12/13/18/19: the making of Blind Spot

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15

12/13/18/19:
THE MAKING OF *BLIND SPOT*

Film Place Collective
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INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the lack of in-person interaction ensuing from social distancing measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic stretched the limits of filmmaking, both as a conduit for connection and as a spatially situated practice. Within both film and architecture, the question of how filmmaking could respond to the current health and socio-economic crises within a global lockdown became an especially pressing one. This chapter will look closely at the Film Place Collective's curatorial project *Blind Spot: Spaces of Lockdown*, a virtual exhibition of audio-visual and text-based works that respond to the spatial implications of lockdown. The exhibition shows how connectivity is possible under conditions of 'remoteness', deploying filmic strategies that rewrite histories and present current affairs from marginalised perspectives. We uphold film as a form of 'remote practice' which enables affective connection and communication within a moment of crisis. By affective, we do not just point towards (inter)personal feelings and emotions, but also the capacity to affect and be affected in worldly encounters.[1]

The Film Place Collective comprises filmmakers, architects, and researchers. We discuss and explore the material of film as it mediates place through image, sound, and movement. The members of our collective met through a doctoral initiative called Film+Place+Architecture at The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London.[2] Our work celebrates film as a spatial practice to pursue innovation in architecture, as much as it explores film as an intrinsically spatial medium from a film history and theory perspective.[3]

We launched *Blind Spot* in July 2020 with an open call to collaborate. We were struck by the ways the new boundaries imposed by social distancing prompted us to question spatial environments – the home, the workplace, the city in lockdown – from often starkly different vantage points that register (and exacerbate) existing inequalities. At the same time, the global Black Lives Matter protests, following the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020, exposed the necessity

of intervention within urban space and the built environment, from demonstrations to the removal of racist monuments.[4]

We chose to collaborate with three filmmaker-artists based across Europe who were thinking through these spatial implications in their own work. Over weekly conversations and emails, the project took shape remotely. In autumn, we produced a video for the *Remote Practices: Architecture in Proximity* symposium entitled *12/13/18/19*. The numbers refer to the Film Place Collective's weekly meeting times, taken across four time zones. The video was a way of illustrating our creative and curatorial activities. Finally, in December, we reconvened to discuss our collective experience in a virtual roundtable.[5] Over the course of six weeks in November and December of 2020, Film Place Collective virtually presented three new films by the artists alongside commissioned texts: *copia de la copia (de la copia)* by Rafal Morusiewicz, *Blanqui and the Stars* by Nina de Vroome, and *2020: State of Exception* by Merijn Royaards and Henrietta Williams.[6] Through these different stages of the project, we focused our discussion around two main questions: how can film respond to the current health and socio-economic crises that create conditions of lockdown?; and how can we work remotely as a collective to collaborate with others?

BLIND SPOT: A POINT OF ENTRY

Our idea for *Blind Spot* was sparked by street photographer Matthew Beck's short non-fiction film, *Shelter in Place*.[7] As our project unfolded, our work was clarified by the metaphor of the blind spot and motivated by texts from theorists Donna Haraway, Roland Barthes, and artist-filmmaker John Akomfrah.

Shelter in Place was released on 6 May 2020 as part of *The New Yorker Documentary* series. The

film captures New Yorkers' lived experiences of lockdown in the wake of 20 March 2020, when Governor Andrew Cuomo first issued a stay-at-home order to help curb the spread of COVID-19. Beck's portrait of lockdown and domestic confinement made us question: how might the necessity of distance alter our relationships with each other and with the spaces around us?; and how might film register and communicate these changing experiences of place?

With the everyday lives of New Yorkers increasingly confined to the home, Beck turned to the filmic medium and to his neighbours to help make sense of this new reality. He left notes on the doors of buildings situated across the street from his Manhattan apartment, inviting his neighbours to phone him. *Shelter in Place* splices and recombines the resulting collected telephone conversations, drawing us into the affective lives of Beck's neighbours, who sit by the window as they share their fears, hopes, worries, and other feelings provoked by the pandemic crisis.

