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/ KALEKOWANIE SZTUK PERFORMATYWNYCH

Non-Ocularcentric Theater: Blindness as a Resource in the Work of Teatro Ciego MX

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Artykuł powstał jako odpowiedź na call for papers *Kalekowanie sztuk performatywnych* pod redakcją Katarzyny Ojrzyńskiej i Moniki Kwaśniewskiej. Cykl publikowany jest od numeru 178. Wybrane artykuły zostaną zredagowane w języku prostym przez Jakuba Studzińskiego w ramach współpracy z Małopolskim Instytutem Kultury. / The article was written as a response to the call for papers *Cripping Performing Arts*, edited by Katarzyna Ojrzyńska and Monika Kwaśniewska. The series is published from issue 178. Selected articles will be edited in plain language by Jakub Studzinski in cooperation with the Malopolska Institute of Culture.

Abstract

The main aim of this article is to examine the phenomenon of Teatro Ciego MX, a Mexican company composed by blind actors. Based on the study of their work, I argue that actors' blindness can be interpreted as an artistic resource for broadening horizons of traditional theater. I examine the singularity of blind acting and multisensorial performances. The article is based on my own fieldwork, which includes interviews with the actors and their collaborators, as well as observation of rehearsals and performances. It uses disability studies, particularly the concepts of cripistemology and blindness arts, as a theoretical framework for the analysis.

Keywords: Teatro Ciego MX; visual impairment; resource; disability studies; Mexico

Introduction

The belief that vision is the most important sense, called ocularcentrism (Jay, 1993), has been ingrained in Western culture for centuries. Over subsequent epochs, philosophical reflection identified knowledge with clear vision (Pallasmaa, 2012). Flourishing especially in the Enlightenment, the supremacy of sight has remained prominent in numerous fields, including theory of art, until today. Visuality is an inherent element of performance and visual arts that serves as a tool for constructing a certain cultural norm.

Nowadays, numerous artists and thinkers who aim to deconstruct social and cultural norms have proposed several theoretical and practical strategies to achieve this. In my article, I adopt the perspective of disability studies, in which blindness becomes an epistemic and creative position from which the deconstruction of the hegemony of vision is possible.

What serves as the cornerstone of disability studies is the distinction between impairment and disability, in which the former is understood as ‘an injury, illness, or congenital condition that causes or is likely to cause a loss or difference of physiological or psychological function,’ while the latter is ‘the result of negative interactions that take place between a person with an impairment and her or his social environment’ (Northern Officer Group, 1996, p. 1). In a nutshell, impairment is a physical or mental condition that is seen as pathological from the medical point of view, while disability is understood as a negative social situation caused by it. This distinction is closely related to two different ways of understanding disability: the medical model and the social model. According to the former, disability is understood as an individual problem, and attention is placed on the limitations and deficits that it causes. In this approach, deficit is the central concept, and its

elimination is the main task to be accomplished in the face of disability (Oliver, 1983, 1990). In the latter case, disability is conceived as a socially constructed phenomenon resulting from society not being organized in a manner that takes into account the needs of persons with disabilities. In other words, the main disabling factor is not the physical, cognitive or mental condition, but the society, its structures and institutions. An individual is treated as disabled insofar as she or he experiences harm and exclusion (Oliver, 1983; Barton, 1996).

Although in the beginning disability studies scholars strongly criticized the medical model and postulated adopting the social model, currently numerous researchers indicate that the latter is also insufficient to capture the multi-faceted nature of disability. The social model has primarily been criticized for omitting the bodily aspects of disability (Hughes and Paterson, 1997; Shakespeare, 2006). My way of thinking about disability as a resource fits in the ongoing debate on how to maintain the social understanding of disability without excluding the corporeal aspects and individual experiences of living with it.

