Rethinking Disability

World Perspectives in Culture and Society
Patrick Devlieger, Beatriz Miranda-Galarza, Steven E. Brown & Megan Strickfaden (Eds.)

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Light in the Borderlands: A Film Created by Three Legally Blind Urban Explorers

Adolfo Ruiz & Megan Strickfaden

*Light in the Borderlands* is a short film that documents a series of conversations and explorations of the built environment with participants who are legally blind (Ruiz and Strickfaden 2013). The notion of legal blindness as a borderland is based on Beth Omansky’s book, *Borderlands of Blindness*. Omansky discusses the unique “phenomenological and sociocultural experiences” of legally blind individuals as “vastly different from those of either sighted or totally blind people” (2011:15). Throughout the book, Omansky is critical of the “medically constructed blindness/sightedness binary”, and explores how “legally blind people move back and forth across the unique border between the sighted and blind worlds” (2011:184). Using Omansky’s framework as a starting point, this project presents research in an alternative format, using techniques similar to photo voice combined with ethnographic film that goes beyond traditional methods of participant-observation (Pink 2004). The film is an exploration into the experiences and perceptions of legally blind people from their points of view. In taking an approach that is outside the medical model of disability in which “society perceives legal blindness as pathology” (Omansky 2011:11), the research and film discussed in this chapter provides interpretations based on social and cultural models by exploring legal blindness through an open-ended series of conversations and co-designed urban explorations. Throughout this research, participants not only told their stories, but also determined geographic context, and often controlled the specific methods of documentation.

The spaces explored in this project consist of interior spaces within the city of Edmonton, Alberta in Canada. Three locations were visited, one with each participant, in the making of this film. Each space was selected by the participant and reflects the lifestyle and interests of each individual. The choice of location determined the topics of conversation, and activities through which each story emerged. Eleanor (participant 1) recorded her comments as she described some of the effects of light while walking through a shopping environment. She described a space where, for her, lighting conditions are constantly changing and dynamic. Shafi (participant 2) reflected on his childhood and his love of art during a visit to an art gallery. He described a world of transitions between sightedness and sightlessness. Carol (participant 3) visited a gym and interpreted her participation in a dance class from the perspective of a hand-held camera. She illustrated the dynamic nature of movement while sharing her story of how she lost her sight.
Setting the Stage

As a short film, *Light in the Borderlands* seeks new ways of representing the intimate worlds (Pink 2004) of blindness that reflect “intercultural” and “hybrid” forms of cinema (Marks 2000:8). In *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Laura Marks talks about experimental films and videos that “attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge” (2000:1). *Light in the Borderlands* is therefore about a territory described by both Marks (2000) and Omansky (2011) as a vague and undetermined place. This film deals with the borderland between two cultures, in this case that of sightedness and blindness, in which people “are pressed to migrate back and forth across its border from situation to situation” (Omansky 2011:185).
The aim of our film project was to collaborate with members of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) in the creation of a short documentary film. Through this collaborative project it was our intention as researchers to move outside of a medical model of disability by exploring the built environment from the perspective of legally blind participants. This investigation was open-ended and largely controlled by participants as they provided geographic context, methods of documentation and verbal content for the film. The participants are the storytellers. Researchers in Human Ecology and Art and Design at the University of Alberta initiated, organized and edited this project and, as such, the film is also reflexive; the researchers reflect on their own “experiences and practices mirrored and contrasted” to their participants (Pink 2004:26). In describing our co-creative collaboration, this chapter illustrates the methodology and meaning behind the making of the film and this project in general.

Co-creative and Emancipatory Approaches

The participants were recommended by the CNIB, Edmonton branch. The project was introduced, during an initial telephone conversation, as an exploration into how the built environment is navigated and perceived by people who are legally blind. The storytelling component of this project was also discussed early on as the researcher explained the idea of co-creating a short documentary film that would be recorded by participants, and edited by the research team.

