4. Upon the Formation of a Visual Variety of the Human Race

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In New York City, a father and daughter sat in a café people-watching out the window and drinking coffee.

"Look across the street," signed the father.

His daughter quickly scoped the busy street packed with people hustling to and fro before quizzically looking back at her dad.

"One of them is deaf . . . which one is it?" he asked.

She looked back and scanned the crowd. She noticed one man's eyes glancing from side to side. "The one with the brown overcoat," she guessed.

"I agree. Let's watch and see," he suggested.

The man in the brown overcoat was about to cross the street, but sensed the sudden shift in the crowd of people around him as they simultaneously looked in the same direction. He decided he too should check in that direction and saw sirens and flashing lights accompanying a speeding ambulance. After the commotion subsided, he crossed the street and continued walking past the café. The father waved his hands in the man's periphery. In the middle of a bustling city, the man in the brown overcoat noticed a flutter of hands through the window and quickly turned to see the father and his daughter.

"You deaf?" signed the father.

The man was astounded and asked, "How did you know?"

People of the Eye

The characters in this short story are unique in that they inhabit a highly visual world. They use a visual language to communicate and have developed a visual system of adaptation to orient them in the world that defines their way of being.1 This is not an unusual story. Episodes like this have been shared and reported all over the world. The claim that deaf people are highly visual and tactile is not a new concept. It has been stated time and time again in various sources—both in writing and through the air ("wholly"). The most notable statement came from George Veditz, who eloquently communicated at the National Association of the Deaf convention in Colorado in 1910, "[Deaf people] are first, last and of all time the people of the eye."2

The strongest support for the notion put forward by Veditz (and others) is the emergence of a visual-gestural language. Since the dawn of time, whenever and wherever
there were deaf people on earth, a visual communication system (using gestures, mime, and hand signs) would be developed to convey thoughts, feelings, desires, and ideas. Although there is no written record of this phenomenon from ancient times, one of the earliest recorded observations of deaf people using gestures and signs is found in Plato's Cratylus. In ensuing dialogue between Socrates, Hermogones, and Cratylus on issues of names and language, Socrates made an observation in reference to deaf people using gestures/signs in Athens around 400 to 350 BCE:

Suppose that we had no voice or tongue, and wanted to communicate with one another. Should we not, like the deaf and dumb, make signs with the hands and head and the rest of the body?**

Observations of deaf people creating visual-gestural communication do not only occur in major metropolitan areas but also in isolated places around the globe from the jungles of the Amazon** to the many islands scattered all over the world's oceans. In essence this discussion highlights what Vedlitz also said a few years later in 1913, "As long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs.*

The desire and drive to create signs is deeply rooted in our fundamental human need for communication. The truth is "we cannot be truly human apart from communication... to impede communication is to reduce people to the status of things."** Deaf people, being of a human variety, have refused to be reduced to the status of things and have found ways to communicate visually and developed visual languages.** That is the essence of their being. All other things are constructed around this, channeled through and by vision.

The roots in visual-gestural languages have pushed the boundary of vision far beyond other human groups known.** This essay will draw from various bodies of research and observations to further demonstrate the significance of "vision" to the Deaf world.

The Use of Eyes in Language and Culture

Before looking at the role that vision and the use of eyes play in the language and culture of deaf people we need to realize two things: (1) there are people who are not deaf but are highly visual in the way they think, behave, and express themselves, and (2) unlike the ears, human eyes have communicative functions, which play a role in sending and receiving information. Almost all humans are able to display this duality. The size of pupils sends information on whether one is scared, interested, and so on. Droopy eyes send the signal of drowsiness.** However, among signing deaf people, the role of vision and the use of eyes expands exponentially. We must bear in mind that when using signed languages signers manifest many different kinesthetic features that are depicted visually: the body, head, hands, arms, facial expressions, and the physical space surrounding the signer and his/her eyes. The focus here will be on the role the eyes and vision have in linguistic and discourse exchanges and ways they are extended to other cultural and literary functions.