One of the strategies adopted in the field of disability studies is reclaiming of the disabled perspective, which has been marginalized by the mainstream able-bodied culture. While reflecting on vision and art, what deserves special attention is the concept of ‘blindness arts’ which contrasts with and complements ‘visual arts’ (Thompson and Warne, 2018, n.p.). It acknowledges the creative potential of blindness in the fields of artistic expression and access. The concept of blindness arts involves a rereading of blindness as a multifaceted aesthetic position and considers blind people as active cultural creators, consumers, and critics (Thompson and Warne, 2018). In line with the principles of disability studies, blindness arts

recognize blind people as active subjects rather than passive objects of medical and societal curiosity. Furthermore, they reject pathologizing myths and stereotypes of blindness grounded in culture (Thompson and Warne, 2018).

The realm where the functioning of blindness arts is particularly interesting are performing arts. Due to the fact that they are firmly based on visual principles, it seems worth examining how their traditional principles become challenged by artists with visual impairments. It is relatively difficult for a person with a visual impairment to become an actor or a director. As a consequence, although performing arts sometimes use blindness as a theme, they rarely involve artists with visual impairments themselves. However, recently this situation has slowly started to change. Individual examples of performers with visual impairments can be found in various countries. In this study, I explore the concept of visual impairment as an artistic resource in the work of Teatro Ciego MX, a Mexican theater company composed entirely of persons with visual impairments. It has been operating for fifteen years, being one of just two companies of this kind in Latin America. The article is based on the empirical evidence that I collected between 2019 and 2023 as part of research for my PhD dissertation. The research material was gathered during interviews (conducted online and in person) with visually impaired artists and their collaborators, and during observations of my interlocutors' rehearsals and performances[1].

Disability as an Artistic Resource

The notion of resource has a rich history in the social sciences. In economics, all material and non-material components of the process of production of goods and services are considered resources (Bruce, McConnell, and Flynn,

2013). Although I am far from using the notion of resource in an economic sense, it should be noted that some of the properties related to its economic interpretation are relevant to other disciplines, including those that tackle the problem of subjectivity. As Erich Zimmermann (1933) claims, something can be considered a resource only if it can serve human needs. In other words, it becomes a resource solely when people have needs that can be satisfied by it and people know how to use it in order to satisfy these needs. For example, coal is not a resource per se. It might become a resource when an individual needs energy and knows how to produce it from coal. Analogically, in sociological theories of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Lin, 2001)[2] and psychological theories of stress-coping (Antonovsky, 1979, 1991), adaptation (Hobfoll, 2002), and psychotherapy (Leslie, 2014), a resource is interpreted as any object or characteristic possessed by an individual or any emotion, event or belief experienced by him or her if only the individual can use it and knows how to profit from it.

Taking recourse to the rich history of the concept of a resource in the social sciences, I propose my own definition of a resource as 'any lasting social circumstance; physical, mental, or psychological characteristic, a property or an ability; personal experience or knowledge; possessed or accessed by an individual that helps him/her in achieving the desired result' (Dubiel 2022, p. 123). Such a broad definition allows one to recognize a resource in a wide spectrum of characteristics, items, events, and conditions, such as, for instance, disability.

In the field of disability studies, affirmative thinking about disability as a resource already has a certain tradition. Opposing the medical discourse about loss and deficiency, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2012) contends that disability should be reread in terms of the value it brings to society. By using

the language of environmental conservation: ‘preserving intact, keeping alive, and even encouraging to flourish’ (p. 341), Garland-Thomson conceptualizes disability as an essential component of human diversity that offers a significant cultural and material contribution to the world. As a consequence, she calls disability a ‘generative resource’ (p. 341) and claims that disability supplies the world with critical resources in three areas: cultural narratives, epistemology, and ethics.

The idea of disability as a resource also corresponds with another affirmative concept, namely disability gain, which was first formulated within Deaf Studies as ‘Deaf Gain’ and was defined as ‘unique cognitive, creative, and cultural gains manifested through deaf ways of being in the world’ (Bauman and Murray, 2014, p. xv). The concept of Deaf Gain was coined as an identity-based and emancipatory alternative to the common medical term ‘hearing loss.’ As such, according to the authors, it fits into the shift from an overarching framework of normalcy to one of diversity. The idea was readily picked up by blindness researchers and the concept of blindness gain was coined (Thompson, 2017; Chottin and Thompson, 2021).

