

# The Blind Side of Art: Visual Impairment as a Resource in the Work of Mexican Artists

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**Abstract:** Disability studies is a dynamically developing discipline; however, it usually focuses on the Anglophone world. Scholars representing this field often concentrate on deconstructing popular stereotypes and revealing hidden systemic discrimination. Although more and more initiatives are taken up – such as disability pride – it seems that an affirmative approach to disability remains in the minority. This article is a proposal for going beyond the mentioned schemes. Entering the area of the Latin American culture, I try to verify whether the findings of disability studies can be confirmed there. Proposing the interpretation of disability in terms of resource, I want to broaden the affirmative perspective on disability.

This paper aims at a critical reflection on the creative potential of visual impairment used by blind and low-vision Mexican artists in the creative process. Drawing upon the research conducted between 2020 and 2022, I argue that they use their visual impairment as a resource in their artistic activity. I distinguish four aspects of the functioning of visual impairment as a resource in artistic work: inspiration, representation, non-ocularcentric imagination, and accessibility.

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## Introduction – Blindness Arts

In the introduction to the special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly*, which was entirely dedicated to the theme of the relationship between blindness and art, Hannah Thompson and Vanessa Warne (2018) proposed the term “blindness arts” in contrast with, and as a companion to, “visual arts”. According to the authors, the essence of the concept is in exploring the creative potential of blindness and offering new insights into the relationship between blindness, creativity, performance, and access. Inquiring the creative potential of accessibility tools – including audio description, touch tours, and braille – as means of enriching the cultural experiences of both blind and non-blind people is also an important element of this approach. Due to my academic background in Spanish Studies, it was natural for me that when entering the field of disability studies, I intended to focus on the Hispanic world. Soon, I was intrigued by how different the way of cultural functioning of disability in Latin America is from that widely commented in the field of disability studies based mainly in the Anglophone academy. Although the interesting questions are numerous, I focus on investigating the phenomenon of work of visually-impaired artists in Mexico, because I believe that it provides a very significant input to the still ongoing discussion about the fundamental question of disability. As a blind person myself, a researcher, and a frequent cultural attender, I try to capture a very specific understanding of disability as a resource that is located somewhere on the intersection of these three perspectives, namely: the personal experience of blindness, scientific reflection, and cultural production. In this context, the main research question is: can disability be interpreted as a resource in artistic work, and if yes, under what conditions does it take place? In order to address it, I explore various dimensions of the artistic work by several visually-impaired artists in Mexico. I investigate the particularities of their artistic techniques, the relationship between their daily life and their artistic production, the embodied knowledge of functioning as a visually-impaired person in Mexico, and much more.

In the first part of the paper, I outline the theoretical background and the context of the study. In the subsequent part, I discuss the methodological issues. Then, I present and comment on my findings. I distinguish four forms of understanding of the visual impairment as a resource in artistic work – inspiration, representation, non-ocularcentric imagination, and accessibility. The paper ends with concluding remarks.

Art is just one of multiple fields in which the potential of disability as a resource can be explored. I find it especially interesting because it is strongly related to the questions of creativity, innovation, and identity formation, all of which make it easier to see this potential. Once revealed, it can be used also in other fields, such as education, labor market, and many more.

## Defining Disability

Disability has been of interest to scholars for many years. However, it had been investigated predominantly in medical terms. The situation changed when in the second half of the twentieth century a new approach – namely disability studies – emerged in the Western academia. Analogically to race studies or

queer studies, disability studies explore disability as a part of human diversity, thinking about it as an integral part of a human being and not as an obstacle to overcome. One of the fundamental concepts of the field are the models of disability. The distinction between the medical model and the social model became a cornerstone for founding disability studies.

In the medical model, disability is seen as a result of a biological or psychological defect of an individual, and attention is focused on limitations that it causes (Oliver 1996). In this approach, *deficit* is a central concept, and striving to neutralize it is a fundamental activity. People with disabilities are expected to seek professional assistance in order to bring relief to their undesirable condition (Donoghue 2003). This approach usually results in the stigmatization and marginalization of people with disabilities, who are labeled as social deviants or deemed a moral danger for social order (Goffman 1963; Friedson 1965).

In the social model, in contrast, disability is a result of the fact that society is not organized in a manner which would take into account the needs of all its members. In this approach, disability is a socio-political constructed category and not an individual characteristic. In other words, the main disabling factor is not the physical, cognitive, or mental condition, but society, its oppressive structures, and discriminatory institutions (Finkelstein 1980; Barnes 1991; Oliver 1996).

