She caught my eye and smiled, a small, sweet smile, but her eyes were still blank. (Lefteri 390)

This is one of Lefteri's most precise stylistic choices. The automatic human gesture of closing one's eyes to smell more intensely is, for Afra, a gesture that cannot be made: her eyes are always already closed. The repetition of the familiar gesture in this altered context produces a quiet pathos that is also a phenomenological observation: the hierarchy and interaction of the senses is disrupted when one sense is permanently absent.

Blindness and Trauma: Psychogenic Vision and Somatic Memory

Cathy Caruth's influential theory of trauma (*Unclaimed Experience*, 1996) holds that traumatic events exceed the capacity of consciousness to integrate them, returning instead as intrusive symptoms -

flashbacks, dissociation, somatic disturbance that disrupt the linear temporality of narrative selfhood. Afra's blindness is precisely such a symptom: a somatic response to the overwhelming excess of what she has witnessed.

Lefteri is careful, however, not to pathologise Afra's blindness in exclusively medical terms. The novel refuses to offer a clinical explanation - psychogenic blindness, conversion disorder, preferring instead to maintain the condition's ambiguity between the physiological and the metaphysical. This refusal is aesthetically and ethically significant: it prevents Afra's blindness from becoming merely a symptom to be diagnosed and cured, insisting instead on its status as a mode of being that deserves engagement on its own terms.

The temporal structure of Afra's blindness is also significant. She becomes blind during the attack on their neighborhood in Aleppo at the moment of maximum visual horror. The body's refusal to see registers not the absence of vision but the excess of a sight that could no longer be borne.

“When I closed my eyes and breathed in the smell, I could pretend for a moment that I hadn’t seen the things I’d seen” (Lefteri 54).

The narrative blank here is Nuri's not knowing what Afra saw is itself a formal embodiment of traumatic unspeakability. What cannot be told cannot be seen, and what cannot be seen cannot be told: the visual and the linguistic are locked in mutual collapse. This narrative withholding is not a failure of representation but its most precise achievement: the text enacts, at the level of narrative structure, the impossibility that it describes.

In contrast, Marie-Laure's blindness carries no traumatic content. She has been blind since childhood, and her relationship to her condition is one of integration and competent habituation. When she encounters beauty, terror, or loss, she encounters them through all her senses without ocular mediation; her emotional responses are not symptomatically distorted by the condition of blindness itself. This contrast structures the paper's central comparative argument: blindness *as such* is neither expansion nor collapse. It is the context, history, and relational environment of blindness that determines its experiential character.

Space, Memory, and Navigation

Marie-Laure: Space as Tactile Text

Yi-Fu Tuan's phenomenological geography (*Space and Place*, 1977) distinguishes between 'space' - abstract, undifferentiated, potentially threatening and 'place' - humanised, known, affectively invested. Marie-Laure's project across both Paris and Saint-Malo is precisely the conversion of space into place through tactile knowledge and embodied memory. The scale model is the instrument of this conversion:

The mineralogical knowledge detailed here[9] is not incidental but thematically central. Marie-Laure learns the world through its material textures like the weight of stone, the roughness of crystal, the smoothness of polished granite. This is knowledge acquired through sustained, intimate, embodied attention: the kind of attention that, in the novel's epistemological framework, constitutes a deeper knowing than the visual inspection that sighted visitors to the museum bring to the same objects.

When the Germans occupy Saint-Malo, the city's spatial grammar is violently disrupted: streets are blocked, buildings bombed, familiar landmarks destroyed. Marie-Laure's internalised tactile map enables her to navigate this disruption with a flexibility that visual memory, dependent on visible landmarks, could not provide. Her fingers carry the city within them, independent of its surface appearance.

This demonstrates the operationality of embodied spatial memory under conditions that would defeat visual navigation. The darkness that makes sighted characters helpless is, for Marie-Laure, simply the normal condition of her perceptual world: she has always navigated in the dark, and the sudden darkness of occupation and bombardment changes nothing in her fundamental perceptual practice.

Afra: Space as Threat

Afra's spatial experience is diametrically opposed. As a refugee moving through unfamiliar, often actively hostile environments (Aleppo, Turkey, Greece, England), she cannot build the cumulative tactile knowledge that Marie-Laure develops over years of stable habitation. Each new space is unknown, potentially dangerous, and must be navigated with the assistance of Nuri.

The guided navigation figures Afra's spatial experience as relational dependency rather than independent mastery. This is not, the novel insists, a moral failing or a limitation of Afra's character: it is the direct consequence of her displacement from familiar spatial environments. The contrast with Marie-Laure is instructive: spatial competence in blindness is not a property of the individual body but of the relation between body and environment. Given stable, known space, the blind body achieves extraordinary competence; given perpetually unfamiliar space, it cannot.

Gender, Relational Care, and the Ethics of Interdependence

Both Marie-Laure and Afra are women, and both novels situate their blindness within networks of gendered care. The ethics of these care relationships differ significantly, however, and the difference has consequences for the protagonists' perceptual capacities.