Blindness gain appreciates blind people’s inventiveness, imagination, and creativity which result from their multisensory way of being in the world. When speaking about gaining blindness, Georgina Kleege defines blindness as ‘an array of nonvisual perception and other forms of acquired knowledge’ (2010, p. 61). Similarly, Sarah Böllinger (2019) conceptualizes disability gain as unique knowledge that is generated and passed on to society by persons with disabilities. Notably, it can only be produced in the presence of disability. Thinking about disability as a gain generates ‘innovative ways of looking at the world and creativity that moves us past old conceptions of the normate’ (Fox, Krings and Vierke 2019, p. 106). Reframing disability as a

gain rather than loss or deficiency is based on the way disability studies perceives disability as an expression of human variation and, as such, a valuable part of human experience. What seems crucial for considering visual impairment as a resource is that this perspective stresses the fact that blindness is a source of nonocularcentric, multisensory knowledge, innovation, and creativity.

Although a resource can be beneficial in various spheres of an individual life, and it can be employed in different kinds of social action or life activity, I focus on using it for artistic purposes. Therefore, I use the term an 'artistic resource.' Furthermore, I argue that visual impairment falls within the definition provided above and can be considered an artistic resource.

The use of disability as a resource is often related to the unique knowledge produced as a result of the experience of living with a disability. As Sunaura Taylor (2017) observes, when living with a disability, one is in a way forced to create completely new and unique ways of interacting with the external world. She states:

> I'm an artist, and so I think about creativity a lot. Being disabled gives you a completely new way of having to interact with the world. […] For instance, I was never taught by anyone how to use my mouth to do things. There is a certain level of creativity and innovation that goes into every single thing, which some people might find really frustrating, but for many of us who are actually living it, it's a very liberating thing to not have every aspect of your body already defined (p. 232).

The creativity that Taylor refers to can be understood on many levels. It can

obviously concern innovative solutions or creative artworks, but it may also refer to completely new and original knowledge. As Taylor admits, nobody has taught her how to use her mouth to do things. She had to invent and develop this on her own, based on her personal experience. This reflection perfectly explains the ways of knowing that Robert McRuer and Merri Lisa Johnson (2014) call cripistemologies. For the purpose of the present study, this concept can be narrowed down to blindistemology, which can be defined as an alternative epistemology that emerges from the lived experience of visual impairment. It is composed of many diverse elements. In this article, I would only like to address the non-ocularcentric perception, which is a tool in non-ocularcentric cognition and results in producing non-ocularcentric knowledge.

Blind Theater: Shifting the Focus Away from the Eye

'Blind theater' (teatro ciego), which embraces the idea of performing in complete darkness, is a fundamental concept for this section. The first show of this kind in Latin America was staged in Córdoba (Argentina) in 1991. It was titled *Caramelo de limón* (Lemon Candy) and was directed by Ricardo Sued. The play tells the story of an Argentinian family that abandons the country because of the horrors of military dictatorship. Performing in darkness is a formal intervention with a clear aesthetic aim. It serves as a metaphor of overwhelming fear and uncertainty (Obregón, 2005). All the actors who performed in the play were normovisual.[3] Nevertheless, one of them, Gerardo Bentatti, was so inspired by this experience that he decided to repeat it, but this time in collaboration with people with visual impairments. In 2000, together with the theater director José Menchaca and