Although emancipatory in its principles, the social model is also strongly criticized for its reductionist character, the underestimation of the physical and emotional aspects of disability, and ignoring the bodily experience of impairment, which leads to a disembodied notion of disability (Hughes and Paterson 1997). This critique has stimulated a very vivid and fruitful discussion across the years, which results in many proposals of a reformulation of the social model as well as of the creation of new models, for example the affirmation model (Swain and French 2000) or the tripartite model (Bolt 2015). My proposal to think about disability as a resource follows this trend of searching for new interpretations which not only are more affirmative, but also appreciate the embodied experience of disability. I deliberately use the term 'visual impairment' to overcome the strictly reductionist thinking about disability imposed by the social model and to go back to the corporeality of living as a blind or low-vision person. I want to stress the embodied experience of certain sensory situations of my interlocutors.

## Disability as a Resource

*Resource* is a term coming from economics. In this field, it is understood as everything that goes into the production of goods and services (Bruce, McConnell, and Flynn 2013). In other words, economic resources include all material and non-material components of the process of production. Erich Zimmermann (1933: 3) notes the subjective character of a resource. Speaking about natural resources, he points out that they become resources in the economic sense of the term "only if, when, and in so far as they are, or are considered to be, capable of serving man's needs". It means that something can be assessed as a resource only when people know how to use it.

The notion of resource has quickly transferred into other social sciences. In sociology, it appears mainly in the theories of social capital. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1990) frequently use the term ‘resources’, but neither of them provides a clear definition of it. It should be noted, however, that the concept of embodied capital defined by Bourdieu (1986) as “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” corresponds to some extent with the concept of disability as a resource proposed here. Nan Lin (1982) develops his theory of social capital simultaneously to the works of Bourdieu. However, in his work, Lin dedicates much more space to the notion of resource and the sharp distinction between it and social capital than the French sociologist did. Lin (1982) defines resources as “goods, material as well as symbolic, that can be accessed and used in social actions”, and classifies them into two categories: personal resources and social resources. The former can be ascribed or achieved, and they include such characteristics of the individual as gender, race, age, education, etc. The latter, on the other hand, involves resources located in the social network and social ties of the individual to which the individual has access.

The concept of resource is also commonly present in psychology. Researchers inquiring into stress-coping and adaptation were probably the first ones to appreciate its utility. Steven Hobfoll (2002: 307) defines resources as “entities that either are centrally valued in their own right (e.g. self-esteem, close attachments, health, and inner peace) or act as a means to obtain centrally valued ends (e.g. money, social support, and credit).” Later on, the concept of resource was also incorporated by health psychology and various schools of psychotherapy. Ericksonian psychotherapy – in which resource is much broader than it had been before, as it is understood as “any emotion, event, belief, or behavior that a client has experienced” – can serve as an example here (Leslie 2014: 13).

Undoubtedly, resource in psychology is much better conceptualized than in sociology. However, it always appears in the context of adjustment. An individual usually reaches for his/her personal resources when facing stress or critical life events. In all cases, resources are a means to reach a balance rather than to go beyond the scheme. Interpreting disability as a resource when it is understood like in psychology would correspond directly with the medical model of disability. That is why in my study I argue for going beyond the definitions proposed above. It should be understood in a much broader sense, taking into account not only what it is, but also how it can be accessed, used, and interpreted not only by the owner, but also by the others.

I define 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. Resource can be profitable in any sphere of life of an individual, and it can be used in any kind of social action or life activity. Resource has a productive, relative, and subjective character. It can be freely and facultatively accessed by an individual. In order to address the question about whether disability can be understood as a resource defined in such a way, it is worth evoking two concepts grounded in disability studies which reflect on perspectives that arise from approaching the world from an atypical position.

The first perspective is cripistemology, which can be defined as “an alternative epistemology that emerges from the lived experience of disability” (Johnson and McRuer 2014: 134). The second one is the theory of complex embodiment, which, by blending the social model and the medical model, defines disability as an epistemology of the physical but socially-located body. This approach is informed by the assumptions that any knowledge is socially-situated, any identity is socially-constructed, and that the bodies excluded from the dominant social ideology can expose this ideology to critique (Siebers 2008). These approaches focus on the questions of identity and political demands; however, their critical potential can also be applied to analyze the functioning of disability in the field of art.

## Methodology of the Study

This paper is based on a larger research project that I am conducting as part of my doctoral dissertation, which explores disability as a resource concept. The main research goal is to investigate how visually-impaired artists in Mexico manage their disability in navigating between sensory knowledge, personal artistic vision, creative process, disabled identity, and access. In order to achieve this objective, I address several specific research questions:

1. What motivates visually-impaired persons to take up an artistic activity?
2. How do visually-impaired persons work with the visual artistic material?
3. What allows and helps them do that?
4. In what situation and under what condition are visually-impaired artists advantaged over the sighted ones in the creative process?