In the making of this film participants speak of personal experiences while responding to the presence of the researcher. Hammersley and Atkinson suggest that this ethnographic response is expected as “in interviews the very structure of the interaction forces participants to be aware of the ethnographer as audience” (2007:176). From view point the researcher becomes an unheard voice, insinuated throughout the ethnography. The relationship between the participants and this unheard voice is intrinsically part of the story of Light in the Borderlands, the story of how the research evolved, the ethnographic encounter, and the dialogue behind the scenes.

The researcher’s voice is also expressed in the structuring of Light in the Borderlands. Though not heard in the film, this voice is implicit in the editing of image and sound. What is presented in the film as three continuous monologues is in fact the product of several hours of conversation, reflection, and casual chatting. The results of this verbal interaction were recorded and subsequently pieced together in order to tell each of the three stories. The choice to include specific parts of each interview and to omit the researcher’s voice was considered integral to the focus of this project; that is, to convey the urban experiences of participants. This type of “video research” is in line with Pink’s description that visual data collection is not objective and that it involves “collaboratively producing audio-visual representations of embodied sensory experiences with ones informants” (2004:37).

The first in-person meetings were scheduled at times and locations that were convenient for each participant. Two of these initial in-person meetings took place in public establishments (coffee shops), and one took place in the participant’s place of work. Each of the three meetings lasted approximately forty minutes. During most of this time, discussions loosely revolved around three questions: (1) how do you get around the city? (2) What three places do you most often visit within the city? (3) What three places do you most like to visit within the city? From each of these questions, a variety of discussions emerged, including inquiries about: places of work; cities previously lived in; preferred mode of transportation; and hobbies. The practice of
music was of considerable importance for all three individuals. In-depth discussions naturally branched off from the third question, which led to some of the most informal and personal parts of the conversation, providing a thick description of lived experiences (Holliday et al. 2010). This question also encouraged each participant to choose a location that was a significant urban space. Some of the participants chose places that were attractive or desirable, while all of them selected places that were familiar. The second meetings with each of the participants became the urban explorations part of this research, where discussions about the meanings of urban spaces would continue, and be documented.

The three participants chose an eclectic range of locations for their urban explorations: an art gallery; a shopping mall; a gym. Conversations at this stage of the research were primarily unstructured. In each of the three urban journeys there was an opportunity to explore the role of “place as an active trigger to prompt knowledge recollection and production” (Anderson 2004:254). While visiting the locations, participants described perceptual experiences and talked about personal memories that were associated with or triggered by the place. This combination of walking, documenting, and talking led to what Anderson describes as an opening up of “the senses to allow the recalling of incidents, feelings, and experiences” (2004:258). Each journey involved a walk through the chosen location. While walking, conversations were often triggered by lighting features, artwork, or memories of past visits. The “reciprocal relations between place, human identity and time” (Anderson 2004:258) were explored within the context of each space and led to the sharing of stories and recording of footage.

The narrative component of this project involved each participant sharing past experiences, and capturing digital video that provided the visual content for the film. Involving participants in the process of storytelling was inspired by Rod Michalko’s discussion of his own written work in which he “elevates blindness to the position of something that provokes thought” (1998:4). In the context of this research, storytelling plays an important role, not only in developing the film, but also in providing participants with an opportunity to share their unique lived experiences. According to Charlotte Linde, narrative plays a role in “the establishment of self” and is also “a major resource for conveying that self to and negotiating that self with others” (Linde 1999:98). Even though the technology of film invariably privileges vision and language (Pink 2004) we also acknowledged that embodied experiences might be transmitted or mediated through the camera. As such, we did not instruct the participants on how to hold or use the camera since we wished them to experience the filming in whatever way was suitable to them.