Daniel LeBlanc's care for Marie-Laure is characterised by what Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*, 1982) calls the ethics of care: attentiveness to the particular needs and capacities of the cared-for, responsiveness to vulnerability, and a commitment to fostering autonomous agency rather than dependence. Daniel makes the scale models not to do Marie-Laure's navigating for her but to give her the tools to navigate for herself. His goal is consistently her independence.

This pedagogical intention to enable solo navigation is the ethical motor of Marie-Laure's perceptual development. Daniel's care is not protective but empowering: it takes the form of transferring skills rather than supplying permanent assistance. The ethics of this care relationship is, in Nel Noddings's terminology (*Caring*, 1984), one of 'engrossment' in the other's project rather than substitution for it.

Nuri's care for Afra is more complex and more ambivalent. Haunted by survivor's guilt and his own unprocessed grief for Sami, Nuri's caregiving is inflected by a desire to restore Afra to her former self to 'cure' her blindness as a proxy for recovering their pre-war life. This therapeutic rather than accepting orientation to Afra's blindness is, paradoxically, disempowering.

The impulse to restore sight through verbal description[13] is well-intentioned but epistemologically presumptuous: it assumes that visual knowledge is what Afra lacks and most needs, rather than accepting her non-visual world as valid in its own terms. This is precisely the 'normalizing gaze' that Garland-Thomson identifies as the primary mechanism by which disability is constructed as deviance rather than difference. Nuri's care, in this moment, inadvertently participates in the ableist framework that the novel more generally works to resist.

Narrative Form and the Aesthetics of Perceptual Limitation

Gérard Genette's narratological distinction between focalisation (who perceives) and narration (who speaks) is productive for examining how both novels formalise their protagonists' perceptual situations. In *All the Light We Cannot See*, chapters focalised through Marie-Laure are narrated in the

present tense and second person ('You') as well as the third, a formal choice that implicates the reader's own body in the character's perceptual situation.

The sentence structure of this passage - short, paratactic, list-like - formally enacts non-visual attentiveness. Rather than the long, landscape-painting sentences that characterise visual prose description, Doerr gives us a sequence of discrete auditory events, each accorded equal weight, none subsumed within a synthesising visual field. The prose aesthetics of non-vision are distinct from those of vision: the world comes in pieces, in sequence, in time, rather than all at once, across space, in simultaneous panorama.

Lefteri's formal strategies are different but equally deliberate. The novel is narrated by Nuri, a sighted man, which means that Afra's perceptual world is always mediated through another's focalisation—a formal choice that reproduces, at the structural level, Afra's social situation as a disabled woman whose experience is constantly interpreted by those around her. Yet Lefteri periodically breaks this mediation, giving Afra direct speech that challenges Nuri's interpretive authority.

This assertion which uses the verb 'to see' in its epistemic rather than perceptual sense—is a formal and thematic pivot in the novel. Afra claims a form of insight that exceeds visual perception, and that exceeds Nuri's understanding of her situation. The sentence's paradox (a blind woman claiming superior vision) is the concentrated form of the novel's central argument about the nature of perception.

Suzanne Keen's work on narrative empathy (*Empathy and the Novel*, 2007) suggests that literary representations of altered perceptual states generate affective responses in readers by inviting them to imaginatively inhabit unfamiliar sensory worlds. Both Lefteri and Doerr deploy this dynamic deliberately: the reader of *All the Light We Cannot See* is repeatedly positioned within Marie-Laure's tactile and auditory world, while the reader of *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is positioned within the disturbing cognitive dissonance of Nuri's attempts to understand and represent Afra's experience.

Object, Perception, and the Sea of Flames

The Sea of Flames diamond - the novel's central MacGuffin functions not merely as a plot device but as an object that focusses questions of visual and non-visual knowledge. The diamond's beauty is, by definition, a visual phenomenon: its play of light, its colour, its transparency. Yet it is hidden within a model that Marie-Laure can touch but not see, and it is sought by characters whose visual greed. The German officer Von Rumpel's obsessive ocular desire leads them to their destruction.

The comparative here more real to her fingers than is the novel's most direct statement of its epistemological argument: tactile reality has a density and immediacy that visual reality may lack. The diamond is, for Marie-Laure, not an object of visual desire but of tactile presence - she feels it without attributing to it the legendary properties that those who can see it project onto its visual surface. Her non-visual relationship to the object is, in this sense, less mystified than those of the sighted characters who pursue it.

Colour, Paint, and the Aesthetics of Loss in Lefteri

Afra's former vocation as a painter makes her blindness particularly resonant as aesthetic loss. Colour—the most purely visual of aesthetic properties—is, for a painter, the primary medium of expression. Afra's blindness thus registers not only as a perceptual loss but as a creative and vocational loss of the first order. Lefteri develops this dimension of Afra's situation through a sustained meditation on colour as memory.