The inquiry was carried out between December 2020 and January 2022 with nine participants (five women, four men) aged from 28 to 58, mostly living in Mexico City, one person living in Oaxaca, and one in Guadalajara. Four of them hold a degree in artistic fields (three in music, one in painting); three are also higher-education graduates, but in other fields; and two have secondary education. Eight of them are legally blind (five born blind) and one has acquired low vision. One of them started his artistic activity after gaining visual impairment. The types of art practiced by my interlocutors include singing, playing an instrument, doing stand-up comedy, acting in a theater, painting, sculpture, photography, storytelling, and fabric. Some of my interlocutors pursue more than one type of art.

The research was planned as a typical ethnographic field work which would include interviews and participatory observation (see: Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Angrosino 2007). Unfortunately, due to the global pandemic of COVID-19, my research stay in Mexico was canceled. As a consequence, the method of the inquiry changed significantly. I was forced to eliminate participatory observation and concentrate on interviews that were enriched by online materials, such as digital registration of the performances of some of my interlocutors, press articles, and descriptions of their artworks available on various Internet services and social networks. My method resides somewhere on the borderline between ethnography and sociology, with the basic material acquired through individual unstructured interviews (Konecki 2000) There was also additional data collected in a desk research and a netnographic inquiry (Kozinets

2010). Interviews were carried out via the Zoom platform, after which they were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. As all interviews were carried out in Spanish, all fragments of transcriptions used in this paper have been translated into English by myself. When quoting my interlocutors directly, I provide the gender and the age of the quoted person. I decided to use Zoom, because it is popular among blind users, since it is assessed by them as the most accessible for screen reading. Comfort in usage and good knowledge of the chosen platform is a key factor in the process of building a sense of security of interlocutors in the online interviews (Ślęzak 2021).

The inquiry was preceded by a thorough interrogation of artists with visual impairment in Mexico. 17, Instituto de Estudios Críticos (17, Institute of Critical Studies) turned out to be the most resourceful source of knowledge and contacts. As a result, most of my interlocutors are somehow related to it, and also related to each other. Some of them work together in artistic projects and collectives. Although I found most of the interlocutors using the snowball method, I had known some of them because of their artistic production before the research started, and I contacted them independently from the gatekeepers associated with the Institute.

Interviews focused on the question of the current artistic activity of my interlocutors, but also contained elements of life history. The main themes tackled in the interviews included: education, family situation, artistic activity, dealing with disability, autonomy.

The collected data was subjected to a two-stage analysis. In the first step, a descriptive analysis was applied in order to break the research material down into its component parts and observe what patterns or themes emerge repeatedly. In the second step, a theoretical analysis was used to reflect on possible explanations of these recurring motives (Angrosino 2007). In the course of the analysis, several categories were clarified. Subsequently, they were classified and assessed with regard to the relevance for the study (Silverman 2005; Flick 2007). Some themes, though important for a general understanding of my interlocutors' functioning, are not included in the present paper, since they are not strictly related to the research topic. Eventually, I identified four categories, namely: inspiration, representation, non-ocularcentric imagination, and accessibility, all of which are subject of the present study. This identification was carried out in the emic perspective, since it drives much more upon what my interlocutors have told me rather than upon previous studies, as the theme lacks systematic scientific research (Angrosino 2007). It should be noted, however, that the names of categories have been designated by myself. These terms are rarely mentioned by my interlocutors, but the situations described by them can be conceptualized as such.

## Inspiration

Most artists draw inspiration from their life experiences to some extent. Even if the works are not intended as autobiographical, the artists' experiences such as living in a given place, with a given sex, profession, race, or social position – shape the imagination of the artist and – as a consequence, are

somehow reflected in his/her creative work. Treating personal experience of disability as an artistic inspiration could therefore be understood on many levels, starting with using real events from daily life with disability and ending with taking up the topic of disability as a starting point for general reflection on some universal problems.

One of my interlocutors, a person with a guiding dog, admits that funny or annoying situations involving her dog that she experiences constitute a good source of inspiration for her stand-up. "There is another [a stand-up routine – M.D.], where I speak about all adventures with the guiding dog. It is funny, but it is also educational. Well, in that way people realize, laughing and whatever you want, but they realize that they put their foot in their mouth. I mean, that they cause a conflict when they touch a guiding dog" (woman, 30).<sup>1</sup> In this case, the socially-situated and embodied knowledge of the owner of a guiding dog serves as a source of inspiration. Daily life experiences also become the motivation to take up the activity on the stage to some extent. It turns out to be an effective tool for shaping the positive social attitude and correct behaviors toward people with disabilities.