The notion of an emancipatory methodology was an important part of this research. Based on Paolo Freire’s (2006) ideas discussed in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, participants played an active role in this research by becoming co-investigators. Freire also refers to the necessity of “action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (2006:79). Adapted to Light in the Borderlands, Freire’s ideas are relevant as the “interviewer/interviewee power relation” (Anderson 2004:258) was addressed, not only through dialogue, but also by encouraging each participant to become a co-investigator, by choosing locations, determining the content of the film, and, at times, acting as cinematographer. The combined use of geographic, narrative, and emancipatory approaches has provided an opportunity to access knowledge that is different to what would be encountered in a “conventional interrogative encounter” including atmospheres, emotions, and reflections (Anderson 2004:260). In an attempt to “treat blindness as a story” this research works within a qualitative framework in order to explore the ambiguous and often misunderstood experiences of legally blind people within the built environment (Michalko 1998:4).
The analysis of the film footage was made meaningful by interpreting through the theories of Omansky and Michalko and by "...reading of the actions, objects, utterances and other representations" (Pink 2004:38) of the footage produced by the participants. The editing involved collaboration with the participants, extensive discussions between the two authors (insiders), and consultations with a filmmaker, Aerlan Barrett (outsider), who provided valuable feedback and suggestions after seeing an initial draft of the film. The distinct soundscapes created for each journey emerged from the analysis and editing phases.

Through the voice of researchers, and the editing of the film, the shifting borderland between the sighted and blind world is explored and communicated. There was, however, another shifting borderland, or boundary, that was explored and often dissolved throughout this project; the boundary between researcher and researched was blurred as participants largely determined the content and context of the film. Participants often played the role of researcher by steering both conversations and journeys.

This shifting boundary became embodied in a cultural artifact that epitomizes visuality, for the digital camera is another important actor not seen in the film. With this technology participants captured journeys that reveal mobility (as in Eleanor’s walk through the mall), aesthetic exploration (as in Shafi’s footage of the gallery), and kinesthetic sensation (as in Carol’s movement during a zumba class).

![Figure 3: Embodied footprint (Still taken from film by Carol, 2013).](image)

The camera reinforced the embodied and multi-sensory nature of this research by providing participants with an opportunity to document their own practices of navigating through built environments, making art, and dancing. The standard definition Sony Handycam used in the recording of this film is a small, easy to operate camcorder. The camera facilitated a straightforward recording of urban journeys. Requiring one simple step before use (the pressing of a red button), the device also facilitated a rapid exchange between researcher and participant as the camera could easily be handed back and forth. At times the device acted as an object of exchange and transition, as conversations led to recordings, and technical explanations of the
use of the zoom lens led to the capturing of footage. The quality of these interactions reflect Appadurai’s notion that objects possess a “social life” (2006:19). During the recording stage of this project the relationship between participant and researcher was often mediated by the camera. In other words the camera was a key actor in this study, enhancing interaction and dialogue between people.

Meanings through Themes

Providing the opportunity to tell a story and become “co-investigators” (Freire 2006:106) has allowed for the development of a “collage of collaborative knowledge” between participants and researchers (Anderson 2004:254). The meanings that emerged through this collaboration are driven by six specific themes embedded within the film. These themes involve the type of camera used and the captured imagery; storytelling; human movement; audio (available and created); selected spaces; and finally, the presence of light. Through these themes, Light in the Borderlands begins to capture the multi-sensorial experience of an urban cityscape including interior environments seen through the eyes of the three participants. The resulting footage is explorative, imprecise and often playful.

The camera used to create imagery was considered to be an extension of the participants’ senses and embodied experience. The standard definition Sony Handycam was chosen because it is small and easy to carry, simple to operate, and provides footage that is lower in resolution than high definition devices of a similar size. Its mega zoom lens (set at 60 times) also provides an option for participants to zoom in or more easily decipher far away details. With a pixel count of 720 x 480, the image quality is soft and not as crisp or well defined as high-definition video. Standard definition was considered a more appropriate resolution because it was deemed that this would embody the lived experiences of partially sighted participants whose residual, usable vision fluctuates in different lighting situations. The limitations of this camera are capitalized on as an integral part of the documentation process. These limitations result in a noisy, grainy image that is particularly unclear during sudden light shifts, phenomena that were described by the participants in the first interview.

