

# SOUND IN THE MACHINE

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## SUMMARY / BLURB

After spending a good hour or so walking into walls and groping strangers at Dialog in the Dark, called “the greatest exhibit you’ll never see,” I’ve done some thinking. What must it be like to live without seeing? And why do we keep using the old dark and light metaphor. Who even knows what darkness is all about? I mean really in the dark, dark without even the glow of an alarm clock or the rogue sliver of light peeping underneath a door—dark without end, dark because light does not exist for us.

## NOTES

Guest voice-overs:

Johanna Asmuß: “Stranger in the Dark”

Heather Bond: “Existential Liminality Personality”; “Wendy”

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## Special: Dialog in the Dark



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By Brian Snead

### TRANSCRIPT

Back in February I went to the Atlanta exhibition of Dialog in the Dark, a.k.a “the greatest exhibition you’ll never see.” In a nutshell, they put you into a group of folks you don’t know and send you on a pitch black tour of different settings with a blind or visually impaired guide. It’s frustrating as hell, but there is, so to speak, a silver lining: it’s the closest most of us will ever get to experiencing the world in complete darkness and levels the playing field, if only for a small window of time, for talking with someone who lives it every day. The essence of the experience is then not darkness, but dialog. I’ll spare you the fancy stuff for now though. Here’s a bit of what I did.

After sizing myself up to the nipples for my cane in the lobby, I walked into a small, dimly lit room lined by ten softly glowing cubes. I sat down with everyone else and waited for whatever was next. A guy came in and told us how to use the walking cane and to identify ourselves by name. The overhead lighting slowly faded and a piped-in voice introduced us to

a world of darkness where your only sense will be touch, smell, and sound. Here you forfeit the magnificent treasure of sight. Here you will experience the world as never before and learn how blinded you are by sight. If you have not already done so, please place any and all electronic devices capable of producing light into your pockets. Gentleman, please refrain from any funny business with ladies either known to you or not known to you while the lights are off: you are being monitored at all times by infrared cameras placed in every room. And now you begin the most incredible journey of your lives, a journey which will transform your very soul, overwhelming your body and placing you in an existential liminality, a borderland of consciousness and nothingness...”

It was a bit heavy-handed even if I did exaggerate a bit with that. As it finally came to an end, the lights faded to nothing. Absolute nothing. The jolly voice of a woman named Wendy entered the room. She told us to

come on over to my voice...so we can get this thing started!

The residual image of the room helped me get over to her, but my sense of space and direction quickly dissipated. At some point, shuffling along and not knowing where I was going, the floor became uneven and soft. I was sure there was grass underfoot. Birds chirped in the distance. I was in a park. Thinking I would smack into a tree any second, I kind of held a grimace on my face and shuffled along awkwardly. I was already beginning to feel a little ridiculous. My walking cane banged a trash can and I heard Wendy say,

looks like somebody just found that ole trash can!!

Thank God the lights were off. Sort of. To find my way around, I abandoned the cane and ran my hands up and down everything; I bent over to feel the ground. I found a fence, then a tree, then a bridge with water running under it. A real over-achiever. But thoughts of how this must have looked started going 'round my head. I told myself "this is a bit weird, but better chill on the tree-groping—the infrared camera and all." I faked a smile. It all started to become a little irritating.

Wendy's voice floated around the room challenging us to find stuff. From the sounds of 'woops, sorry- no, I'm sorry' and the awkward giggles that followed, I think most of us were finding a lot more boobs and arms than lampposts and fences. We moved into the next room.

As soon as I heard the obligatory Musak, I knew we were in some kind of store. A grocery store. Now, differentiating between a loaf of bread and a jug of lemonade is one thing, but how would you tell a can of diced tomatoes from a can of pinto beans? How about a jug of apple cider from a jug of milk? Or how about toilet paper from diapers? They pack those things pretty tight, ya know.

I'm not saying you'd never figure it out, but think of how impossible getting the right stuff would be. How would you get up to the cashier, pay the bill, and get out of the store? And then there's all the little tragedies just waiting to happen: frozen food islands in the middle of aisles, the pyramid displays of crackers or coke, the mommies not paying attention with their buggies, the 'wet floor' signs in the middle of wet floors. Impossible!