Another way to get inspiration from the personal experience of disability is to reflect on it in more general terms, without referring to particular events. One of my interlocutors says that in the experimental theater, in which she acts, reflections on the various personal experiences are a significant part of the artistic work: "It was a kind of theater that was strongly based on personal experiences. So, in that performance I was my character myself. So I was talking about my blindness, for example and I had a whole one scene in which well, I was talking about these things. [...] It was all born from the exercise of improvisation" (woman, 58).<sup>2</sup> For this woman, her experience of living with a disability is a kind of artistic material, as if it was a lump of clay from which she makes her stage character. In this case, the final artistic product has a very personal and individual character. Rooted in the real life, inspiration becomes a factor that blurs the difference between the actor and the performed character.

The last example of how the artist's own disability can inspire him/her is related to the subversive potential of disability. As an identity loaded with very strong stereotypical meanings, disability lends itself as a means for questioning some social norms. Some artists do it by speaking about social reactions for their disability in provocative and shocking ways. By breaking established norms, artists confront the spectators with their stereotypical patterns of thinking.

Barbara Lisicki and Alan Holdsworth, British activists and disabled artists, wrote the poem titled "Disabled People Aren't Allowed to Say Fuck", which is a bitter satire on the double standards applied to talk about disability. There is a social license for non-disabled people to use the discriminatory,

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1 "Hay otra (una rutina de standup), donde hablo de todas las aventuras con un perro guía. Es chistoso, pero también es educativo. Pues así la gente se da cuenta, riéndose y lo que quieras, pero se dan cuenta de que están metiendo la pata. O sea que están causando un conflicto al de tocar perro guía."

2 "Había un tipo de teatro que estaba muy basado en las experiencias personales. Entonces en esta obra yo misma era mi personaje. Entonces hablaba yo de mi ceguera y tenía toda una escena en donde pues, hablaba de esas cosas. [...] Todo esto nació de ejercicios de improvisación."

ableist language, while people with disabilities are expected to be kind, grateful, and smiling. Swearing does not fit into the idealized image of people with disabilities as humble beneficiaries of charity (Dubiel 2021).

One of my interlocutors works with his disability in a similar way when preparing monologs for his stand-up. As he points out, when seeing a blind person, people always think about him/her as extraordinarily brave and lovely, omitting the whole diversity and complexity of humankind that is obviously reflected in each blind person, too. His way to question this stereotypical image is to evoke some controversial themes and behaviors: “In my routines, I say that I’m a swinger and that my girlfriend and I invite people to fuck in our house. And that I’m blind but have sexual relations all the time and that we use cocaine and marijuana. However, I speak about it not because I do it, but really it makes you subversive in the sense that people think: wow I didn’t know that a person who can’t see could do that” (man, 28).<sup>3</sup>

This is shocking for multiple reasons. First of all, disability and sexuality are, as observed by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (2012: 1), “if not antithetical in the popular imagination, then certainly incongruous.” People with disabilities are often denied to have and satisfy sexual needs (Maldonado Ramírez 2018; Trojanowska 2020). Secondly, people with disabilities are rarely associated with provocative statements. Rather, they rather expected to adapt to social norms and schemes. Last but not least, it probably opens a range of questions about the logistics of such activities in the minds of the spectators. In this case, blindness of the performer is a resource for subversive norm-questioning. His/Her position of an excluded body enables him/her to spotlight and criticize socially-constructed expectations.

## Representation

Representation of disability in culture can be understood twofold. The most obvious is how disability is constructed and reproduced in culture by non-disabled members. This understanding of representation has so far been most explored by scholars from the field of disability studies. Most cultural and literary disability studies focus on analyzing how the non-disabled describe or perform disabled characters in paintings, photography, novels, films, theater performances, comics, etc. (Garland-Thomson 1997; Mitchell and Snyder 2000; Antebi 2009; Alaniz 2014; Bolt 2014). However, there is another understanding that also is noteworthy, and I will focus on it in this part. It is representation understood as presence, active participation in culture. This kind of representation is usually considered under the umbrella of disability art, denoting types of artistic production in which disabled artists create artwork that is more or less related to their experience of disability (Kuppers 2003; 2019; Hadley

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3 “En mis rutinas hablo de que soy swingers Y de que mi pareja y yo invitamos gente a coger En nuestra casa. Y de que soy ciego pero todo el tiempo estoy teniendo relaciones sexuales y de que tomamos cocaína, y marihuana pero hablo de eso no tanto yo lo haga sino porque realmente genera ser disruptivo en el sentido de – ay güey no sabía que una persona que no ve podía hacer eso.”

and McDonald 2019). I propose to distinguish two subtypes or aspects of representation understood this way, which can be tentatively named as ‘disabled performing disabled’ and ‘disabled performing non-disabled’. I use the word “performing”, because this phenomenon is probably most visible in the field of performing arts; however, it could be applied to other branches of art, too.