The film footage was created without the use of storyboards, high-definition equipment or a tripod that results in an optical exploration that emulates the physical movements of the videographers. Through a filming process that was primarily in the hands of each participant, Light in the Borderlands is often reflective of Pallasmaa’s (2003:34) multi-sensory description of contemporary urban spaces in which “the unfocused vision of our time” is “freed from the implicit desire of the eye for control and power”. In the production of this film, the absence of conventional compositional strategies, along with the subsequent editing and dissolving of footage by the researcher, has resulted in unique interpretations of what Pallasmaa (2003:36) refers to as “the layered contemporary urban transparency”.

Storytelling is a core component to the film produced, where each participant explored a specific environment while sharing stories. Offering unique perspectives on the built environment, Eleanor, Shafi, and Carol provide a range of environmental, sensorial, and personal accounts of travelling through a contemporary Canadian city. Eleanor likes to feel comfortable in her place. She uses the word “nice” a lot. She not only enjoys visiting retail locations, she also spends time in these spaces out of necessity as her daily bus itinerary between home and work involves
a stop at the shopping mall, located relatively close to her place of employment. Originally from Saskatoon, Eleanor has been at this job for approximately one year. Having spent six years in Edmonton between the late 1980s and early 90s, she decided to make a permanent move from Saskatchewan to Alberta. Although she describes Saskatoon as “very easy to get around in” and “a very nice size” she seems excited to be in a larger urban centre, as she explains in the interview: “I guess I decided that I really like it here, so I came back about a year ago... I love Edmonton”. Living in a new city, Eleanor described that “figuring out how to get to places... is a project”. A range of public and retail spaces were among her favourite “projects”, and as a result we agreed to base her urban journey in the shopping mall. Eleanor’s depiction of the mall, both past and present, provided a context through which she became an active co-creator by providing extremely detailed information of the building space. Her descriptions at times evoked an expert understanding of how this retail establishment may be navigated, as conveyed through her reference to the location of an underground pedway: “...it’s from the food court in the City Centre east and it goes to the Shopper’s Drug Mart... and a kid’s store on the left-hand side on the west door.” As Eleanor began video recording, she led the researcher through a multi-leveled journey of the shopping mall beginning at the west-side underground food court and ending at the east-facing entrance where she caught her homebound bus. The conversation shifted from perceptions to mobility, and Eleanor shared her concerns about winter weather and public transportation. She talked about specific strategies she has used, and experiences she has had, involving bus stops and the use of her white cane. When dealing with large groups of people, Eleanor explained that “bumping into a crowd, it’s not so bad with a cane”. A recent experience at a bus stop illustrated her challenges using public transportation: “Turning around in a crowd, I felt like the salmon going up stream... if you have your cane, you don’t get the obscenities, and everything else yelled at you”. There is a feeling of stability (foundational, solidity) and rhythmic flow in Eleanor’s storytelling. Images with Eleanor come across as rhythmic, creating unusual still images, and captures the narrative of where she has been over the past 10 years. She further captures the dynamic movement of exploring and transitioning through spaces. It is clear that there are two parts to Eleanor’s story including her life to this point and then her experience of light. She has always been blind so there is no reference to personal (inside) sightedness other than her experience with other people (outside self).

Shaft uses architecture to illicit memory and thoughts from the past; particularly relative to family and other places he has lived. He is precise in his storytelling and thinks carefully about his words before he speaks. He is calm. Shaft, of all three participants, has practiced art and has a particular love of video, music, drawing and painting. During the research he described himself as a storyteller. Shaft talks about a written, autobiographical, project he is involved in, and also referred to his musical practice where he plays the guitar and keyboard as he looks for people to start a band. When discussing his activity in the visual arts, he referred to a photo competition he participated in through school, and described his interest in drawing. “When I see another drawing... I don’t know why but I just feel like I can do it—it’s easy for me, I can draw it.” Shaft also indicated that his artistic pursuits are beginning to shift as his vision changes. “I used to do drawing a lot, but nowadays I’m not doing it... because my vision is getting worse and I don’t have free time a lot. When I have free time, I just practice music”. Shaft referred to the art gallery as a favourite place in the city, and we therefore decided to base our second meeting on a journey through the local gallery. In the film, Shaft discussed and shared material objects in the form of drawings, which he has created since his arrival to Canada. While talking about the technique and content behind the artwork he often described a significant anecdote or made reference to
the time period when the work was made. The viewing of his artwork provided an opportunity for Shafi to reflect on his travels, his intercultural experiences, and overall interest in creative activities. Shafi’s artwork provided a visual interpretation of his recent life story, as drawings of shoes worn two years ago, were shown next to a detailed rendering of his favourite Bollywood actress. Handwriting was often incorporated in his work as song lyrics and references to countries previously lived in appeared, carefully inscribed, next to illustrated pictures.