The film begins with a series of *Rear Window*-like images of apartment windows, zoomed in and shot in vertical orientation. This vertical framing nods to our mobile devices and the hyperconnectivity they facilitate, yet in *Shelter in Place* it is the ringing of a phone and the voice on the other end of the line that establishes connection between the speaker and the filmmaker, and in turn, between the film and the listening viewer.

We found it striking that just as the pandemic ushers in an age of Zoom, Beck's film studiously avoids the aesthetics of the video call in favour of the comparatively outmoded telephonic voice. The neighbours' voices are muddied by echo, the poor audio quality recalling the bristle of static of analogue phone technologies. At the same time, the closeness of their voices to the microphone amplifies what Roland Barthes famously called the 'grain' of the voice.[8] This grain – 'the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips, a whole

presence of the human muzzle', as Barthes puts it – produces a sense of proximity to the body of the speaker and communicates affect beyond the words spoken.[9] Against images of domestic confinement in which the neighbours rarely make eye contact with the camera, *Shelter in Place* mobilises sound – the telephonic voice in particular – as a way of evoking proximity in distance.

> I don't think anybody ever really wants to die, but this is being brought front and centre, that we have to confront our mortality, and it is scary, yeah.
>
> Matthew Beck, *Shelter in Place*, 2020 (11.15 min)

> I want to travel so much more, I wanna start a family, I want to have kids; yes, there is so much, you know.
>
> Matthew Beck, *Shelter in Place*, 2020 (07.19 min)

> We don't know how far in the future we can look right now.
>
> Matthew Beck, *Shelter in Place*, 2020 (08.20 min)

> I was so looking forward to the spring, but it is a different spring now.
>
> Matthew Beck, *Shelter in Place*, 2020 (11.56 min)

While Beck's film offers a model for how film-making practices can generate genuine personal connection as opposed to mere technological connectivity, the concept of the blind spot provides a compelling metaphor for this moment of social upheaval when it is easy to lose perspective – to lose the ability to measure distance or proximity between ourselves and our surroundings, between ourselves and others; to fail to understand where we are positioned in relation to the outside world;

to lose our sense of place. The blind spot is the point of entry of the optic nerve on the retina where it is insensitive to light. While stereoscopic vision allows the visual fields of our eyes to overlap to avoid the effect of the blind spot, the single eye counts on the ability of the brain to fill in the missing part.

In this age of working remotely, we find ourselves immersed in an online world of apparently limitless space that we can see and hear but, at the same time, are unable to inhabit. Video calls flatten our being-in-the-world into image, and the reflection of ourselves in those calls acknowledges the double distance that separates us from ourselves as well as from the other. With our sensibilities thus altered and on-location film production curtailed, how do we go in search of place and connection in and through filmmaking practices? In *Shelter in Place*, the visual motif of the apartment window underlines the distance and separation between caller and filmmaker, the home and the outside world. At the same time, on a sonic level, the film centres conversation and its capacity to cross distances and span differences. By muting his own voice on the other end of the line, Beck creates an opening for the listening viewer to take up this position. In doing so, the film reveals how spaces of lockdown can nevertheless generate new lines of connection: by restoring the human voice as a locus for contact.

It is with a call to connection that theorist Donna Haraway opens her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*:

> The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice for learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent responses to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places.[10]
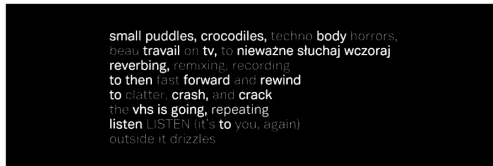
Haraway's thinking helped to orient our discussions as to how we, as a film and