Although in classical Western theater all roles were played by white men, nowadays the presence of women and non-white actors is a natural and obvious part of diversity in film and theater. Unfortunately, for most filmmakers and theater directors, the fact that disabled characters are performed by non-disabled actors is equally natural. Disability advocates, therefore, ask: if painting white actors black is considered extremely incongruous, why does it seem completely correct to seat an able-bodied actor in a wheelchair? This practice seems to be not far away from racist practices of whitewashing and black face (Gilman 2013; Harris 2014). They postulate that disabled characters should be performed by disabled actors. The scope of presented arguments is wide, from the most principal idea of authenticity or accuracy of the performance, through the reclaiming of the presence in the culture, and ending with the economic aspect of providing jobs for disabled actors (Pritchett n.d.).

Apparently, some experimental Mexican theater companies share this point of view and want blind characters to be performed by blind actors. One of my interlocutors mentions that she played the role of an old prostitute that lost her sight, so the blind actress was needed and she was the only blind person in this performance. In this case, the blindness of my interlocutor is her acting resource, because it provides her with the critical embodiment necessary to perform the blind character properly and accurately (Johnston 2016). In some cases, blindness of an actor may also strengthen the symbolic dimension of the blind character. This was the experience of another interlocutor, who participated in Bertolt Brecht’s play titled *The Exception and the Rule*. “In this play, I interpreted the Justice because, you know, that it is supposed that the justice is blind, right? So well, my character was mounted on a pedestal all the time. I didn’t have to go anywhere, I only had interventions from time to time in the play” (woman, 40).<sup>4</sup> In this case, critical embodiment is not necessary, because the character stands still, but her true blindness highlights the authenticity of justice at the symbolic level. It is also a significant step in the process of reclaiming the presence in the space of culture.

The phenomenon of disabled performing non-disabled is a reinterpretation of able-bodied culture by artists with disabilities, for example an actor with a disability performing a fictional character or historical figure who is non-disabled. Analogical actions are already taken up in the field of other identities. In 2018, the Japanese HBO broadcasted the TV series *Miss Sherlock*, in which the most famous detective in history is a female figure. In 2021, British Channel 5 broadcasted the miniseries *Anne Boleyn* with a black actress, Jodie Turner-Smith, playing the titular role. In this case, some of the above-mentioned arguments can also be recalled, for example reclaiming cultural presence,

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4 “En esa obra yo interpreté la justicia porque ya ves que se supone que justicia es ciega, no? Entonces, pues mi personaje estaba montado en un pedestal todo el tiempo. Yo no tenia que moverme a ningún lado, solo tenia mis intervenciones de tanto en tanto en la obra.”

but the general significance of this artistic trick is slightly different from the former one. First of all, it is a step toward the ideal situation, when it is not his/her physical capability or appearance, but artistic skills that determine the casting of a certain performer.

One of my interlocutors, who is an opera singer, mentions that the script of the performance was changed especially for him. Cast to perform Rodolfo in Puccini's *La Bohème*, my interlocutor had problems navigating the stage because of complicated decorations, so the director decided to present Rodolfo as a blind person. He moved through the stage using the cane and also was sometimes accompanied by a young boy serving him as a guide, who does not exist in the original play, but was added especially for my interlocutor's comfort.

A person with a disability is not a very common character in the opera. Blind Rodolfo, then, can be interpreted as a step toward a more inclusive opera. Visual impairment of my interlocutor challenges not only the inaccessibility of the stage understood directly as for the blind actor, but also in the more symbolic meaning for the blind character. His blindness becomes a resource in the process of reclaiming human diversity in the opera.

Another question related to casting an actor or actress who is completely different from the common image of the character is that it may be the intention of the director to open a new reading of a well-known character. In such a situation, the logical order is the opposite of the former case. Primarily, the director wants the character to be a person with a disability and looks for a suitable person to perform this role. One of my interlocutors was cast exactly for that reason. She describes her stage character as follows: "It was a play based on the Labyrinth, the whole myth of Labyrinth, Minotaur, Theseus, Ariadne. And I was Ariadne. It was a very interesting play because Ariadne was blind. She was a blind character. And she, yes, because of her blindness knew the Labyrinth perfectly" (woman, 58).<sup>5</sup>

As in the case of blind Rodolfo, blind Ariadne is a step toward the inclusivity of classical culture. However, this time, it was a clear intention of the director. In the myth of the Labyrinth there is nothing about Ariadne's blindness, but, in fact, there is nothing about her sightedness either. People just tend to think that if a certain characteristic is not mentioned, it does not appear. Such a directorial trick forces spectators to reflect on their presumptions. It also enables a deeper understanding of the construction of the character. Blind people usually have much better spatial orientation than the sighted. Ariadne's blindness may explain her good knowledge of the Labyrinth.