Various Eye Behaviors in Language

When signaling, the signer's eyes are always moving in a saccadic manner—rapid eye movements to and from fixation points to signal various linguistic information in different layers. The eye movement may occur over a single word to convey specific meaning, appear in sentences to indicate the spatial position of the object, signal constituent boundaries, bring the addressee in and out of a story world, and/or play a role in turn-taking. All saccadic movement happens in one brief exchange.

At the lexical level, the eye gaze may shift to correlate with the manual portion of a sign and convey additional meaning to the word. Sentence 1 shows an example of this co-occurrence with an adjective. In this sentence the signer looks at the addressee, then quickly shifts his gaze to the hands where the shortness of the cute boy is conveyed, and then shifts his gaze back to the addressee.

Sentence 1

gaze down

BOY CUTE SHORT.

Translation: The boy is short and cute.

(Note: No eye gaze transcription over a sign means the signer is looking at the addressee.)

At the syntactic level, the eyes play a critical role in relations to syntactic constituents, such as noun phrases and verb phrases in simple sentences. They have different functions depending on where in the sentence the eyes are being used. In noun phrases, the eyes can have function to convey the location and distance of an entity.** Eye gaze frequently accompanies the indexical sign that expresses definite determiners in ASL. The eyes gaze to the same location in space where the finger points: the location in space associated with the referent that is being referred back to, as seen in sentence 2.

Sentence 2

gaze left

IX-LEFT MAN WANT BUY YOUR CAR

Translation: The man (over there) wants to buy your car.

Indefinite reference in American Sign Language (ASL) is associated with a broader region in space than just a single point. So, for example the indefinite determiner SOMETHING / ONE is articulated by an upward pointing index finger moving in quick circles within a small region in space. The eye gaze that accompanies the indefinite determiner is also more diffused within that region of space. So, sentence 3 illustrates the distinction in that the definiteness/indefiniteness of the noun is reflected in the different types of eye gaze used.

Sentence 3

diffused gaze

SOMEONE MAN WANT BUY YOUR CAR

Translation: A man wants to buy your car.
In the verb phrase, the eyes used in tenseless (nonfinite) tense serve as nonmanual markers of syntactic object agreement.17 In sentence 4, the direction of the eye-gaze (to the left) marks the location associated with the object and augments the sentence by functioning as a nonmanual object agreement marker as it spreads across the verb phrase.

Sentence 4
gaze left

John love Mary.

Translation: John loves Mary.

When engaging in discourse, the listener usually fixes and maintains his gaze on the signer's face, particularly the eyes, thus creating a conversational partnership in regulating different discourse functions. As previously mentioned, the signer's eyes are constantly moving in a saccadic manner to convey various linguistic purposes. This eye movement continues throughout the exchange. The signer gazes away from the addressee (-gaze) for various linguistic and discourse-related reasons and gazes back to the addressee (+gaze) to check on him/her, to keep him/her involved, and/or to give a turn.18 This "checking mechanism" often happens at points that are identified as constituent boundaries or lines.17 In a situation where the addressee wants to initiate a turn, he will place his hands in the signer's visual field, wait until the signer is gazing at him (+gaze), and then start signing. In a heated exchange, the signer can maintain his role by minimizing the number of times he performs +gaze. By doing this he minimizes the chances of being interrupted.18

The dynamics of a classroom involve more complex turn-taking strategies where the teacher usually assumes the role of a regulator. In the case of signing classes, this equation has been observed: the more fluent the teacher is with visual communication signals, the more fluid classroom discourse will be. These teachers maintain a clear distinction between two forms of gazes: individual gaze (I-gaze) and group gaze (G-gaze).19

