THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND: FILMING DURING A PANDEMIC WITH A SIGHTLESS SUBJECT

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper is constructed to serve as a detailed analysis of the storytelling and logistical process for making the film *Sonora* in Colombia, South America. *Sonora* is an experimental short documentary with Juan Pablo Culasso as the main subject. Blind since birth and deeply reliant on his heightened sense of hearing and touch to understand the world around him, Culasso navigates a world that is truly more complex than most of us can imagine. As a result, he has developed a mind that inherently has a unique connection to nature. *Sonora* is ultimately a haptic film visually and sonically that combines Culasso's non-scripted voiceover with in-the-field examples of how he experiences nature. The goal is to instill a better awareness within the individual viewers of the potential use of their own senses.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In darkness exists a world layered with the textures of sound and touch. Juan Pablo Culasso was born blind in Uruguay and aspired to become a field biologist at the age of 13 when given a field recorder and microphone to start capturing nature sounds. He began building an extensive library of nature sounds and learned how to identify animals by their sounds. With a unique ear and affinity for the sounds of birds, Juan Pablo has learned how to distinguish and identify over 1,000 species of birds throughout Latin America, North America, and Antarctica. Despite being denied entrance into multiple universities to pursue his passion of being a field biologist, he continued to record (Culasso). The reason that Culasso was rejected from these programs was that they were not set up to accommodate blind people. When Culasso was seeking entry into these programs, blind people were commonly pigeonholed into fields of study like philosophy or sociology. Despite these setbacks, Culasso would go on to eventually be awarded as the winner of the National Geographic Great Minds Contest in 2013 for his ability to recognize over 500 birds just by their song, opening the doors for him to form a career path based on his passions. He now lives in Colombia, the country with the most diverse range of bird species in the world, totaling almost 2,000 species, or 20% of the global population of known species. Ultimately, Culasso aims to connect people to nature with his sound recordings by taking recordings of sounds in nature with the intention of capturing the essence any given environment to give listeners a wholistic experience when listening to his recordings

Culasso's story is complex and profound and could only be properly examined in a feature-length documentary; however, it was apparent during production that a conventional

structure revolving around a three-act arc, beginning-middle-end, was not the most appropriate approach if we relied solely on the footage captured during just a few short days of filming. Conversations were abundant, as was the writing about concepts and messages to be implemented in the film, yet this all lacked a concrete plot. Ultimately, it was decided that the film would rely on the sensory experience through visuals and sound design to maintain an organic sense of curiosity, tension, and insight, guided either by Juan Pablo's introspective and non-scripted voice-over or by the sounds of nature.

Academic rhetoric and documentary films often focus on the disenfranchisement or empowerment of blind people, but rarely contain both themes. For example, the 2006 film *Blindsight* follows the trek of six blind teenagers who scale the 23,000-foot Lhakpa Ri on the north side of Mount Everest in Tibet (Walker). Similarly, the 2012 film *Imagine* tells the story of blind students at an Institute for the Blind in Portugal, where they are taught to be cautious, safe, and live with their disability. This situation changes when a deaf teacher is hired and inspires them to go beyond their disability, ditching the use of the cane and teaching them how to orient themselves using sound vibrations (echolocation), instinct, and their imaginations (Schumann).

On the other side of this equation, films on the disenfranchisement of the blind tend to make that their focus and to stay there. For example, *Blindness* (2008), a dystopian tale, creates a world where everyone goes blind, and the entire society devolves into chaos as a result. Even famed movie critic Roger Ebert called this film "despairing and sickening […] ugly" (Ebert, *The Unbearable Being of Blindness*, para.1). In the movie *See No Evil* (1971), Mia Farrow plays a young woman who lost her sight in a horse-riding accident. There are many scenes of Farrow flailing about with her hands in front of her, reinforcing the idea that blind people are helpless

(BRWC). Through her actions, she adds to the false stereotypes, conveying messages that because the blind cannot see, they are unaware of their surroundings, and they are therefore naïve, trusting, and vulnerable. It seems this film is a celebration of disability more than anything.