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5 "Era una obra basada en el laberinto, todo el mito de laberinto, el Minotauro, Teseo, Ariadna. Y yo era Ariadna. Era una obra muy interesante, porque Ariadna era ciega. Era un personaje ciego. Y ella sí por su ceguera, conocía el laberinto perfectamente."

## Non-Ocularcentric Imagination

In 2007, Juan Carlos Saavedra, a Mexican actor and theater director, decided to stage a play in complete darkness and cast blind people as actors for that venture. Over time, the project turned into a theater company called Teatro Ciego (Blind Theater), and it is still playing.

The theater is supposed to be an inherently ocularcentric type of art, based on observation, looking, even staring. In darkness, the spectators are confronted with their assumptions about theater and reoriented to other than visual modes of knowing by depriving them of images. What is important, the blind theater is not a radio play; it is a real theater performance, including the whole embodied experience of being in the theater: the sound of actors' voices and movements, the touch of the chair, the smell of the neighbor's perfume. When the action takes place in the forest, spectators are showered with leaves. They can smell the coffee when the action moves to the bar. They are forced to rely on four senses and to use them to the maximum. Their daily perception is extended.

The blindness of the actors works as a resource at many levels. On the one hand, as mentioned above, it becomes a vehicle for sighted spectators to focus on sensory experiences that they usually tend to omit. On the other hand, it enables the actors to forge their unique way of acting. Over the years, the company has become more and more professional. Not all performances are now carried out in darkness, and not only blind actors are cast. This situation makes both sighted and non-sighted artists go out of their comfort zone, but it also creates a unique space of interaction and exchange between sighted and blind corporeal acting practices.

In the opinion of my interlocutors, blind acting contributes also to the general experience of acting at many levels. They also interpret it as a kind of advantage over sighted artists. Considering it in terms of *cripistemology*, it turns out that some specific abilities that one has to develop because of functioning as a blind person become his/her resource in the dramatic work. One of them is imagination, which, according to Constantin Stanislavski (1989), plays a crucial role in the process of interpreting the character. One of my interlocutors stresses the meaning of imagination in acting and notes that blind people are privileged in this respect: "The actor is completely an imagination. And if there is something that the blind have well developed is the imagination. Especially a person blind from birth, who lives imagining everything. Since he can't see with his eyes, he constructs all that on what he imagines" (man, 28).<sup>6</sup> This belief, expressed by the congenitally blind person, may raise objections from the sighted, who usually question the blind person's abilities to imagine. This discrepancy can be related to differences in understanding the notion of imagination. While for the sighted it is usually associated with thinking about images, for the blind it is much more related to embodiment. And this is the kind of imagination close to the living emotion that Stanislavski is talking about. Blind actors cannot simply mimic other people's expressions, but are forced to look for their own means instead.

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6 "Es la imaginación completamente el actor. Y si algo tiene desarrollado un ciego, es la imaginación. Y más un ciego de nacimiento que vive de imaginar todo. Porque no ve con los ojos entonces todo lo construye a partir de lo que imagina."

Stanislawski strongly condemns imitation as an acting tool. He ascribes it to the lower class of acting that he calls mechanical acting, unlike true art that is based on living real emotions. According to him, “There can be no true art without living. It begins where feeling comes into its own. [...] In mechanical acting there is no call for a living process, and it appears only accidentally. [...] To reproduce feelings, you must be able to identify them out of your own experience. But as mechanical actors do not experience feelings they cannot reproduce their external results. With the aid of his face, mimicry, voice and gestures, the mechanical actor offers the public nothing but the dead mask” (Stanislawski 1989: 24). My interlocutors share Stanislawski’s point of view about living emotions as well as they stress the corporal aspect of embodied emotions. One of them openly criticizes the ocularcentric methods of theater training: “When they (sighted actors) work, for example, with gestures, corporal expression, with a very specific mobility, they copy it immediately from their professors. And for us is to understand. Well, when I, for example, conducted an acting workshop with the blind, it was a challenge to make them understand, those that have never seen, what an annoyed face looks like. So it’s making them an annoyed face, including that they touch you. It is to lead them to emotion, to lead them to annoyance. And no matter if you frown or not. No matter if you roll your eyes. The point is that you should be annoyed at that moment and what’s on your face. Is it annoyance? Well, I don’t know, but your face is not a copy of somebody else who you observe being annoyed” (woman, 30).<sup>7</sup> It turns out that in acting – contrary to the usual ocularcentric seeing as a means of knowing paradigm – it is the lack of sight that is the source of understanding. Sight is a relief, but it is treacherous. It seems to offer a shortcut to interpretation, but, in fact, it could lead to mechanical acting instead of true art and to showing the death mask on the stage, to borrow terms from Stanislawski. Visual impairment in this approach becomes a resource that motivates an actor’s self-development and results in in-depth role-interpreting. It also contributes to the authenticity and originality of expression.