persons from the Argentinian Library for the Blind, he founded el Grupo Ojcuro. This project resulted in the staging of *La Isla Desierta* (The Desert Island) by Roberto Arlt in 2001, directed by José Menchaca and starring normovisual and blind actors, again, in complete darkness (Gutiérrez, 2017). El Grupo Ojcuro evolved into a permanent theater company in 2008 and changed its name to Centro Argentino de Teatro Ciego, which continues to operate until now, giving all its shows in complete darkness (Perez Delgado, 2015). Their first performance, analogous to *Caramelo de limón*, was staged in Mexico in 2004. Entitled *Y cerré mis ojos* (And I Closed my Eyes), it was written and directed by Kerim Martínez Flores. Again, the performance starred only normovisual actors. It took place in complete darkness and was based entirely on dialogues and sounds made by the actors, who throughout the whole play remained gathered around the table at the center of the stage. Juan Carlos Saavedra, a Mexican actor and theater director, participated in this event and was very impressed. Inspired by the idea but intending to improve it, Saavedra finally came to a conclusion that persons who will feel safe and comfortable enough to navigate in darkness are blind people.[4]

In 2006, searching for his cast, Saavedra visited a secondary school for the blind in Mexico City and, together with several teenage students, staged a play entitled *Bajo el Puente* (Under the Bridge). Encouraged by its success, Saavedra decided to set up a theater company with his new actors. In 2007, Teatro Ciego MX (Blind Theater MX) was founded and continued staging *Bajo el Puente* on various occasions. Although they had no previous dramatic training, the young blind actors made a significant contribution to the artistic vision of Saavedra. Blindness turned out to be the lacking element that helped him develop the idea of blind theater and make it an original performing technique.[5]

Although the concept of blind theater seems to focus on an exploration of the blind condition, its core principle extends the reflection beyond the loss of sight into a realm of different perceptual and artistic possibilities (Perez Delgado, 2015). Blindness itself is not a common theme of Teatro Ciego MX's performances. It rather serves as a tool that increases the multisensorial depth of theatrical experience. With the exception of the play about Louis Braille, the shows of Teatro Ciego MX do not feature blind characters. The immersion in darkness becomes a means for deconstructing the ocularcentric norm in which traditional theater is grounded. Deprived of images, the spectators are encouraged to discover nonvisual modes of perception.

To some extent, blind theater may resemble initiatives such as Dialogue in the Dark, in which normovisual visitors are guided by blind people in absolute darkness.[6] Unlike them, however, Teatro Ciego MX is not an educational, but an artistic project. Although some performances include educational elements, the focus is on their artistic dimension. In the educational context, the main goal is to raise awareness among normovisual members of society about the ways in which blind people function, and thus increase their empathy and overturn stereotypes. In case of the work of Teatro Ciego MX, these aspects are also present, but they play rather a peripheral role, being a by-product of the main endeavor – a search for new means of artistic expression that arise from personal experience of blindness. Their main principle is acting in darkness and using phonic means of expression. In the dark, actors cannot emphasize their statements with a gesture or facial expression. The entire emotional charge needs to be encapsulated in their voice. Since in the dark the entire process of character building is based on the form and content of the utterances, the actors' vocal dexterity is crucial. However, physical fitness and motor coordination are

also important. It is not that in darkness, stage movement and gestures are not performed. On the contrary, they must be done with double energy to be heard. Furthermore, actors use a wide range of accompanying sounds to represent the world of the play. If they use a prop, they have to do it in a way that allows the audience to recognize the object and action by listening to the sound that they produce. In order to make it easier for the audience to immerse themselves in the fictional world, actors also often engage the other senses.

Bajo el Puente tells the story of Sofía who, after the death of her parents, is sent to an orphanage. Lonely and harassed by the headmistress, the little girl withdraws into a private world of fantasy. During the show, actors walk around the performance hall, forcing the audience to listen carefully to the sounds coming from all sides. When a scene takes place in the garden, spectators are showered with rose petals. They can feel the drops of water on their faces when it starts raining in the play. At the very beginning of the show, they are also invited to navigate the performance space in a blind way. The hall is completely dark and they have to find their seats by themselves. In this way, the opening of this performance invites the spectators to rely on nonvisual sensations and use them to the maximum. Their daily sensory experiences are tested and their perceptiveness is heightened.