This recollection[17], preserved in Nuri's memory, is phenomenologically significant: Afra's pre-blindness relationship to colour was already, it seems, synesthetic - colour was for her a multi-sensory experience that involved taste and touch as much as sight. Her 'way of looking' was already, in some sense, a way of feeling. This retrospective detail suggests that the sensory redistribution that blindness enforces was, for Afra, already implicit in her painterly perception.

The white-on-white paintings that Afra produces after losing her sight are, in this context, not merely symptoms of trauma but aesthetic statements. White-on-white—the tradition of Kazimir Malevich, Robert Rauschenberg, is a form that negates colour while foregrounding materiality: the texture of the canvas, the raised surface of the paint. Afra's white paintings, read through this art-historical lens, are not the absence of perception but a radical reduction of it to pure tactile materiality.

This moment[18] captures the paradox of Afra's creative practice after blindness: she paints through touch rather than sight, reading the canvas as a tactile text. The braille simile is not merely illustrative but theoretically precise: braille is a system in which reading and writing are tactile rather than visual operations. To paint 'like a blind person reading braille' is to have discovered a mode of aesthetic production that is genuinely non-visual - not a diminished version of sighted painting but a different practice entirely.

Comparative Synthesis: Two Models of Non-Visual Being

The comparative analysis pursued across this paper has produced a structural contrast between two models of non-visual experience in contemporary war fiction:

Marie-Laure (Doerr): Sensory Expansion. Lifelong blindness, supported by skilled and empowering caregiving, in a contextually stable early environment, produces a subject whose non-visual perceptual world is rich, systematic, and ultimately more reliable under conditions of crisis than vision itself. Marie-Laure's aesthetics of perception is characterised by accumulation, precision, and confident embodied mastery.

Afra (Lefteri): Sensory Collapse. Traumatic blindness, occurring in a context of extreme violence and sustained displacement, without stable spatial environment or consistently empowering care, produces a subject whose perceptual engagement with the world is fragmented, intermittent, and haunted by what cannot be seen. Afra's aesthetics of perception is characterised by erasure, withdrawal, and the somatic memory of intolerable visibility.

These two models are not, however, simply positive and negative versions of the same thing. Marie-Laure's sensory expansion comes at the cost of invisibility. She is consistently underestimated by sighted characters, including German officers who fail to perceive her as a threat. Afra's sensory collapse is simultaneously a form of resistance - a refusal of a world that has shown itself to be unbearable. In both cases, the novels' ethical complexity lies in their refusal to reduce non-visual experience to a simple verdict.

Both novels also converge in their formal argument: that narrative prose can and must develop aesthetic strategies for representing non-visual perception, strategies that go beyond the conventional visual ekphrasis of mainstream fiction. The tactile precision of Doerr's prose and the epistemological ambiguity of Lefteri's focalisation are formal achievements that correspond to the phenomenological arguments this paper has traced.

Furthermore, both texts are deeply embedded in the politics of twentieth- and twenty-first-century warfare. They suggest and this is perhaps their most significant shared claim—that the violence of modern warfare is, among other things, a violence against perception: against the capacity to see the world with confidence, to navigate it with competence, to inhabit it with pleasure. Blindness, whether physiological or psychological, is one of the forms that this perceptual violence takes in its survivors.

Conclusion

Blindness in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* and *All the Light We Cannot See* is not merely a narrative device or a symbolic supplement to the novels' thematic concerns with war, memory, and loss. It is, as this paper has argued, a profound reconfiguration of perception—one that challenges the oculocentrism of both literary aesthetics and cultural epistemology, and that opens onto alternative modes of knowing, navigating, and aesthetically engaging with the world.

By bringing phenomenological philosophy, critical disability studies, and sensory theory to bear on close readings of key passages from both primary texts, the paper has demonstrated that the two novels construct non-visual experience in divergent but equally sophisticated ways. Marie-Laure's blindness produces a sensory aesthetics of precision, accumulation, and embodied confidence; Afra's blindness produces a sensory aesthetics of erasure, fragmentation, and traumatic withdrawal. Together, these two models constitute a significant contribution to the literary representation of disability in war fiction—and to the broader project of developing an aesthetics of perception that takes multi-sensory embodiment seriously as a mode of aesthetic value.

The framework of aesthetics of perception proposed here has applications beyond the specific texts examined. As disability studies, phenomenology, and sensory history continue to influence literary scholarship, the tools developed in this paper pay close attention to narrative focalisation as sensory mediation, to prose style as formal enactment of perceptual world, to care relationships as determinants of perceptual capacity may prove productive for the analysis of a wide range of literary representations of non-normative embodiment.

Such a reconfiguration of perception also aligns with the broader claim that aesthetic experience exceeds the visual domain; as Yuriko Saito argues, “aesthetic experience permeates everyday life” (Saito 3), including those sensory modes often marginalised within dominant visual culture.

Blindness is not darkness. It is, as both Doerr and Lefteri insist in their different ways, a different light - one that illuminates aspects of the world that the dominance of vision has kept in the shadows.

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