What I came to find out through readings, viewings, and my time spent with Culasso is that specific sensitivities of a person living with a disability are simply going to vary. Culasso was a great teacher and guide and always expressed patience and gratitude regarding my use of language and actions. As I learned from watching the film *Dealt* about the blind card mechanic and magician Richard Turner, some blind people refuse to accept their blindness as a societal or even physical restraint, to a manic extreme. Yet, similar to Richard Turner's sister, Lori Dragt - also blind, Juan Pablo finds freedom and empowerment in accepting being called blind, sacrificing goals of inclusivity for a pragmatic and dependent lifestyle by which he is still able to follow his passions. Nonetheless, Juan Pablo was sensitive to notions of the "otherizing" of blind or disabled persons. He did not want to be called visually impaired or disabled; blind was perfectly fine. He also was careful not to refer to his blindness or heightened sense of hearing as a superpower. This rhetorical tendency is scattered throughout films and academia, creating a subtle undertone of divisiveness or "other" (Ashmead et al.; King). How his blindness was referred to was the one component of the film and interview that Culasso insisted on being able to pre-rehearse in addition to consenting to the final editing style of, particularly in how I was to execute the reveal of him being blind. Culasso expressed concern over this aspect because he had worked with many journalists and filmmakers in the past in which he was unhappy about how his "disability" was portrayed (Culasso). Rather than asking for veto power, he was just

concerned that the reveal sequence of his blindness and its' overall treatment were consistent with the theme I had outlined with him, which was one of empowerment. Needless to say, this made my job more manageable in the realm of navigating what was appropriate.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Documentary films are subject to a variety of categorical ambiguities, and none more so than in the experimental space of filmmaking, also referred to as non-traditional narrative or avant-garde, which may be used interchangeably. Experimental filmmaking started appearing on the landscape in the early 1920s. It had its' own unique approach to presentation, eschewed formal conventions, and presented the world differently. As Nichols notes:

> The explosive power of avant-garde practices subverts and shatters the coherence, stability, and naturalness of the dominant world of realist representation. Documentaries from the period between the wars cobble images together with remarkable abandon, fully in accord with the pioneering spirit of the avant-garde. (Voice-over commentary, poetic or expository, lends them a purposefulness the avant-garde typically eschewed.) (Nichols, "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde" 592).

This approach, as Nichols puts it, changes facts into subjective realities. The creation of the artist generates an alternate reality that the viewer experiences in the film as a new, unexpected, or unique experience. Villaplana Ruiz and Ortuño Mengual goes beyond this observation to characterize avant-garde films as a form of visual poetry. By imbuing a film with this poetic sense and abstract meanings, which go beyond the obvious common interpretations, they free the viewer from the normal boundaries of perception (4). This is important in *Sonora* as it permits the viewer to take in a visual representation of how sound is seen in a way that focuses on how we interpret with our senses and may not ordinarily be recognized by the human eye or ear, giving the finished work an otherworldly feeling. This allows the films' poetic nature to create an abstraction that expresses feelings or emotions that the individual may have never experienced or may have been unaware of beforehand or if translated literally.

Using experimental devices is important in filmmaking when representing disadvantaged and marginalized populations. Such methods have received limited attention in mainstream filmmakers and media. Brylla and Hughes note that the portrayal of blindness in Western culture has been very limited, portraying the blind as "unfortunate, disabled and deprived, or exotic, mysterious and supernatural" (74). This has positioned blind individuals in society as "the other" which has resulted in people who are blind as being difficult to understand due to their differences, rather than their similarities (88), something which *Sonora* seeks to navigate with a more empathetic tone.

This overt focus on the otherness of the disabled tends to omit disabled individuals from being portrayed as ordinary or coping with the day-to-day tasks that all of us must do, like shopping, travel, and housework (153). A way to escape this etic view and achieve an emic view is to map the experience of blind people through their own lived materiality, which conveys human subjectivity (283). In this way, their spatial experience of the world can be translated into an indexical (rather than iconic) permitting the viewer to shift away from being a spectator and away from the ocular centric interpretation to a synesthetic experience (72). The documentarian who achieves this shift enables the sighted viewer to have a more genuine understanding of the lived experience of the blind character(s) being viewed.