Another performance that applies the methods of blind theater and was produced by Teatro Ciego MX is *Unplugged en la obscuridad* (Unplugged in Darkness). Staged for the first time in 2013, it was written by Paco Reyes and directed by Juan Carlos Saavedra. This performance has a much more intimate character, and the action does not move from one place to another. Everything happens in the same house, where different stories of people who do not know each other intersect. Everything is commented on by two

talking cats. Again, the scenography is largely acoustic. It is produced by the actors, who use doors, tables, and several recycled objects to create the setting. Although the show is mostly based on sounds, olfactory and tactile elements are also included. The company continues its creative search by experimenting with the performance space. This time, not only actors enter the audience, but also the audience invades the stage. The seats are placed on the stage in the middle of the imagined house, so the audience is at the center of the action. This show develops and perfects the idea of blind theater. The actors' blindness helps explore the multisensoriality of everyday experiences (Perez Delgado, 2015). Interestingly, the ocularcentric concept of theater spectatorship is undermined also on a discursive level. In the description of the show, the audience present at the performance (el público asistente) is referred to as a listener (un escucha) rather than a spectator (más que un espectador) (Teatro Ciego MX 2016).

La mirada del inventor ciego (The Gaze of Blind Inventor), the first performance of Teatro Ciego MX for children, which premiered in 2015. Written by Berta Hiriart and directed by Juan Carlos Saavedra, it is based on the life of Louis Braille, the inventor of the tactile system of reading and writing for the blind. Making this show is another step in the process of increasing the involvement of the audience in the performance. *La mirada del inventor ciego* is an interactive show during which children not only learn about the history of probably the most important invention in the history of the blind community but are also invited to perform several tasks without using their sight. Interestingly, although in this show the concept of blind theater is also applied, the entire performance does not take place in darkness. In order to make spectators better understand the experiences of the protagonist, they are put in a situation of changing visibility. Initially, when Braille is still a normovisual child, the stage is illuminated and

perfectly visible. However, when he gains blindness the lights are turned off. Spectators are also encouraged to share some experiences of the young blind boy. Firstly, they accompany him when he experiences the inaccessibility of the school for normovisual children. In complete darkness,they are handed printed maps and packs of crayons and asked to color all the continents in correct colors. Secondly, they accompany him to a gardening lesson in the institute for the blind, where they try their hand at transplanting flowers. On their way to the greenhouse, they are guided by blind actors, forming lines with individuals holding the arm of the person in front of them – a common method used by blind people in Mexico City when they navigate crowded streets or metro stations in a group.

As Teatro Ciego MX has become an independent company, blind theater has ceased to be merely a formal aesthetic approach. It now engages with 'blindistemological' content. Choosing the biography of Louis Braille as a theme of the show was also an important step towards reclaiming the blind historical and cultural heritage. The plot of the play is not limited to the story of the invention of the tactile reading and writing system. It also presents the strong opposition that it met with. It was voiced by the normovisual professors who saw the new system as an impediment to the control they wished to exercise over the blind students. Similarly to sign language, the Braille system was perceived as a threat to the ableist power relations at the time and, as such, was forbidden for several years (Mellor, 2006). Teatro Ciego MX presents the Braille system as a space of emancipation and resistance against oppressive structures.

Over the years, the company's composition has changed many times. However, its core has always been formed by the actors with visual impairments. Currently, the permanent cast members are three blind actors:

Erika Bernal Gallego, Marco Antonio Martínez Juárez, and Jesús Rodríguez. There are also blind and low vision actors, such as Cristian Arias, Cristian Vargas, Maricarmen Grau Huesca, and Luz Adriana Carrasco, who regularly participate or used to participate in the performances. Furthermore, starting from *Unplugged en la Obscuridad*, several normovisual actors have also been invited to contribute to the performances, but their number never exceeds the number of visually impaired actors. For example, in *Unplugged en la Obscuridad* three of six actors and in *La mirada del inventor ciego* two of six actors were normovisual. Jesus Rodriguez interprets the experience of these shows in terms of collaboration and exchange of knowledge and skills, where both blind and normovisual actors are experts:

> It is a collaboration, exactly. They [normovisual actors] have to learn how to move in darkness. We teach them how to use podotactile marks and that they are important. And there are some things that we learn from them. We take it as mutual learning.[7]

In this case, blindness of the actors is not only a resource for developing the idea of blind theater, but also a source of specialized knowledge that they can transmit to the normovisual actors.