Figure 4: Outdoors reflections in glass (Still taken from film by Eleanor, 2013).

Figure 5: A drawing of a Bollywood actress
(Still taken from film and drawing by Shafi, 2013).
As Shafr talked about the work there was a sense that his drawings represented more than technical achievement; they were also visualizations of lived experience, memories, and previously owned objects. The drawings embody a complex range of overlapping cultural experiences in which written words, and hand-renderings provide the content for a visual diary. His visual skills are also evident in dramatic shots that he took of the architectural space of the art gallery. Shafr had a gradual loss of vision from a very young age and in a way is still making sense of his life with less vision. He is navigating what he was, what he is and the consistent change he is undergoing.

Carol was fully sighted until her mid-thirties. She has fully accepted blindness, yet compares her current life to the one she had before. She talks about experiencing what she perceived as “full” independence when she could see and what she has now. Her narrative is a comparison between her life before and her life now. Early on in the interview process she discussed the challenges of using public transportation. During the research she made reference to her work, as she talked about the career she has enjoyed since her twenties. Having studied at a local college and university, and another college in Toronto, she now teaches voice full-time out of her home studio. Although Carol is not looking to quit her music career, she is hoping to cut down on the number of students she teaches, while joining an organization that will provide generous health coverage. Working out of a home studio and attending a neighborhood gym, Carol referred to walking, as her preferred method of getting around. She currently lives in a suburban community, but expressed a preference for the built environment of downtown or the scale of cities such as Toronto, where she lived for four years and hopes to return to. She also talked about “visually friendly places”, specifically a gym in a suburban community close to Edmonton. She joined the facility one year ago and referred to the people there as being “really accommodating”. Carol is taking several dance classes at the gym, including Zumba, and Shi'Bam. “I never took a dance class before... in fact, I would’ve been very intimidated to do so because of, partially, my visual impairment, partially, because I’m not an athlete”. She most clearly articulated the idea of living between two worlds. Carol was the most courageous in terms of how she held and related to the camera by actively holding the device against her body as she moved.

Figure 6: Embodied experience in the gym (Still taken from film by Carol, 2013).
Movement and Light

Dynamic movement is core to this film project, which is emphasized by the fact that each participant walked while recording. They did not stand still or use a tripod during the making of this film. They were at liberty to experience the geography in a very natural way without worrying about the outcome of the documentation. The focus was very much on being in a place dynamically rather than what might happen with the film. Interestingly, urban planners/designers typically create relatively static objects for urban cityscapes yet this film embodies the dynamic nature of how people engage with the city. This movement is conveyed through the shooting of the film but also in the editing. In the editing there is an overlap of imagery for Eleanor. Her journey also takes the viewer through the various parts of a downtown Edmonton mall as she records and talks about the effect of lighting conditions. Her story ends outside the mall at a bus stop as she describes the challenges of public transportation. Shafi’s journey begins inside the art gallery as he zooms the camera along and into the curved interior walls. Overlapping images convey the physical journey within the space as well as his story, which begins with childhood memories and evolves to current aspirations in music and visual art. There is very little dissolving of imagery with Carol. The dynamic motion captured through her walking and dancing provided an appropriate visual accompaniment to her story. Each participant in Light in the Borderlands interprets how “bodies and movements” are “in constant interaction with environment” (Pallasmaa 2005:40). The participants’ different storytelling narratives and the stories themselves were the major factors when making editing choices.

