



Notes on Blindness Discussion Guide

Directors: Pete Middleton, James Spinney

Year: 2016

Time: 90 min

You might know these directors from:

This is the debut feature-length film from both of these directors.

FILM SUMMARY

Theologian John Hull was no stranger to the concept of blindness. Having temporarily lost his eyesight as a child, he knew what it was like to suddenly be submerged into darkness. Once his vision returned, however, the memory of this experience faded into the background. When his eyesight left him once and for all at the age of 48, he endured a grueling trip to the bottom of his now permanent blindness.

At first very little made sense to this logical, academic man. “How could this happen to me?” He asked himself time and again. In shock and denial, he stated, “Every time I wake up, I lose my sight.” Submerged in a world of dark confusion, he scrambled to collect tools to help him along the uncharted path into the land of the non-visual. Although he had lost his vision, he did still have the power of his words, the strength of sound, and a lot of cassette tapes. Over the course of his first three years of blindness, Hull recorded his thoughts, impressions, and frustrations on tape, 16 hours in total, naming them “Notes on Blindness.”

Co-directors Pete Middleton and James Spinney mined those tapes, taking on the challenging task of translating Hull’s experiences onto film. As they were visualizing the unseen, Hull discovered additional audio material— family memories translated into the soundscape— that helped the directors first create a 3-minute film, then a 12-minute version, and now the sensory intense feature-length NOTES ON BLINDNESS.

A profound personal account of a solitary experience, NOTES ON BLINDNESS shines a light on the mind’s eye, introducing a world where rain, laughter, wind, and footsteps supersede visual impressions. With a delicately sublime soundtrack and impeccable reenactments, NOTES ON BLINDNESS offers the closest thing to blindness many sighted people may ever know, echoing into the darkest reaches of the human spirit.

FILM THEMES

A rational man, John Hull was uprooted and unsettled by his sudden blindness, attacking his notion of the world and forcing him to rewrite his life's rulebook. NOTES ON BLINDNESS takes us there with him.

DENIAL VS. ACCEPTANCE

When John first went blind, he felt suspended in disbelief, imagining that this was nothing more than a surreal side show he would soon escape. Frustration and anger overran his existence. "I felt as if I was banging my head, my whole body, against the wall of blindness, with a desperate need to break through this curtain, this veil that was surrounding me and come out into the world of light out there," he declared. In denial, he attempted to alter rather than embrace reality, until he understood, "I had to think about blindness. I realized if I didn't understand it, it would defeat me." Employing logic, patience, and inner strength, John accepted his blindness, enabling a new life to flourish within.

NOSTALGIA VS. REALITY

"What one is refusing to accept is a fact. Now what I have to face is the fact that there is no escape, that I'll just have to go on." Thus were John's words as he crossed over into accepting the here and now of his existence, the reality that he no longer had his sense of sight. "Was I going to live in reality or nostalgia?," he declared, understanding that the power of the past had been disabling him from moving forwards. By removing his rose-colored glasses of the past and coming into the present, John's mind blossomed, and a world he had never known presented itself, complete with an infinite reach of possibilities.

UNKNOWN VS. PREDICTABLE

Vision informed John's life, and he relied on this sense to fill in the contours of his existence. Once he lost his sight, the world was an unknown, frightening entity. "One fights back by adopting tiny techniques of familiarity, predictability, the same objects, the same little movements of the hand," John stated. "One has to establish some sort of environment." He adjusted to his home, making it a safe place where he could function. When he traveled to Australia and had no fixed objects to rely on, his sense of self was deeply uprooted, and uncertainty and depression stepped in. As John displayed, the human psyche relies on a degree of predictability in order to function in a healthy manner.

VISUALIZING THE UNSEEN

John kept an audio diary to document his experience of blindness, an invaluable resource to which the blind can relate and from which the sighted can learn. Putting this unseen world onto film offered a profound challenge. How could a light be shone on darkness? How could the filmmakers visualize what they had never seen? By employing dramatized reenactments and having actors lip-synch John and Marilyn's words, a believable approximation of the blind experience was established. By calling on the viewer's imagination and subtly requesting that the sense of hearing override sight, NOTES ON BLINDNESS filmically dramatizes blindness and gives dimension to the unknown.

"There is something so totally purging about blindness, that one is either destroyed or renewed. Your consciousness is evacuated. Your past memories, your interests, your perception of time. Place itself. The world itself. One must recreate one's life."

John Hull

"It's a gift. It's not a gift I want. It's not a gift I want my children to have, but it is a gift."

John Hull

FILM FACTS:

- NOTES ON BLINDNESS, along with the accompanying virtual reality project of the same name, premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival. One of the awards the film was granted was a Tribeca Film Festival Storyscapes Award.
- John Hull was born in 1935 in Australia. His father was a minister and mother was a teacher. He lived there until 1959, when he moved to the UK to study theology at the University of Cambridge. He taught at the University of Birmingham until he retired in 2002. Hull first developed cataracts at age 13 and went completely blind for a few months. After regaining his sight, he became totally blind in his left eye at 17. His vision in his right eye was fine until 35, but then began deteriorating until 1983, when at 48, he became completely blind. Hull died at the age of 80 after suffering a serious fall.
- Hull had four children with Marilyn. His first daughter, Imogen, is from a previous marriage.
- While researching the blind experience of snowfall, co-directors came across Hull's book "Touching the Rock." They interviewed him and asked for the tapes mentioned in the book's forward, which Hull sent to them. Hull's story inspired them to create a 3-minute film version in 2013, a 12-minute short the following year, this feature length film, and a virtual reality project.
- Hull kept an audio diary from 1983 for a period of three years, recording over 16 hours of material.
- According to the WHO, 285 million people worldwide are visually impaired; 39 million of those are completely blind. 82% of blind individuals are over the age of 50, and 90% of the visually impaired live in developing countries.
- Fewer than 2% of the visually impaired use a white cane to navigate. Most use nothing, while some use a guide dog, which is unable to tell if a traffic light is green or red. In this case the person listens for traffic and decides when to go. If a car is approaching, the dog refuses to walk.
- The co-directors were working from Hull's audio recordings entitled "Notes on Blindness" when beginning the film. Then Hull came across many other recordings from his family, including Imogen's weather reports, the trip to Australia, and Marilyn's words. These tapes helped form the outline of the film and inform the chronology.
- The virtual reality project "Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness" is a multi-platform interactive project created alongside the documentary and is made up of four chapters. The viewer is placed in a fixed location and allowed to turn backwards and forwards. Each scene addresses a specific memory, moment, and location from Hull's audio diary, using audio and real-time 3D animations.
- The filmmakers have an extensive outreach program running alongside the film, including developing new approaches to accessible filmmaking, making film more available to all.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share NOTES ON BLINDNESS with others. Although we strongly urge the feature-length format as the best way to delve into issues, this film also comes in two shorter versions: [3-minutes](#) and [12-minutes](#), a great way to inspire your time-deprived friends and family.
2. Read one of John Hull's many books, including "Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness," inspired by his audio recordings, and "On Sight and Insight: A Journey into the World of Blindness."
3. Experience the [virtual reality project](#) connected to the film, an ambitious attempt to immerse viewers into the mind of a blind individual and bridge the gap between the sighted and blind worlds.
4. Learn about how [Audio Description](#) and the [MovieReading app](#) are making the visual images of theater, television, movies, and other art forms more accessible to all.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.