CHAPTER THREE

INFLUENTAL FILMS

Documentaries about disabled or disenfranchised people have historically leaned into more expository types of filmmaking, heavily reliant on talking-head interviews and archival footage vs. creating a deeper exploration and experience of the world of the subjects featured. Films on blind people have at times taken more experimental liberties, though I had failed to find a documentary about someone who was blind since birth. I have personally derived more inspiration from films that take more observational and verité approaches, but implementing this style meant adapting filming or editing techniques mostly from documentaries on unrelated subjects. Three films are the most appropriate to reference when talking about what influenced the form of storytelling in *Sonora*. In chronological order of viewing, the first would be *RAT FILM* by Theo Anthony, released in 2016, a feature-length documentary that explores the experimental practices of Red Lining in Baltimore during the early 20th century. *RAT FILM* focuses on Baltimore residents' perspectives of the current rat problem in the same neighborhoods exploited by federally funded research grants to John Hopkins University, creating a dynamic illustration of the parallels between now and then. *RAT FILM* goes far beyond *Sonora* in the complexity of both storytelling and the messages delivered, and it does not have anything to do with blindness. Yet, in *RAT FILM*, there was a viable justification for taking an experimental filmmaking approach that I wanted to seek out on my next project before *Sonora* had even been conceptualized. *RAT FILM* helped form the framework of stylistic intentions, specifically in delivering a message through a subject's perspective that was impossible to mimic accurately, thus creating a space for creative intuition to take over. This

would also allow space to incorporate an ecological conservation message that stems from a genuinely different angle: someone who primarily relies on sound, touch, and smell. When sighted people view the world, they tend to focus on visual degradation, but they pay less attention to the damage that could be happening in other aspects of a situation, such as things that can be touched, smelled, and heard.

The next slice of inspiration came during the treatment writing process upon watching a film called *Post Tenebras Lux*, particularly its opening scene, which could be a short film all on its own. The camera work and editing create a profound POV experience of a young girl walking through a muddy pasture in this scene. Dogs are barking and running circles around her as she navigates the field into a herd of cows. The tension is first created by the sound of the dogs but quickly shifts by revealing her exposure to free-roaming cows and horses, of which the dogs are fighting to maintain distance from. The girl does not seem to perceive the danger or that anything out of the ordinary is happening. Through simple fundamentals of camera work and editing, it is clear that this little girl, who has yet to develop the ability to form a complete sentence, has a connection with nature that perhaps only a young child can. This technical method felt appropriate to try and apply to the technical practices within filming and editing to create a tension that adds to the uniqueness and importance of a perspective from a man like Juan Pablo.

Lastly, a film called *Notes on Blindness* that I watched during the editing process of *Sonora* delivered another needed dose of inspiration and perspective. It is technically considered a documentary, which tells the story of a theology professor who starts going blind in the middle of his career, thus losing his ability to read and requiring not just new ways to take in information, but a new way in which he related to the world. The subject proceeded to record

hundreds of cassette tapes which were mostly recorded around his house and family or in his office as a daily diary. The audio was then used with actors that lip-synced the dialogue. By this device, the directors James Spinney and Peter Middleton, created an abstract and literal world that they drifted in and out of extremely effectively. One of the most powerful scenes from this film is when the subject, John Hull, muses about wanting to experience rain indoors; the allegorical scene shows rain creating a completely different sonic experience in each room, thus revealing the room in which he is listening. It is a beautiful film that communicates so much without words in that one sequence. This further re-emphasized where editing process was heading with *Sonora* and gave needed clarity in what the most important thing to communicate in the film is, and that's the experience of Juan Pablo.

Culasso's story is not simple, and many things were discussed, which we agreed to leave out of the film. He spent his entire life passionate about recording nature, trudging through South America and Antarctica mainly with the assistance of his father, who has now passed. He was denied entry into multiple universities to study biology and sound recording because of his blindness. Now, because of his accomplishments, he gives lectures at some of the same universities that denied him acceptance. Instead of focusing on the many facets of Culasso's story, *Sonora* aims to be a more introspective film by demonstrating *how* Culasso connects with nature and conveying why that is important. Because the story of *Sonora* focuses on the present, this approach inherently switches the mode of storytelling into a space that I had previously not explored but had only seen and admired in films such as those aforementioned among many others: blending the poetic with the verité in a poetic fashion.

