

Patrick Devlieger, Frank Renders, Hubert Froyen &
Kristel Wildiers (Eds.)

Blindness and the Multi-Sensorial City

Garant

Antwerpen - Apeldoorn

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Patrick Devlieger, Frank Renders, Hubert Froyen & Kristel Wildiers (Eds.)
Blindness and the Multi-Sensorial City
Antwerp – Apeldoorn
Garant
2006

372 pp. – 24 cm
D/2006/5779/15
ISBN 90-441-1739-4

Cover Design: Koloriet / Danni Elskens. Picture by Rieke Jacobs.

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Garant

Somersstraat 13-15, B-2018 Antwerpen
Koninginnelaan 96, NL-7315 EB Apeldoorn

www.garant-uitgevers.be uitgeverij@garant.be www.garant-uitgevers.nl info@garant-uitgevers.nl

Garant / Central Books
99 Wallis Road, London E9 5LN
bill@centralbooks.com

Garant / Coronet Books
331 Bainbridge Street, Philadelphia PA 19147
order@coronetbooks.com



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Blindness/City: A Disability Dialectic

Patrick J. Devlieger and Hubert Froyen

Neither the blind person nor the city seem to be equipped for each other. This incommensurability evolves from a primary shock of loss; the bridging lies in personal, social and material conviviality. The city can be understood as the gradual loss of nature, blindness as the loss of the capacity of visual perception, leading to an experience of feeling lost in city spaces that are neither designed nor built for non-visual orientation and navigation. The images produced throughout the course of history as a result, range from the blind beggar singing songs while reading from a Bible in Braille text to the blind person swiftly moving through the city with the aid of a white cane bring this to the forefront. The history of these images reflects the discursive developments of blindness and more generally of disability in terms of charity or of independence. Such a focus of representation however would mostly point to the past.

Yet, the city as a place of emergence and the potential that lurks in all vulnerability, and in blind and visually impaired people in particular, turns one to the question of "becoming", more precisely in the direction of the future. In this book, we are mostly interested in the future of the development of the relationship between blindness and the city; it presents a particular history of worldmaking. We endeavor to develop an approach of worldmaking at the intersection of a dynamic at three levels, through we wish we can investigate the making and remaking. At the personal level, the city is embodied: its meanings are the result of a personalized experience. The city is written unto the body. In particular, the sensorium allows one to in-corporate the city. For the blind and visually impaired person's particular organization of the sensorium, it involves that the interaction with the city takes place through particular ways of being attentive. At the social



Figure 1. The Blind Woman of Annandale, 1998, acrylic on panel, 112 x 112 cm, by Susan Dorothea White (reprinted with permission).

ucts, structures and built environments. 'Universal Design', or 'Design for All' has a dual objective, first the provisions of environments, objects en services which are convenient, safe and enjoyable by everyone, including people with disabilities, and secondly to reject the division of the human population into able-bodied and disabled people, to avoid segregation, apartheid, stigma. Focus on 'handicap situations' instead of 'handicapped people' (Froyen 2003). In all cases, universal design is context-oriented and driven and its generated knowledge is necessarily characterized by *techne* and *phronesis*, rather than *episteme* (Froyen, this volume).

The second figure that is central is that of blindness. The figure of the blind is not being used here merely as a metaphor to expand the meanings of certain situ-



Figure 2. The Blind Woman of Annandale, 1998, acrylic on panel, 112 x 112 cm, by Susan Dorothea White (reprinted with permission).

ations, but rather as a way to expand our understanding of the world. "The Blind Woman of Annandale" (Figure 1) by Susan Dorothea White, and in our own words, the purpose of our own work is to help a woman whom she has lost track of the neighborhood to find her way. White how much she has lost track of the neighborhood how she manages



Figure 2. The Blind Girl, 1856, oil on canvas, 32 ½ x 24 ½ in, by John Everett Millais (reprinted with permission from Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery).

ations, but rather in a particular dialectic with existing situations. In clarifying our understanding of this figure, we make use of a painting, “The Blind Woman of Annandale” (Figure 1), both in the interpretation of the creator, Susan Dorothea White, and in our own imaginative extension of this interpretation, for the purpose of our own work. White (2003, personal communication) has painted an old woman whom she admires for her audacity to come out of her house and into the neighborhood to go shopping, all by herself. In an encounter, the woman asks White how much further she had to go before reaching the main street, as she had lost track of the number of streets she had already crossed. White marveled at how she managed on her own and her courage in facing the danger crossing roads

and was astounded when she learned that the woman lived alone. When rendering the experience, White portrays the woman as a repeated figure entrapped in a dark vacuum of invisibility. She imagined that her blindness might feel like being continuously suspended inside a dark blue cavity that moves like an invisible, impermeable membrane, isolating her from the world and rendering her vulnerable. It cannot be broken because its boundaries always move with her and her stick. The painting's context stresses the things she cannot see, such as the child in the background, the beautiful flowers (gum-blossom, kangaroo paws, and wattle), and the city skyline. Her hand reaches into the letterbox at the front gate for mail she cannot read. Her house on the left side of the painting is derelict. The texture of the grain of the wood panel is used to create a sense of the fragility of vision and the imagined instability and uncertainty of blindness.

However, what struck us in the painting is not loss but the dynamism with which the woman "makes space". The mobility of her body, and the extension of her arms, aided by the white cane, transforms the space into existence, "real". Multiple positions of the body embody the space in different directions. Movement, positioning, and tactile pointing make the space real. In other words, the painting makes clear not only the *absence* of vision, but also the *presence* of non-visual experience (see Classen 1998:138). While the painting takes note of the losses that result from the experience of blindness, we would also like to emphasize upon the particular sensory qualities that are developed in blind people, such as the haptic, the tactile, and the auditory, which enables the making of a different version of the world. The painting not only shows how the person makes space by moving through it (see Munn 1996), it also creates locality, and by its reproduction and discussion in other media, including this book, also creates a transnational space (see also Low 2003).

John Everett Millais' painting of a blind girl of 1956 can perhaps further add to our understanding of the experience of blindness (see Figure 2). The blind woman can experience the music of her concertina, the touch of her daughter's hand and the smell of her hair, but not the rainbow in the sky. While visual perception is excluded for a blind person an analogous perception through sound, emotion, smell can sequentially render an experience of warmth and atmospheric tension, a discharging of rain, a dropping of the temperature, and the warming up by the sun. The experience becomes richer and comes close to conventional multi-sensorial perception when we add the possible verbal and non-verbal expressions of the small (sighted) girl.

In accordance with a cultural model of disability, the figure of the blind is emphasized in terms of what is won rather than on what is lost and on a critique of the world. Seeing, in its capacity to grasp the entirety of a situation, is more likely