In a classroom, the two different gazes serve different functions, for instance, when the teacher wants to address a particular student he employs the I-gaze at that student, by keeping his eyes transfixed to that student (with allowance for saccadic linguistic markers), and maintains mutual eye contact while engaging in questions and answers. When the teacher wants to talk to the class as a whole his gaze is less transfixed and more diffused as he addresses the whole group. The teacher will also sweep his gaze and head around the group to address all of the students. Handling this distinction between the two types of classroom eye gaze has been problematic for nonfluent signing teachers and has caused misunderstandings between the teacher and student. For example, a teacher used an I-gaze at one particular student when he was actually addressing the whole class. Signing "Please pay attention when I am talking" with the eye gaze at one particular student will likely result in the student responding "I have been paying attention: why are you picking on me?"20

While telling a story, a signer typically does not relinquish his/her turn to the audience. Instead the expectation is that the storyteller maintains his/her turn until the story is completed. Thus, the role of eye gaze, while still vital to engaging the listener/audience, takes a somewhat different form. In addition to the constant saccadic shifts that fall within the categories described above, e.g., using eye gaze for lexical and syntactic purposes, the teller uses eye gaze in a constructed action/dialogue, to present information from the point of view of a character in the story. This type of eye gaze serves a major function in storytelling. The teller assumes various characters' gazes while signing his/her actions and incorporates reciprocal gazes to clearly represent dialogues between two or more characters in a story. At a more global level, the teller brings the story world up right before the addressees' eyes, and eye gaze serves to modulate between the narrator's perspective, the story world, and the more "direct" depiction of events through the eyes of a character.21 In addition, closer scrutiny allows one to see that the teller's rhythmic gaze from the story world to the audience serves as a device for narrating narrative units in a formulaic sense.22

There are eye behaviors, other than gaze directions or saccadic movements, that play additional roles in the language that are worth mentioning here. While accompanying various spatial-related signs the aperture of the eyelids can also convey a sense of weariness or farness. When the eyes widen in association with a lexical item it conveys closeness, whereas the squinting of the eyelids conveys distance. Another behavior includes the way the closure of the eyes with a word conveys an emphasis; this has been identified as emphatic eye closure.22

Another type of eye behavior involves eye blinks in sentences. If one looks at the site where eye blinks occur with regularity one will find signers blink their eyes in constituent boundaries that are between the noun phrases and verb phrases and at the end of sentences as shown in sentence 5.24

Sentence 5
blink blink

Last night John visit Mary.

Translation: Last night John visited Mary.

The proposition that the role of eyes used for signaling communicative function among signing deaf people is expanded exponentially is thus confirmed. The essence of what may appear as simple eye-gazing behavior is in fact part of a complex multilayered linguistic system in ASL. That is, the signer's eyes are always moving in a saccadic manner to signal various linguistic information in different layers from a single word to interactions with a large group.

Visual Language and the Brain

Oliver Sacks, a renowned neurologist and author, was astounded at the complexity and multilayered role that eyes play in conjunction with sign production.23 He commented, "One can have a dozen or a dozen and a half, grammatical modifications, done simultaneously, one on top of the other, and when this comes home to me, the neurologist in me was amused. I thought: that's impossible. How the hell can the brain analyze..."
eighteen simultaneous visual patterns." I was filled with a sort of neurological awe. The answer to this, briefly, is that the normal brain can't make such visual analysis, but it can learn to do so. 28

There are a number of neurological studies examining the interactive function of signed language, vision, and the brain that support Sacks's observation. In this essay the focus is on three research areas that portray this learned visual way of being: (1) peripheral vision, (2) spatial processing tasks, and (3) rapidly presented visual information tasks.

Since the 1980s several studies have looked at peripheral vision of deaf people through electroencephalograms (EEGs) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRIs). The results have consistently shown that signers have superior attention to the peripheral visual space. 27 This scientific proof gave legitimacy to what has been known in the Deaf community for a long time. The story in the beginning of this essay showed how the man in the brown overcoat was able to use his peripheral vision to "navigate" his way in the world of sound. This attention to the periphery develops at a very early age in children. One personal observation concerns my daughter when she was three and a half. She was engaged in a conversation with an adult seated across from her at the dining room table. I was seated to her right (in her periphery). They were going over the names of her classmates in preschool. I supplied a name sign hoping to clarify and help out the adult. My daughter quickly looked away from the adult and corrected the way I produced that particular classmate's name. I was astonished that at age three and a half, she was able to recognize the name sign error I made out of her peripheral line of vision. Her facility using peripheral vision is further evidence in support of the claim that signers have superior attention in this area.