Another important aspect of blind acting is spatial orientation. On the one hand, it requires a lot more effort from blind actors than from the sighted ones, while on the other hand, this additional work rewards them with a much deeper experience of the space of the stage. The above-mentioned interlocutor describes the process of the familiarization with this space as follows: “We have a different way of getting to know the space. Because well, an actor comes and that’s all. He glances at the stage and that’s it. We, well, 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 and you have to blend in” (woman, 30).<sup>8</sup> Again, by using the *cripistemological* lens, it can be revealed that

7 “Cuando trabajan (actores que ven), por ejemplo, con gestos, con expresión corporal, con movilidad muy específica, que ellos la copian inmediatamente, con sus profesores. Y para nosotros es entender. Pues yo cuando, por ejemplo, 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. Es llevarlos a la emoción llevarlos 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. 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.”

8 “Nosotros tenemos otra forma de conocer el espacio. Porque pues un actor llega y nada más. Le echa ojo al escenario y ya. Nosotros pues 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 como todo un ritual de presentación con el espacio que vas a ocupar. Es un espacio que vas a habitar y te tienes que adecuar.”

blindness enforces certain behaviors of an actor that result in producing a very specific relation with the space of the stage and deep embodiment of it. Presumably, such an approach would be profitable for all actors; however, actors who can see could easily skip it, so they do not explore this possibility.

## Accessibility

Nowadays, accessibility is not simply a special service aimed at enabling people with disabilities to experience art, but it also often becomes an important part of the process of producing and presenting art, which improves the experience of all spectators. As Jessica Cooley and Ann Fox (2014) observe, “accessibility is an aesthetic that enlivens and enriches the experiences of all people.” Thinking about accessibility already at the stage of organizing an exhibition or preparing the show may result in designing innovative and engaging ways for everybody to interact with art.

Obviously, before the piece of art can be exhibited in an accessible way, it should be produced by an artist. The more an artist thinks about accessibility at the stage of creation, the more accessible the piece will be for the recipients with disabilities. Following this idea, striving to make their artworks as much accessible as possible, some artists discover that accessibility can serve also as a new tool of artistic expression. One of my interlocutors, a painter with a low vision, in developing her painting techniques is inspired by accessibility and aims to make her pictures more multi-sensorial. She explains it in the following way: “Some of them (paintings) smell, because I added a fragrance essence to them. [...] A picture of fruit or a picture of flowers, well, with an appropriate essence. [...], In that way The smell helps persons if they don't see and I'm not there to explain what it is exactly there” (woman, 51).<sup>9</sup>

Not only is this artist driven by the will of making her works accessible to blind visitors, but she also strives to create the opportunity for autonomous contact with art. As Georgina Kleege (2018) observes, for the blind, contact with art is usually intermediated with the audio description or the tactile copies. The artist who is visually impaired herself is perfectly aware of this issue and challenges the traditional thinking about painting by engaging senses other than sight. In case of this artist, accessibility, creativity, and disability are strictly related with each other. As Sunaura Taylor (2017: 232) notices, creativity is an inherent element of the experience of living with disability: “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”. In other words, a person who has to deal with the inaccessibility of the surroundings all the time becomes more creative in general terms, which in the context of creative work results particularly profitable. Due to her visual

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9 “Algunos (cuadros) huelen porque les pongo esencia. [...] Un cuadro de frutas, o un cuadro de flores pues con la esencia adecuada. [...] Se me ocurrió, porque pues que así las personas si no ven y si yo no estoy y no puedo explicar qué es exactamente lo que hay. El aroma sí ayuda.”

impairment, the discussed artist has to expand her creative techniques for her own comfort of work. It turns out that the concept of accessibility could refer not only to the art's audience, but also to the artists themselves. The situation of a deterioration of eyesight, especially for a visual artist, usually makes the creative process inaccessible and prompts one to look for new, less ocularcentric methods of work. This artist, due to her disease, has a problem with seeing contours, so she reaches for collage, which is a technique that helps her with that. She describes her creative process as follows: "I had to, well, explore another technique. Because I painted oil and now acrylic paint and also collage, because collage has texture. So I'm aware of what I'm painting. I smoke a lot, so I have many packs of cigarettes. So, I told you that when I look closely I distinguish colors. So I cut them and I separate them with the shades and in that way. With that I make pictures like those I drew before perhaps with pencil or in charcoal, but now I do collage" (woman, 51).<sup>10</sup> My interlocutor, just like Henri Matisse, under the influence of gained disability, turns from traditional painting to the cut-paper collage.<sup>11</sup> What makes it possible to perceive disability as a resource here is the fact that in both cases, i.e. that of Matisse and that of my interlocutor, pieces of art created with this new technique are widely appreciated. The cut-outs by Matisse are presented in the most eminent museums of modern art all around the world. My interlocutor, though not as famous as the French fauvist, develops her career constantly, taking part in more and more exhibitions.