All of this shows that blindness of the actors is a critical element of the development of the concept of blind theater. In terms of theater practice, their ability to navigate space without using sight helps blind actors move around the performance space in darkness in a confident way. This skill also serves as a catalyst for focusing on sensory experiences that normovisual people tend to disregard. In terms of academic and activist reflection, blindness works as a resource for critical pondering on the ocularcentric and

even ableist paradigms of mainstream culture. Blindness can also be a resource that provides unique expert knowledge that blind actors can share with the fellow normovisual actors.

Non-Ocularcentric Work on the Stage

The idea of blind theater, although conceptually original and practically expanding the scope of theatrical means of expression, is not the only possible performance strategy for blind actors. They also can, and in fact do, act in the light, often sharing the stage with normovisual actors. These situations open up new artistic possibilities, but also create new challenges. How can a blind person learn the visual principles of acting? How can a blind actor effectively navigate the stage so that he or she does not fall off or knock over decorations? These fundamental questions should be addressed when thinking about the presence of blind actors on an illuminated stage. In this section, I examine how actors from Teatro Ciego MX forge their original acting style and how they situate themselves in relation to normovisual actors.

It turns out that some specific skills that one has to develop as a blind person become his or her resource in the stage work. One of them is imagination. According to the principles of psychological acting, which are one of the foundations of the Teatro Ciego MX technique, imagination plays a crucial role in the process of character interpretation. In this context, blindness can serve as a great facilitator in developing acting skills because blind people, and especially those who are congenitally blind, who live imagining everything, so they have to develop this skill to the maximum. In that way, blindness is understood as an indirect resource that enables one to use or develop other resources. Nevertheless, such an assumption may raise

objections from normovisual people, who sometimes doubt whether congenitally blind people are capable of imagining things. This discrepancy may be related to differences in understanding the notion of imagination. While for normovisual people it is usually associated with thinking in images, for blind people it is much more related to embodiment, which is a key element of the Teatro Ciego MX technique. When examining the work of Teatro Ciego MX, it should be noted that over time, searching for new ways of expression, its members decided to act on an illuminated stage. Interestingly, the members of the Mexican company indicate that performing in the light is for them a natural stage in their development and the next step towards professionalization. This is in fact quite a normative perspective that shows how deeply the ocularcentric ideas are embedded in our thinking. Even artists who aim to challenge the visual hegemony are sometimes unable to liberate themselves from ocularcentric mindsets, according to which acting in the light will always be the desired 'norm.'

Over time, Teatro Ciego MX's performances became more demanding, and the actors had to develop their performing skills. As a consequence, the company has become more and more professional in the opinion of its members. Artists constantly educate themselves in such fields as: stage movement, voice emission, improvisation, dance, and cabaret. Yet, the essential question is: how can a blind actor learn to visually interpret his or her role? Although many people consider it impossible, it turns out not to be so. Independence from visual information may even be an advantage in forging an individual acting style. Since blind actors cannot observe and imitate poses and gestures of others, they have to look for their own means of expression. Several of my interlocutors stressed the corporal aspect of embodied feelings. Marco Antonio Martínez Juárez, an actor and current co-director of Teatro Ciego MX, sees the connection between corporal

expression and the idea of experiencing emotions in the following way:

> The work of emotions in acting, well, has a lot to do with living the emotion, that your body itself expresses the emotion. It is not that you represent anger, you have to get angry so that your anger can be seen, so that you transmit this emotion to the people in the audience.[8]