Several spatial processing tasks were also done comparing native signers of ASL with nonsigners. The tasks required subjects to recall, compare, and identify various mental and visual images. They include being able to quickly identify, generate, and transform mental and mirror images. 28 Tests include spatial cognition tasks in nonverbal IQ tests such as block designs, a subtest of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 29 and recognition and matching an array of six faces oriented and shadowed differently with the target face. 30 These spatial processing tasks show that native signers of ASL perform better than nonsigners. 31

Another task focused on the ability of deaf people to recognize rapidly presented visual information. Researchers created a videotaped test of invented Chinese characters written in the air with tiny light bulbs attached to a hand. The videotape was shown to a group of deaf and hearing Chinese first graders. The tasks required students to maintain in memory the path traced rapidly, analyze into component strokes, and finally reproduce on paper. The deaf signing first graders significantly outperformed their hearing counterparts. 32

However, the perception tasks discussed above do not require knowledge or use of signed languages. However, comparative results show that the native signers had a consistent advantage when performing the tasks. These studies reinforce the notion that signing deaf people make better use of vision.

In Culture and Literature

The visual way of being in the world described thus far is carried over into the cultural values, consciousness, social spaces, and literatures of signers. 33 Recall the story in the beginning of this essay, where the father and daughter were able to identify the man in the brown overcoat as deaf out of thousands of people on the bustling city street. They noticed the subtleties that only members of this culture (those who share the visual experience) can see. The first visual cue was the way the man in the brown overcoat was orienting himself in the streets of New York City by executing saccadic eye and head movements. The father and daughter knew from observing the synchrony of these movements that there was something uniquely familiar about this man; something that is visible only to deaf people. This man had what is known in the community as "deaf eyes." The daughter's guess that the man in the brown overcoat was "the" deaf man was confirmed by observing how he read the world.

Visual-Cultural Adaptations

There are different sets of learned behaviors and adaptive systems that are passed on with respect to "reading the world." One learns to engage in observing, looking, and eventually seeing that sound has ways of bouncing off visual cues. I remember my father's advice as I was growing up. He would sign, "Observe others around you; if you notice them looking in one direction, something is happening over there. This is not limited to people walking, but also driving. If cars in front of you slow down or stop at an intersection when the light is green, do not attempt to pass without checking around you because this is a telltale sign of an oncoming ambulance or police in the intersection." My father also noted that pets and/or other animals are able to broadcast auditory cues. My wife and I are able to "hear" our kids coming down the stairs or playing upstairs when they are supposed to be in bed by noticing our pets (cats and dog) perk up from their sleep and glance at the space behind us. When I walk my dog in the woods I often "hear" things by noticing her glances in particular directions. Another "visual rule" my father hammered into me as a child was the necessity of looking back every time you leave a room or place. "You never know if someone may need your attention, so it is a courtesy to look behind you to check with others before you leave." I also learned the significance of periphery as an integral part of reading the world. The man in the overcoat used it to respond to the father through the café window just as my three and a half-year-old daughter used it to correct me when I incorrectly produced her friend's name sign.

When we look at social spaces we see that the proxemics or social distance between interlocutors is at a distance that is comfortable for the eyes. When more than two people are involved, the spacing arrangement between signers becomes triangular. When additional signers join the conversation the circle becomes larger, and always maintains visual sight lines of one another. At conferences or sporting events it is common to see many circles forming throughout the lobby and people maintaining appropriate visual proxemics.
Visual Symbolism in Arts and Literature

In this section we look at ways the visual experience permeates into the arts and literature by looking at some symbols: doors, windows, light, and night. Although the signing community shares many established symbols in various arts and literary works with the majority culture, there are some idiosyncratic representations that are indigenous among signers. Examination of these symbols provides insight into the consciousness that binds the community.