Dear Nina,
I hope you are doing well. I am so sorry it is so difficult to meet, it is so challenging with the time differences! I am glad you sent your work on Blanqui for the Blind Spot Project! I love your tactile approach to filmmaking, the richness of the different animation techniques brings so much depth to the storytelling.
We are interested by how your voice-over allowed the flatness of the collages to detach themselves from the pictorial realm and expand spatially. I picked some moments (I have much more but I didn't want to overwhelm you!) and I was wondering if you would be interested in telling me more about the space where it was produced. I know you must be really busy but I would be available all day Thursday if you have a moment to discuss it.
Thank you so much for your consideration,
Phuong-Trâm

After our discussion I received this image from Nina:

Dear Phuong-Trâm,
Yes, it's been difficult since I am again very busy. Now I'm working in Ghent for an edit of another film. But tomorrow evening after 9 o'clock I could make a skype call, if that works for you. Thank you for your kind words and your interest in the film! I would love to exchange with you about it. It would be a new viewpoint to focus on the architecture and the spatiality of the work. So let's try tomorrow evening, 9pm my time.
Nina

Dear Gui,
this is my attempt at a starter to the situation I invited you into, having been asked by the Film Place Collective team to produce a text (or something else) relating to my recent film, copia de la copia (de la copia). I thought of starting it in the format of a staged conversation between you and me, as it rhymes with the discussion-based collaborative approach that we have practiced while working on a few projects over the past two months (I am writing these words on Sep 20).

small puddles, crocodiles, techno body horrors,
beau travail on tv, to nieważne słuchaj wczoraj
reverbing, remixing, recording
to then fast forward and rewind
to clatter, crash, and crack
the vhs is going, repeating
listen LISTEN it's to you, again)
outside it drizzles

The temporality in copia de la copia (de la copia) makes me disoriented because I try to grasp onto a narration or a narrative agency, which I am always denied. It changes, it moves and fades, and it occasionally blurs, which perhaps relates to what you call the "mixtape economy," in which your work is immersed.

In copia de la copia (de la copia), you just "go there," you do not use text captions or cue cards to tell me where, but you somehow just go. And the experience is ambivalent, enerving, and pleasant. It upsets my narrative expectations. I feel as if I was going on this trip "with you" but without being guided "by you."

Found footage has a quality similar to collages. Small pieces of a bigger picture are cut out and brought into a new (or another) context. As you would say it, they get infected and are infectious at the same time.

Somehow, I feel more like a character or, as we both say, a "fictional person" within the film. But then again

this is not a film about you this is not a film about me.

Sometimes I feel so close, and then you push me far away. You move away from a fixed situation, this "one" standing point, to the manifold. Temporalities crumble.

15.1

Film Place Collective, composite image recollecting the making of the collective viewing, 2020

Een open deur voegt ruimtes samen, laat licht toe in de hal en trekt geluid binnen in de kamer. Het brengt een wisselwerking tussen de twee ruimtes teweeg.

Closing and opening the door transforms the two spaces. An open door joins spaces, allows light into the hall and draws sound into the room. It initiates an interaction between the two spaces..

Ieder object is verbonden met de herinnering aan iemand. Het zijn tekens van afwezigheid. Het is dus niet toevallig dat de vertrouwde dingen die symbool staan voor onbereikbare mensen en plaatsen bij het venster staan waarachter mijn vertrouwde onbereikbaarheid zich uitstrekt.

Every object is linked to a memory of someone. They are signs of absence. It is therefore no coincidence that my familiar objects which stand for people and places that are out of reach are in front of the window behind which the unreachable that is so familiar extends itself.

Ja, de horizon lijkt onbereikbaar. Ook al weet ik dat er daar een plek is die net zo banaal en alledaags is als hier, toch maakt het brein zichzelf wijs dat er daar een plaats is die nog ontdekt moet worden. Ik kan niet zonder de belofte van een mysterie.

Yes, the horizon seems unreachable. Even though I know there is a place out there that is just as banal and mundane as it is here, the brain tells itself that there is a place on the horizon that has yet to be discovered. I cannot live without the premonition of a mystery.

ARE YOU HERE WITH ME?

1   Nina de Vroome, *Een portret van mijn werkkamer (A Portrait of my study)*, excerpts, 2020. (https://filmplacecollective.com/nina-portrait)
    Extracts from discussions between de Nina de Vroome and Thi Phuong-Trâm Nguyen, September 2020.