But on to the next room we went. Almost. In the park I managed to wind up at the door merely by chance. This time I was not so lucky. I heard Wendy say,

walk towards my voice and find the door behind the curtain. It's over there on the right at the back. And don't be trying to steal the chocolate 'cuz I'll gitcha! When ya git over there, make sure ya stand to the left of the door in a single file so I can get by and open it up. I don't wanna be rubbin' up on all of y'all: I gotta man for that!!

Standing somewhere after the pile of apples and holding what was probably a box of tampons, I had no idea where "the back" was anymore. And how was I going to figure out left and right? Because there was not enough time to go through the room over and over again, I was having to rely on where I had just been in relation to where I thought I had come in. My sense of space was starting to be replaced by time and it was getting to me. Didn't help that my optic nerve was freaking out and sending white flashes where my vision would normally be.

Anyway, I'm not going to tell you the details of everything. I will say we ended up on a strikingly lifelike boat that I would have fallen off of in the real world and a busy street, where I would have been road kill. After nearly an hour of grabbing flabby backs and running into dudes and walls face first, and not being able to tell my left from my right, they brought us into a bar. I needed a drink! I was seriously in a bad mood, don't mind telling you. You can't imagine how frustrating it is not to be able to do something as simple as walk from one side of the room to the other and have to call somebody to come lead you out by the arm. And the list goes on from there. It's frustrating as hell.

But the bar ended up being the most poignant part of the exhibition and not just because of the miniature beer in my hand. I chatted with the nearly-blind bartender who lost her sight in

her thirties due to some kind of degenerative disease the name of which I don't recall. As she stuck my beer in one hand and my change in the other, a slew of thoughts popped into my head—how amazing it was that she learned how to function without her eyes, could I manage if I went blind and, honestly, would I be up for that? I realized this might be my only opportunity to see the world, if just for a moment, like she must. That jarred me out of my sour mood.

At about that time, Wendy called us over to a table. She told us that it was perfectly fine to talk to her about anything. We were full of questions. She answered them all and finished off every line with a joke. She was, as we say down here, a hoot! When our time was up, she led us out of the bar and into a room with the first bit of light we'd seen in an hour. Rather than feeling relieved, I felt more like I wanted to just hang out more in the dark and think big thoughts and chat. There was so much more to figure out about life in that way.

But the tour was over. I figured I'd just have to sit in my bathroom at night to get back to that place again. For the moment though, it was surprising to see the faces of the other people in the group. I hadn't paid much attention to them before the tour and was a little shocked to find that the faces I had attached to each voice were nowhere close what they actually looked like. And I had Wendy dead wrong. I shrugged it off, but it's worth thinking about whether it would've made any difference in my perception of these people if I went with my impression of them through their voices? Still thinking about that one.

But this I can be sure of. Humanity has probably churned out more sight metaphors than any other. Sit in on any literature class or through any sermon and you are bound to hear them go on and on about two things: the dark and the light. But they really don't care about the dark. It's merely a device to produce light and with it, the catharsis of "seeing" after darkness, which always means knowing, understanding, believing. The dark is merely the magician's black hat into which the white bunny disappears. It's the reappearance following the hand-waving and incantations that, quote, "means something." It only works because we don't understand the dark.

For all of the pre-historic hang-ups that we think, as civilized people, we have overcome, we cannot shake that inborn fear of the dark. What's more, few of us have really ever been in the dark. I mean really in the dark, dark without the glow of an alarm clock or rogue sliver of light peeping underneath a door—dark without end, dark because light does not exist for us. Still on we go, cranking out that disproportionate dichotomy—talking about the Dark Ages and the Enlightenment; singing “I once was blind but now I see”; swooning to “What light through yonder window breaks? It is the East, and Juliet is the sun.” And all the while seeing only a small percentage of what the universe shows us to begin with and never much thinking about how life might look through the eyes of the blind.