Doors and Windows

The attributes of doors and windows are often tied to visual permeability, which for our purpose is connected to language modality. A large number of "Deaf" narratives, especially narratives of personal experiences, have recurrent themes of protagonists being caught, shut in, or locked out behind doors. Conflicts arise because of the opaqueness of doors, which makes them inaccessible transporters of visual elements and language modalities. In seeking resolution, the protagonists try various visual extensions of sound to get the attention of the party "on the other side." More conflicts arise when these extensions fail and the ultimate solution is almost always found through a window of some sort. Windows are permeable: protagonists wave through windows, throw objects at windows, and climb up to windows in order to communicate. As conveyors of light, windows are conveyors of visual communication.

In terms of communication permeability, doors are to hearing people what windows are to deaf people. Though they do impede the process, hearing people can communicate through closed doors because they allow the transmission of sound. Otherwise, there would be no "knock knock" jokes. Their prevalence in the hearing community speaks volumes. There is even a Web site devoted exclusively to knock-knock jokes (www.knock-knock-joke.com). Here is an example of conversations happening through doors:

Knock Knock!
Who’s there?
Doris.
Doris, who?
Doris locked, that’s why I had to knock!

Knock-knock jokes are almost nonexistent in the Deaf signing community; for Deaf people the exchange stops at "knock knock." Windows, on the other hand, silence hearing people. Generally, hearing people have difficulty carrying on conversations through closed windows. One scene in the mockumentary film This is Spinal Tap, about a heavy metal band in decline, effectively demonstrates this point. There is a scene involving the heavy metal band riding in the back of a limousine whose driver incessantly and fanatically rambles about Frank Sinatra to them. An annoyed member of the band presses the button closing the power window behind the driver in order to shut him up. The impermeability and divisiveness of windows as a conductor of speech communication is echoed in "The Ebony Tower," by John Fowles: "The cruelty of glass: as transparent as air as divisive as steel." Thus, even though nond deaf people can see each other, communication is assumed to be blocked if the auditory channel is reduced as is the case with a closed window. In comparison, windows allow visual communication for signers in this story demonstrates:

A deaf couple stops by a supermarket to pick up a few items on their way home. As they pull into the shopping center, they realize that their two-year-old child has fallen asleep. Rather than waking up the child, they agree that the mother should stay in the car and the father goes in for the items they need. As he shops, the father realizes he is not sure which type of herbal tea his wife wanted. So, he goes to the front of the store, past the cashiers and waves through the window to get the answer to his question. The mother notices someone waving inside the store and looks up. Through two sets of windows (the store window and car window) they clarify exactly the kind of tea she wants. As he turns to go back to the aisle where teas are shelved, he notices all the people around the cashier staring at him wondering what he was doing.
At a stoplight a deaf man noticed that the driver of the car to his left had rolled down the passenger window. The deaf man turned to find the driver asking, "May I have the time?" which the deaf man was able to lip-read.

The deaf man glanced at his wristwatch and gestured (by holding up five on one hand and an index finger on the other hand) "six."

The hearing driver shook his head and said, "Roll down the window."

The deaf man rolled down his window and repeated the gesture "six."

The hearing man finally got it.42

The humorous tale above is a spoof on hearing people and their helplessness when it comes to communicating through windows. There was no change in the way the deaf person expressed himself. The visual message was the same; it only became "louder" to the hearing person when the gesture was done through an open window.

There are also several poems that incorporate the use of doors and/or windows. Consider Ella Lentz's poem "The Door."43 This creative work describes deaf people breaking free from the bondage of oralism, sheltering themselves in a room with a heavily secured door. Later in the poem, someone bangs on the door and the deaf person in the room wonders who it could be. Finally, one person goes to open the door, but the other cautions this person saying, "You don't know who it could be!" The role of the door as a "passage" takes on additional meaning here. In this case, as in other literary works, it represents taking a risk, opening the door to an inaccessible unknown.