By using experimental methods *Sonora* is not structured by time but instead follows an essay-style format drawn from Aldous Huxley's idea that a successful essay is comprised of *Three Poles* including the personal/autobiographical, the objective/factual, and abstract/universal truths (Huxley, *Collected Essays)*. The personal component is the most obvious as Culasso's voice-over largely carries the film as he talks about how he uses his senses. Initially taken from the talking head interview and edited to represent an inner voice, this set of dialogue (as opposed to in-person verité dialogue) focuses on how he uses his senses to connect to nature. The objective/factual component is represented by Juan Pablo's stating how many birds he has identified and the naming of exotic plants and birds during in-field shoots. The abstract/universal truths are loosely planted throughout but mainly represented at the end of the film with the last words, "Nature always wins." The film's arc is intended to allow space to incorporate experimental sequences while maintaining enough momentum to deliver the abstract/universal message on environmental degradation in tandem with gratitude for the senses we do have.

A secondary objective of the film is to create intricate and diverse soundscapes so that someone who is blind can watch the film and gather just as much information about the movements happening within any given environmental setting. Due to the nature of Culasso's craft and disability, this film seems to have required a technical and intuitive use of sound. It firmly establishes the viewer in the setting and ties into some of the undercurrent narratives, i.e., Juan Pablo trying to find the sound of a particular bird. For this to work, it would require a mode of storytelling that is as reliant on dynamic sound design as much, if not more so, than the visuals.

By providing an immersive audio experience and incorporating techniques such as ASMR recording and manipulating distance and location of a given sound, *Sonora* aims to portray Culasso's story in a way that provides the viewers with a greater appreciation for their senses, in particular their auditory one, as opposed to just feeling sympathy for a person with a disability. It also seeks to give vision through sound to any potential blind people watching the film. In this twenty-four-minute journey of the senses using nature, Juan Pablo's story, and sensory haptic feedback, we are left with not only a greater appreciation for our senses but also the natural world that we do have. Thus, it would be incomplete without adding the juxtaposed "City" sequence to give insight into Colombia's conflict of preserving the natural world against deforestation and nefarious corporate exploits. When we do not preserve it, we can see what it tends to become.

CHAPTER FOUR

MAKING THE FILM

Pre-production for *Sonora* started when I was speaking with a friend and collaborator and Colombian native who lives in Bogota about a group of birders that were formerly part of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). In Pablo's research, he had come across the work of Juan Pablo. I immediately knew that this would be a great launching point for my thesis and potential future projects revolving around environmentalism in Colombia. This pre-production process for *Sonora* proved to be vital. After multiple long-distance video chats with Juan Pablo and co-producer Pablo Camacho, I had gained sufficient insight to begin writing a treatment for the film. I had approximately one month to write the treatment before flying to Bogota to begin production and was relying greatly on Covid-related interferences not worsening the effect of the already limited availability of Camacho and Culasso. The treatment went through multiple revisions and was challenging due to trying to script out the unknown for the field days with Culasso and allow the space needed within production and post-production to explore how I would be incorporating some of the aforementioned experimental components of the film. We ultimately decided on a concrete treatment for the film that focused on in the incorporation of abstract ideas during production. This permitted a much smoother execution of ideas well as any potential deviations during production to capture unplanned shots or sequences. There was, and continues to be, a certain unpredictability in producing a film internationally during the Covid global pandemic. After having numerous projects fall through due to the pandemic in 2019 and 2020, there was an urgency to take advantage of the time where Culasso was available and when Colombia was not in full lockdown status. This being a self-produced

and financed film paid off in this respect, allowing for greater ease of movement without a crew to account for.