The film’s audio is presented as layers of sound predominantly made up of the ambient background noises in the space combined with additional sound to complement the stories of the participants. In terms of audio, Eleanor’s track is relatively pure. Not much needed to be added because the atmospheric sounds of the shopping mall and transition to the street were representative of her story. Interestingly, when Shafi told his story he was in a space where the acoustics had an “echoey” quality that emulated the art gallery well. Music was added of someone playing a saxophone in a public space to complement Shafi’s voice. The slow mellow, melodic performance had the feel of being suited to Shafi’s voice and tone. For Carol a good part of the track was of her speaking. She enjoyed chatting about her life story and in fact wanted to do this in a café. Consequently, Carol’s voice was recorded at a local café where the hustle and bustle of the background created an ambient that suited the movements in Carol’s film footage. The least audio editing was done with Carol. The soundscape and visual material melded together well, which meant there was little need to add additional sound.

The exploration of space and spatial environments in Light in the Borderlands illustrates that interior spaces are a kind of borderland for people who are legally blind. In addition, space has many thresholds, which can be inviting or repelling depending on the circumstances.
For example, Eleanor moves from the shopping mall to a bus stop where there is a sense of a transitory space that takes her from one place to another. Shafi moves from the gallery interior to an enclosed rooftop garden (within the same building) that is a type of contained outside space. Carol begins and ends in a field next to her home. Carol commonly walks from her home to the gym via the field that acts as a clear threshold to the gym. The spaces explored by our participants are interesting reflections of protection. That is, for many people living with blindness, familiar and enclosed spaces are easiest to navigate, which is well represented in the film.

Figure 7: The gallery rooftop garden (Still taken from film by Shafi, 2013).

Throughout Light in the Borderlands, abrupt shifts in light are often due to the technical shortcomings of the camera. This effect, however, captures participants’ movements from light to dark and back to light again where there are often temporary blind spots. In the film Eleanor speaks of being “disoriented” when she moves through and from different light situations. When lighting changes she “gets her bearings again”. Bright white light or pocket lights cause the most problems for her. For people living in the “borderlands” of blindness, light is very important—it is a navigational tool. With light comes the idea of contrast, as well. Throughout this film, the extreme contrast between lightness and darkness is accompanied by mid tones—usually captured in the interior footage—that reveal a grainy, often fuzzy image. There is often a lack of clarity in the grey interiors of the shopping mall. Eleanor elegantly captures the hectic, multilevel, and often confusing, nature of these kinds of spaces as she carefully walks, turns the camera and zooms into areas of increased brightness. Shafi reveals how architectural space absorbs light through his explorations of the art gallery, and subsequent transitions to the exterior of the building where he delicately captures the curvilinear forms of the outside walls on a sunny day. Carol takes the viewer through a dynamic visual exploration as her camera movements show the contrast between exterior and interior light from within the gym, before starting her Zumba session. Light is the element that is most playful in the film and light is used to represent details of the lived experiences of the three participants.
Conclusion

_Light in the Borderlands_ is a film that highlights layers of information about people living in the borderlands of blindness. Our three participants, who recorded footage and shared stories, convey unique perceptions and experiences of the built environment. This film embodies aspects of ethnography, photo voice, and documentary, reflexive and personal storytelling with the voice of each participant carrying the film through a range of urban locations where they encounter material objects. While visiting the locations, each participant described perceptual experiences and talked about personal memories that were associated with or triggered by the surrounding urban environments. These journeys took place within meaningful spaces through which the combined act of walking, documenting and talking generated a range of stories, visuals, audio and embodied experiences. The film that resulted from this process illustrates the lives of three people and in many ways questions assumptions and stereotypes about blindness as participants reveal their experiences of built environments, share artwork, and dance. This film highlights the abilities of people who are blind. Specifically, some of the abilities that are illustrated: are the ability to see with their feet, navigate spaces, and to use light and sound to experience the built environment.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for each participant upon their request to maintain anonymity.

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