In a performance entitled "Doors for Sale: Audism in the Deaf World,"44 I told various stories and talked about doors as a metaphor for oppression and barriers in the Deaf world and proposed their elimination. After all, unless you can hear, one never knows who stands on the other side. Soon after my presentation I received this e-mail from John Lee Clark.

I recalled a 1921 obituary in the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf's school paper, "The Companion." You know, in those days deaf families would have hearing neighbors who they'd go to if they needed important calls made. Well, one night this fellow's wife became very sick and urged her husband to go over to the next house to have the widow there call the doctor. He goes over there and knocks on the door. No reply. More knocking. Still no reply. More knocking—BOOM!—The guy is shot dead. The widow was calling "Who's there?" and grew panicky when she got no response and she got the rifle and simply shot through the door. So you can say that at least one door killed a deaf person. A window would've saved his life. Even a small window, bullet-hole sized like a peephole, would've been enough to save his life. I've thought about that story now and then, but now it has a new significance for me.45

A similar application of these literary analyses to visual arts adds new perspectives on several paintings by the late Harry R. Williams. In these paintings, doors are featured in the middle of landscapes.46 Coffin Door (Figure 4.1) is one example. In this picture, we see a door shaped like a coffin (resembling one at Gallaudet University) directly in the middle of beautiful seascape, blocking its visual continuity and obstructing the view. A hand enfolds (from behind) the top of the door suggesting that someone is behind it. This dramatizes the situation, yet we never know who it is. In the left of the door the distance is a picture window of the city of Los Angeles. In the foreground is a rowboat, presumably ready to travel toward the window suggesting an orientation toward the visible.47

As we further extend the symbols it is important to note that doors and windows are parts of a dwelling. If we consider the human body "a dwelling" it creates an interesting metaphor related to particular signs that clearly resemble doors and windows. The sign...
DOOR (Figures 4.2 and 4.3) is done with the same “B” hand shape and palm orientation as the formal sign DEAF (Figures 4.4 and 4.5). The sign for WINDOW (Figures 4.6 and 4.7) is made with the same hand shape and palm orientation as the signs EYES SHUT and EYES OPEN shown in Figures 4.8 and 4.9 respectively. It is doubtful whether the association is intentional, but the natural relationships of these parallels are worth pursuing. It is beyond question that they further contribute to a pattern of symbolic representations of visual communication and opacity. But, interestingly, unlike real windows, the sign WINDOW cannot be seen through. Thus, the abstract representation loses something that is in the real world.

LIGHT AND NIGHT
Light and absence of light (i.e., night) is another constant theme that’s widely reported and acknowledged. The theme of light is permeated in various forms of Deaf life from the way different organizations/companies name themselves (e.g., DawnSignPress, www.lighthitchen.com, etc.) to the folk explanations of why Deaf people gather in the kitchen. The common saying is they do that because the lights are brighter in the kitchen. This may be true but it is also true for many hearing people of other cultures. The issue is deeper than that because light is a deeply ingrained value for those leading a visual way of being. Light, like windows, signifies the ability to communicate, and when one communicates one belongs. And when one belongs, one is at home in the world.

Ladd reports of Deaf people assembling around a lamppost long after clubs closed for the night in the UK. Similar observations have been noted elsewhere. In fact, after the “Doors for Sale” performance in Minnesota, a security guard, apparently well advised, began to turn off the lights in the auditorium and then the lobby, managing to herd a bunch of deaf people out of the building. Instead of going home, as one would expect, they all congregated around a lamppost in the parking lot. As I was observing this procession, a young woman came up to me and asked this question, “What do Deaf people and moths have in common?”