Bogota's geographic proximity to distinctly contrasted ecological landscapes made it feasible to plan each of the six days of shooting within individual day trips. During this trip, we ranged from elevations up to 12,000 feet in Colombia's iconic Paramo landscapes, with high tropical alpine landscapes, to being in the south, dropping down to 4,000 feet in elevation and being immersed in the tropical bird paradise of La Vega. The initial intent was to have six full days of filming. Due to the aforementioned Covid obstacles, however, planning for production was hasty, and there was much left to the fate of good luck, particularly when it came to arbitrary nationwide lockdowns, effectively causing three of the six days of shooting to be canceled. Thus, we spent one day filming in the tropical regions and two in the high Paramo regions, plus one day filming the interview in Bogota. Each day was riddled with obstacles; delays each day caused late departures from the city, which only permitted a few usable hours of daylight during each shoot. This was problematic during one day of getting lost on the way to one of the shooting sites. There were also technical issues, two of which would have a significant impact on the direction of the film during post-production. The first technical issue was faulty lens autofocus resulting in a constant flickering of focus going in and out of the background of Culasso's interview, effectively rendering the footage of the interview unusable. The other issue that occurred on two different occasions was when co-producer Camacho, in charge of field audio recording, left the lavalier microphone off while recording, so we ended up with one unusable onboard zoom microphone recording for most of the two days of shooting. As with previous projects, though, some of these mistakes were blessings in disguise, particularly the

unusable interview footage, forcing the film to be anchored in stylistic components outside of the talking head image. The field recording issue greatly tested Culasso's patience and eventually led to a significant reluctance to collaborate more in-depth. Consequently, I never gained access to Juan Pablo's sound library as extensively as we had agreed upon. This incident is a critical facet of the production process to reflect on when working with blind people. There can often be a tendency for blind people to need full confidence in those around them. Because of the failings of both my co-producer and me, this significantly – and justifiably – had an impact on Culasso's confidence.

Filming with someone who is blind presents an array of obstacles, some in the abstract like the issues with trust and confidence, and some logistical. We seemed to experience a different logistical issue every time we had a shoot. If we got slightly lost while driving to a site, this affected Culasso's trust. We also heavily relied upon his wife Sara to be there for each shoot. This meant that each day of filming had to fit within Culasso's schedule and his wife's. She was able to accompany him every day, but we were all required to step in at points and help facilitate his safety and well-being. It took a tremendous amount of trust on his part to make such intensive day trips with two filmmakers that he had just met. These days of traveling and filming provided valuable time, usually 2-3 hours each way, to better get to know Juan Pablo and Sara and gain insight into his perspectives. We learned on the first trip how empowered a person Culasso is, always looking for ways to test his abilities. On numerous occasions, we had to cross thin and creaky walking bridges in the jungle, and when we deemed a particular part impassable, he wanted to be the first to attempt it. We had to gauge what kind of terrain was safe and appropriate and be sensitive to not undermining his can-do spirit.

There is another vital component to the production process of *Sonora*, which is filming internationally/cross-culturally. Being the only U.S. citizen involved in the production process meant constantly having my ideas and agendas checked. Like many Latin American countries, Colombia operates on a much different tempo than the U.S. Even with having spent years overseas and six months in Colombia, I was constantly needing to adapt. In the end, many Colombian locals facilitated logistically and creatively in the development and execution of this film. Since *Sonora* is a self-financed student film, most everyone was very excited to help out where they could. It was a smooth process compared to my first trip to Colombia in a failed attempt to film a different thesis project because I had yet to connect with many locals. Given the highly complex nature of Colombian culture, building relationships with Colombians is critical, and this is even more so when dealing with a project with extremely limited funds. The biggest obstacle was dealing with punctuality in a city as large as Bogota, where hours or an entire day could easily pass during a five-mile taxi ride trying to find an essential cable or battery. The added pandemic resulted in fewer days of shooting than planned due to nationwide lockdowns in which nobody was allowed to leave their house for weeks at a time except to buy groceries.