Erika Bernal Gallego, a blind actress and the current co-director of Teatro Ciego MX, develops this idea and criticizes ocularcentric methods of theater training as follows:

> When they [normovisual actors] work with gestures or corporal expression, with a very specific mobility that they copy from their professors, they do this immediately. And we need to first understand. When I conducted an acting workshop with the blind, it was a challenge to make them – those that have never seen what an annoyed face looks like – understand. So, the point is to make them look angry, which includes touching you or simply leading them to the emotion, to annoyance. And no matter if you frown or not. No matter if you roll your eyes or if you clench your teeth or if you squeeze your cheeks or whatever. It does not matter. The point is that you should be annoyed at that moment and what's on your face. Is it angry? Well, I don't know but your face is not a copy of somebody else whom you observe being annoyed.[9]

It turns out that in the acting of Teatro Ciego MX, contrary to the ocularcentric 'seeing means knowing' paradigm, it is the lack of sight that is

the source of understanding. In my interlocutors' interpretation, sight gives relief, but it is treacherous. It seems to offer a shortcut to interpretation, but this can, in fact, lead to shallow and imitative acting. Visual impairment in this approach becomes a resource that motivates the actor's self-development and results in an in-depth role interpretation. It also contributes to authenticity and originality of expression.

Another important aspect of blind acting is spatial orientation. Over the years, Teatro Ciego MX has developed a whole range of solutions that help blind actors navigate the stage safely and effectively. First of all, there is a system of podotactile signs, made of strings stuck to the floor, which actors can feel under their feet when walking on the stage. Furthermore, small objects are frequently secured in place with pieces of double-sided adhesive tape. In that way, they are more stable. They do not move or tip over when touched, but they can be easily handled if the plot requires it. A mark made with the use of adhesive tape on the surface also helps in localizing the place where a given object should be put back. Obviously, the biggest challenge for blind actors is to learn to navigate the stage in a confident way. In order to do so, they have to spend a lot of time there. On the one hand, this requires a lot more effort from blind actors than from normovisual ones. On the other hand, this additional work rewards them with a deep experience of the stage space. Blind people work out particular ways of embodying space. In the actual performance, this helps build an intimate and multisensory relationship with the space. Erika Bernal Gallego describes this process as follows:

> We have a different way of getting to know the space. A normovisual actor comes and that's all. He glances at the stage and that's it. We go and touch, we explore the place, we get to know

> how it is. […] It's all like a ritual that permits us to fit the space, to mimic the space, […] it's a space that you will inhabit.[10]

In this case, blindness works as an indirect resource on a meta-level. It is a condition that induces certain behaviors in an actor that result in producing a very specific relationship with the stage space and a complex embodiment of it. Presumably, such an approach would be profitable for all actors; however, normovisual actors can easily skip it, and so they do not always give it enough attention.

Conclusion

As the experiences of the actors of Teatro Ciego MX show, blind acting is an innovative acting technique. It is a non-normative artistic proposal which understands blindness as a resource in many aspects. Blind acting involves developing skills, such as imagination, that are necessary in the work on the stage. Furthermore, it facilitates elaborating unique means of expression, which are far from imitation, and original concepts of performance space. Visual impairment also serves here as a resource that helps create and develop blind theater as a technique that explores the human sensorium. The blindness of the actors is a source of unique embodied sensory knowledge. As such, it has inspired an array of aesthetic strategies used by Teatro Ciego MX. Some of my interlocutors whom I have quoted interpret blindness as a kind of advantage that they have over normovisual artists.

In this context, the juxtaposition of beliefs about blind acting and normovisual acting expressed by the blind actors appears very interesting. Although the members of Teatro Ciego MX declare their willingness to challenge the normative schemes of traditional theater, surprisingly, they

are not free from stereotypical ocularcentric thinking about acting.