## Concluding Remarks

The scope of interpretation of disability as a resource in creative work is really wide. Inspiration, representation, imagination, and access are four aspects of this use that are most evident in the studied material, but surely not the only aspects of the creation that can be enriched by the disability of the creator.

As the analyzed material shows, the crucial factor in thinking about disability as a resource is the critical embodiment. The sense of spatial relations, tactile, auditory, and olfactory perception, biographical facts such as education, illness and rehabilitation, daily experiences of discrimination (or the contrary: people's support) – all these elements contribute to the set of unique embodied and socially-situated knowledge that can be accessed only by a person living with a certain kind of disability. Obviously, it is not a resource *per se*, but it can become it when the artist consciously recalls it in his/her creative work. It may also be interpreted as such when it improves the artist's skills or techniques, or contributes to the development of new ways of expression. In order to for this to be

10 "Tuve que pues explorar otra técnica. Porque yo pintaba óleo y ahora pintura acrílica. y también collage, porque collage tiene texturas. Entonces me doy cuenta de lo que estoy dibujando. es que yo fumo mucho entonces tengo muchas cajetillas del cigarro. Entonces, te decía que como viéndolos de cerca distingo los colores. Entonces voy cortando y voy separándolos con los tonos y así. Con eso voy haciendo como dibujos que hacía antes tal vez con lápiz o carbon pero ahora hago collage."

11 Due to the complications after the surgery that he underwent in 1941, for 14 last years of his life Matisse had serious problems with health and he spent most of the time in bed or in a wheelchair. His mobility was significantly restricted, so he could not paint in the traditional way anymore. This situation inspired him to use a new technique, namely cut-outs, which he called "painting with scissors".

achievable, favorable conditions are necessary. The social context and conditions for creative work seem to be key circumstances here. Taking into consideration the experiences of my interlocutors, one of the most important conditions seems to be the open-mindedness of the broadly understood artistic community, for example theater directors. Also, the accessibility of cultural spaces such as galleries is a crucial factor here.

Due to the pandemic situation, my research is necessarily very limited, which is why the results are by no means definitive. However, I am convinced that driving upon even such a small sample makes it evident that exploring the creative potential of disability is a really significant input into the development of disability studies.

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## Cytowanie

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## Niewidzące spojrzenie: niepełnosprawność wzroku jako zasób w pracy meksykańskich artystów

**Abstrakt:** Studia o niepełnosprawności to dyscyplina rozwijająca się prężnie, ale najczęściej koncentrująca się na świecie anglosaskim. W swoich poszukiwaniach badacze tego nurtu zazwyczaj skupiają się na dekonstruowaniu powszechnych stereotypów i odkrywaniu systemowej dyskryminacji. Choć podejmowanych jest coraz więcej inicjatyw typu *disability pride*, to wydaje się, że wciąż afirmatywne podejście do niepełnosprawności jest w mniejszości. Artykuł jest propozycją wyjścia poza wspomniane powyżej schematy. Wkraczając w krąg kultury latynoamerykańskiej, autorka stara się zbadać, w jakim stopniu dotychczasowe ustalenia studiów o niepełnosprawności mają tam zastosowanie. Proponując rozpatrywanie niepełnosprawności w kategorii zasobu, chce poszerzyć afirmatywne spojrzenie na niepełnosprawność.

Celem artykułu jest krytyczny namysł nad kreatywnym potencjałem niepełnosprawności wzroku, wykorzystywanym przez meksykańskich niewidomych i słabowidzących artystów w procesie twórczym. Na podstawie badań przeprowadzonych w latach 2020–2022 autorka argumentuje, że wykorzystują oni swoją niepełnosprawność jako zasób w działalności twórczej. Wyróżnia cztery aspekty działania niepełnosprawności wzroku jako zasobu w pracy artystycznej: inspirację, reprezentację, nieokulocentryczną wyobraźnię oraz dostępność.

**Słowa kluczowe:** studia o niepełnosprawności, sztuka, Meksyk, zasób, niepełnosprawność wzroku