Post-production began swiftly. I had come away from production with the impression that I greatly lacked enough material to carve out a compelling film, so I was eager to see what I could conjure up. I worked on the opening sequence right away, which has mostly remained untouched since and has been a guidepost for the film's style and pacing moving forward. By editing an opening sequence with a more comprehensive sound scheme and graphics, it allowed me to focus on crafting the arc in its most basic form with a better understanding of where it would eventually go once sound, color, and graphics were all fully implemented. As mentioned

before, the technical and logistical obstacles during production continued to build, limiting the ability to tackle storytelling with an unusable interview and valuable days in the field without the necessary audio. Because of this, however, it forced me to double down on the original intention of delivering a short film without a talking-head interview that focused on a more experiential space. I took a different approach than when in classes in that I mostly edited individual sequences separately, sometimes without knowing if or where they would fit in the film. Each sequence adds a unique setting, mood, and component to the narrative. I found this not to be the most efficient way as I was left with a dozen or so sequences, some less than a minute and some over ten minutes long. What this approach lacked in efficiency, it made up for by providing various ways to refine and play with how the sequences interacted with each other. One thing that can happen in this kind of cyclical puzzling is a loss of objectivity. Having gone through at least seven major revisions with countless additional tweaked cuts in between, there came the point where I had to make concrete decisions on the order of sequences and eventually picture lock with the hope that there would be relevancy and a sense of pacing among them.

A major post-production hurdle was always going to be how, if at all, I could handle certain emotions such as tension and differentiating between the POV of Culasso's parabolic microphone and his actual POV, thereby creating a blind effect. The implementation of tension was also resolved by the use of additional Foley sounds, like the creaking of the wood bridge as he walks. There are multiple moments when a similar type of tension is sought, such as when he struggles to arrange his field recording equipment. It is at the end of the "city sequence" that the scene builds into a symphony of chaotic sounds only to have them taken away in the breath of a

quiet palm-oil monoculture plantation, by which the tension is designed to play into the desired impact of silence.

Another hurdle was accounting for the visual representation of blindness, especially considering that Culasso has been blind since birth, thus having no prior reference of color or shapes. An overlay or effect over an otherwise normal image seemed inappropriate. Reversely, going too far with the intensity of any given effect also felt inconsistent with the visual style; it gave the viewer too much to focus on or was presumptuous. Settling on a simple black screen with occasional flashes of small specks representing the sounds being heard was what felt most appropriate in the end. This also helped serve as a visual palate cleanser for transitions and to give greater focus into the sounds that were being heard, particularly while Culasso is setting up his equipment.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

When considering *Sonora* within the context of the body of documentary films, there are clear indications of experimental methods used in the film. The realist representation of the landscapes that Culasso is surveying with his microphone is punctuated with a blurring effect which reminds the viewer that Juan Pablo is not seeing the landscape in the same way that they are, but he is "seeing" it with his ears to detect the bird sounds he loves to capture.

The sharp contrasts in sound effects reinforce the jarring effect that moving from the tranquil outdoor parks to the inner city evokes on a blind person as they shift back into an environment that, though necessary, is unsettling. This is further emphasized by the quick review of the evening news, which features murder, fire, death, and chaos – a world away from the outdoors where Culasso searches for new bird songs.

Sonora is ultimately a film that spawned from a desire to find ways to relate to the unknown. Yet, I found myself relating more and more to Juan Pablo and his sensitivity to sound and eagerness to be in nature. Countless sleepless nights were spent staring at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of the night in Bogota, feeling the onset of sleep-deprived insanity creep in. I finally stumbled upon a pair of earplugs which I cherished as if my life depended on it. The darkness and silence were what brought back the needed clarity.

The representation of Culasso in this documentary also presents a unique perspective of blindness, one that celebrates the disability, rather than disparaging it or viewing it as a disability. As Culasso himself says, one of his greatest assets is his blindness. Due to the ability to tune out visual distractions, he has attuned his ear to hear over 3,300 distinct sounds, which

helped him to identify the songs of over 1,100 species of birds. Rather than focusing on his differences or his disabilities, the film takes a unique turn for a documentary addressing a primary character and focuses completely on Culasso at work in nature. Therefore, this film achieves something that is not common in documentaries that focus on disabled subjects. It sees the disability as something not to be mourned, but to be celebrated because of what it has enabled the person to accomplish.

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