I am aware that this article does not exhaust all the topics of blind acting and blind theater. There are many aspects of these cultural phenomena that still need to be addressed. Undoubtedly, one of the most interesting problems to examine further is how the experiences of blind actors influence more general beliefs about acting. For that purpose, however, a much more extensive research on the relationship between blind and normovisual acting is needed.

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Footnotes

1. The article is partially based on chapter ten of my thesis, entitled *Visual Impairment as a Resource in Performing Arts*.
2. The relationship between the concepts of resource and social capital is close and yet slightly different in theories proposed by various authors. Sometimes a resources is

considered part of social capital, other times social capital is seen as necessary for gaining resources. For Pierre Bourdieu (1986), capital, including social capital, is a tool for access to resources. According to James Coleman (1990), social capital is a set of resources understood as elements or properties of the social structure that have a practical value for a social actor. Nan Lin defines social capital as 'resources embedded in a social structure that are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions' (2001, p. 29).

3. When writing about people who do not have impaired vision, I follow Benjamín Mayer Foulkes (2009) and in most cases use the term 'normovisual.' I prefer using it over other terms such as 'sighted' or 'with no visual impairment' because it reminds us about the concept of the 'norm,' a very arbitrary way of categorizing people.

4. When describing the history of Teatro Ciego MX, I use information received from Juan Carlos Saavedra, whom I interviewed on December 12, 2023, in his house in Mexico City.

5. Obviously, Saavedra is not the only theatre director that is attracted by the potential of multisensory theater. It is worth mentioning at least one example of a similar project: a theatre methodology called Sensory Labyrinth Theatre, created and developed by the Welsh theatre director Iwan Brioc.

6. Dialogue in the Dark is an educational space in which blind guides lead visitors in small groups through different settings, such as an apartment, a restaurant, or a forest, in complete darkness. This experience aims to teach visitors how to interact with the world without using sight and to raise their awareness about blind people. Dialogue in the Dark is a social enterprise operating on a franchise basis. Founded in 1988, it is now present in several countries, such as: China, Japan, Italy, Germany, Greece, and Austria. For some time, it also operated in Mexico.

7. Justo es una colaboración. Ellos (actores normovisuales) tienen que aprender manejarse por la obscuridad. Les enseñamos a usar las marcas podotáctiles y que son importantes. Y hay cosas que nosotros aprendemos de ellos. Lo tomamos como un aprendizaje de ambas partes. All the interviews with the performers of Teatro Ciego MX were conducted in Spanish. When quoting them, I provide the original Spanish fragments and my own English translation.

8. El trabajo de las emociones en la actuación, si tiene mucho que ver con vivir la emoción para que tu cuerpo solito muestre la emoción. No se trata de representar enojo. Sino más bien te enojas, para que se vea tu enojo y que transmitas el enojo pa las personas que están en publico.

9. Cuando trabajan [actores normovisuales) con gestos o con expresión corporal, con movilidad muy especifica que ellos la copian de sus profesores, lo hacen inmediatamente. Y para nosotros es entender. Cuando di el taller de formación actoral con ciegos, fue un reto poder les hacer entender a quienes nunca han visto como es una cara de enojado. Entonces es hacerles la cara de enojado hasta hacer que te toquen o simplemente llevarlos a la emoción, a enojo. Y no importa si estas arrugando o no la frente. No importa si estas haciendo los ojos para un lado y para el otro, o si estás apretando los dientes, o la quijada. o lo que sea. No importa. El hecho es que tú estes enojado en este momento y como se dibuja tu rostro. Está de enojado? Pues, no lo sé, pero tu rostro no es una copia de alguien a quien estas viendo enojado.

10. Nosotros tenemos otra forma de conocer el espacio. Un actor normovisual llega y nada más. Le echa ojo al escenario y ya. Nosotros vamos y tocamos, exploramos el lugar, conocemos como es. […] Es todo como un ritual que nos permite de irnos adecuando al espacio, irnos mimetizando con el espacio […] Es el espacio que vas a ocupar.

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