2   Rafal Morusiewicz and Guillerme Maggessi, in conversation, excerpts, 2020 (https://filmplacecollective.com/rafalinconversation)
    image (left) is from the authors and the still (right) is from *Hydrozagadka* (*Hydro-Puzzle*, dir. Andrzej Kondratiuk, 1970, film)

3   Still from *2020: State of Exception*. Dir. Henrietta Williams and Merijn Royaards. 2020.

architecture collective, might respond to the emergent crisis of the pandemic by reaching out to others.

Our collective readings of Haraway's and Beck's works led us to work collaboratively in our conceptualisation of *Blind Spot*. The project focuses on film – in both its making and collective viewing – as a mode of engagement with existing spaces that were highlighted, or ones that were newly produced, as a result of lockdown. Central to the project was a drive to connect and collaborate with fellow artists, filmmakers, and thinkers, conversing to reach 'potent responses' to a crisis that necessitates being physically apart.[11] As the following pages detail, each film featured in *Blind Spot* records and responds to the present crisis from a different vantage point, employing a range of audio-visual strategies to create affective encounters with spaces of lockdown, both physical and virtual. At the same time, as Haraway insists, with crisis comes an opening to rebuild, and the curated films by Rafal Morusiewicz, Nina de Vroome, and Merijn Royaards and Henrietta Williams seek to (re)write histories by giving voices to claim the space of Polish LGBTQ+ communities, 19th-century socialist revolutionaries, and London-based activists, respectively.

In bringing these responses together on the *Blind Spot* platform, our collective draws on the notion of 'conversation as a method of working', developed by John Akomfrah, artist, filmmaker, and co-founder of the Black Audio Film Collective.[12] In his multi-screen film installations, Akomfrah places sounds and images in conversation, finding different ways of registering what only exists when part of a larger system or dialogue. For Akomfrah, just as in conversation between individuals, conversation between sounds and images, as well as between filmmakers and viewers, allows us to 'experience connections across time and space in [the] present',[13] thereby offering a new way of co-existing.[14] The pandemic may prevent us from inhabiting physical space

together, but as *Blind Spot* explores, the medium of film invites us to share time and space remotely.

MAKING-WITH REMOTELY: CURATORIAL PLATFORM CONSTRUCTION

A key part of the *Blind Spot* project was to build a platform on which to exhibit and disseminate the films and texts of our collaborators. The responsiveness inherent in this kind of curation is much like the 'making-with' which Haraway calls for: we engaged in a live conversational back-and-forth with the artists to establish the parameters of the commissions. This approach shaped the construction of the *Blind Spot* website on which we published the work. While the series ran, we posted a new piece of work on the Film Place Collective website every week.

The texts produced by the filmmakers did not describe their work but rather proposed a mode of engagement with the images and sounds, and their inherent spatiality. Rafal Morusiewicz's interest in different modes of collaborative practice informed the experimental format of their text, posed in the form of a conversation with artist Guilherme Maggessi. In *Blanqui and the Stars*, De Vroome's voice seemed to expand the flatness of the film's collages. This observation led us to commission her text, *Een portret van mijn werkkamer* (*A Portrait of My Study*), which describes the room where the images were made. Williams and Royaards's text explicitly directs viewers to follow the instructions voiced by their film's protagonist in order 'to join with others across digital space'.