Peters noticed that the consistency of light as a theme and symbol is illuminated in various Deaf literary works—from the “birth of the community,” light is prominent in the story of how Épée came upon the two young deaf sisters one night in front of a fireplace, to the presence of and absence of light as symbol in various literary works from ASL Poetry (e.g., Valls’s “Bright Windy Morning”) to ASL narratives (e.g., Bahari’s “Bird of a Different Feather”).

In the end of “Bird of a Different Feather,” the surgically altered bird, unable to fit in either world (the eagle and the bird world), decided to fly away into the sunset followed by darkness. To many the symbol interpretation of night in this context is death. There is another possible way of interpreting the end of the story. Using a lens from those leading a visually oriented way of life, light takes on an additional meaning unlike those who hear, the absence of light makes things to be seen in communication. In essence
experience with tactile communication it is like being removed from the world, unbound and alone in the world of night, as a theme or symbol in literature, one can say in the context of visual communication, night is to doors as light is to windows.

Reflection

The thoughts accumulated for this essay—though not comprehensive—show how signing Deaf people acquire this multilayered visual way of being in the world beyond the capacity of ordinary eyes. They inhabit a highly visual sensory world and appear to be pushing the boundaries of vision far beyond limits known by other human groups. The push springs from the innate human need to communicate. This desire is essential and powerful enough to cause a domino effect in the following areas:

- In language: We have seen the emergence and flourishing of visual languages (using space and physical phonological building blocks) as well as the role of eyes inside and outside the linguistic, discourse, and neurological system.
- In culture: We have discussed examples of ways the culture offers suggestions to lead a visually encompassed life.
- In arts and literature: We have examined some recurrent themes and symbols associated to vision.

This just scratches the surface of the potential for vision and visuality. And in terms of examining Deaf people's sensory worlds, we have not yet explored in depth or discussed another territory that has been told in countless life stories and anecdotes—on the ways Deaf people develop tactile minds. This is another dimension definitely worth exploring.

In retrospect I can't help but wonder about the "what life," because it has taken society so long to acknowledge the role of vision and signed languages in the lives of Deaf people. So many generations of signers have been handicapped in a society intoxicated by the ideology that speech is language and vice versa. It is amazing that with these impositions, Deaf people have developed into one of the most visual groups of people on the face of the Earth. One wonders what the possibilities would be if they were allowed to proceed in life unbounded. How far would this human variety push the boundaries of vision?

Notes

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1. Edward Hall, The Hidden Dimension (New York: Anchor, 1982), states "people of different cultures not only speak different languages but, what is possibly most important, inhabit different sensory worlds" (22).

2. George Veltz, "President's Message," in Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the National Association of the Deaf and the Third World Congress of the Deaf, 1990 (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Press, 1992), 30. George Veltz used the phrase "people of the eye" at least twice. The text can be found in his president's message in the congress, "all were Mother Nature designed for the people of the eye, a language" (22).

3. The discussion here refers to those who were born deaf or became deaf in their infancy.


10. Over the course of human history, the social perception of gestures and sign language swayed from being acceptable to not acceptable. In the later part of Western civilization (from the mid-nineteenth century to today) many have held that the uses of gestures and sign language were not language per se or have no significant social value, and have imposed restrictions on its development and use; see for example Douglas Baynson, Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

11. See for example C. Channell, "Do the Deaf "See" Better? Effects of Deafness on Viscosity Skills" (masters thesis, McGill University, 1994), which argues that being deaf alone is not enough to see enhanced visual processing skills. The research suggests that it is the inclusion and use of sign language that enables this enhancement.

12. For more discussion of this function, see Hall, Hidden Dimension, and Martin Jay, Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

13. The term "word" is used in this essay instead of "sign" to reduce the need for such distinction because there is no difference. A human utterance is a human utterance whether signed or spoken.


15. In the case of first-person object, the eye gaze will mark the subject. For more information, see Ben Baner, "Non-manual Realization of Agreement in American Sign Language," in Neele et al., Syntax of American Sign Language.