FILMMAKING AND THE AESTHETICS OF LOCKDOWN

The three films were distinctly created for a particular moment in time, of a duration and a

temporality defined by lockdown. Each film seeks language to describe unfamiliar spaces, and each works with remoteness on multiple levels – as a pragmatic necessity because of the pandemic, and as filmmaking methodology and technique. Various strategies employed by filmmakers – montage, collage, use of found footage, helicopter shots and thermal imaging, intricate sound design and voice-over – result in a specific affective encounter for the viewer who is often made to feel aware of, and sensitive to, distances and proximities within and beyond the space of the film. The immersive and disorienting collages of De Vroome's *Blanqui* explored confined personal space during lockdown. In Morusiewicz's *copia*, the non-linear montage and shifting identity of the film's subject powerfully conveyed qualities of the Polish LGBTQ+ cinemascape, while seeming to deny the viewer a stable location. Both *Blanqui* and *copia* posit seemingly endless interiority and the lack of an outside as possible aesthetics of lockdown. Meanwhile, Williams and Royaards's *State of Exception*, which revealed both bodies and cities surveilled, presented the locked-down cityscape as alien and ruinous. As respondent Lilian Chee put it during our roundtable event, the film shows the fragility of London's vacated buildings which were portrayed like vulnerable witnesses, as though lockdown had 'turned the city into a body'.[15]

Much like Beck's *Shelter in Place*, the three curated films use affective soundscapes to establish intimacy with unfamiliar and remote spaces. A pressing hypnotic soundtrack emerges as a guide through *copia*'s sequences; the timbre and Barthesian grain of De Vroome's voice narrating *Blanqui* bring us into an introspective world of collage; and in *State of Exception*, the broad sci-fi film-inspired soundscape grotesquely magnifies a pigeon's coos or a woman's breathing, effectively 'reaching out of the screen' to make a viewer's heart race.[16] By reaching out through affect to communicate spatially in these ways,

these films directly draw together filmmaker and viewer in time and space along 'lines of inventive connection'.[17]

ACROSS DISTANCES

The video *12/13/18/19* that we created as our presentation for the *Remote Practices* symposium reflected the remote ways in which *Blind Spot*'s curated films were made.[18] The black screen and scarcity of images we employed allude to the sense of blindness we had in mind; these allowed us to privilege the intimate quality of the voice. At the same time, the use of voice-over evokes the presence of multiple simultaneous worlds, invisible to the eye but nevertheless intuited.

Each *Blind Spot* film is, in its own way, what Haraway calls a 'potent response' to devastation.[19] By critically situating the events of our troubled moment and by reusing and reassembling archival images, these films meaningfully rewrite histories, and elucidate the concept explored in *Blanqui and the Stars* that 'telling worlds is conceiving worlds – the way we tell the world is the way we create it'. In *copia*, Polish history is recentred by travelling through post-war LGBTQ+ television and cinema. *State of Exception* re-examines the use of secret surveillance views, state control, and thermal body imaging. Such alternate accounts are affective reconceptions of the world that reflect an empathetic response to a crisis marked by isolation. During conditions of lockdown, our capacity to make space in which affective thought and creation become possible – through conversation between people, images, sounds, and texts; through virtual forms of connection and construction; and through filmmaking – is vital.

With our perception of distance, our sense of being-in-the-world, and our access to other places drastically altered by practising remotely, the sense of possibility that De Vroome suggests comes from looking out to the horizon to ensure that distance

remains – 'that not everything is within reach' – is potent. 'When visual impressions are limited', the filmmaker writes in her accompanying text, 'space is created for thought to express itself [. . .] There is no real looking, no image is sought, but the eyes keep pulling towards it, as if to make sure that distance still exists.'[20]

CONCLUSION

From the curated films to *12/13/18/19*, *Blind Spot: Spaces of Lockdown* sheds light on the role of film in responding to a global crisis that has altered our relationships to spatial environments and to one another. The metaphor of the blind spot compels the question of situated knowledge and addresses the difficulty of measuring distance or proximity in a moment of global lockdown marked by virtual hyperconnectivity. Whether focusing on confinement, lack of placed-ness, or the city as body, the films featured in *Blind Spot* turn to affective strategies to communicate spatially, and to draw together filmmaker and viewer in a virtual realm where coexistence is possible. Guided by Donna Haraway's call to 'make-with', our collaborative work within *Blind Spot* reveals film as a form of remote practice that can generate new lines of connection across time and space. Its methodology focuses on opening up affective space for conversation, which in turn, facilitates the founding of place anew.