

Lightwave

Deaf community help to shine a light on the East London Deaf community by creating Lightwave

Lightwave is a film produced and directed by Rubbena Aurangzeb-Tariq, a Deaf artist based in London, in collaboration with Professor Bencie Woll of the Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre (DCAL) at University College London (UCL), and with the East London Deaf community.

Lightwave was funded by and created for the Trellis: Public Art festival, a programme of knowledge exchange between researchers and artists in the East End (April 2021). Trellis is part of the wider vision for UCL's Public Art and Community Engagement to create opportunities for collaboration between artists, researchers and communities based around the future UCL East London Campus.

East London's Deaf community is a long-established, constituent part of East London life. However, the community has invariably been underrepresented or wholly unrepresented in cultural discourses. Our project aspired to facilitate a creative collaboration between us and local Deaf people, which affords recognition to the East London Deaf community's history, culture and language, thereby creating an artistic and academic legacy and tangible symbol of the community's richness and resilience. *Lightwave* made it possible to collect video recordings of Deaf community members exploring themes such as:

- the historical development of the community and sites of Deaf historical significance in the area
- sign Language development and use in East London, and its relationship to other dialects of British Sign Language (BSL)
- community diversity, and faith-community influences on development and use of sign language, and technological influences
- ideas for co-creation of artwork.



During lockdowns in 2020 and early 2021, members of the Deaf community and Deaf people from East London boroughs came together in a series of Zoom meetings to talk about their lives, Deaf culture, BSL and the history of Deaf people living in that area. The conversations were recorded and excerpts were edited together with 'live' action paintings that are reflective of the East London Deaf community to create the film *Lightwave*. The film is presented in BSL with subtitles, and will, in its final version, include sound and music.

The Covid-19 pandemic meant that all discussions had to take place remotely. By this happy 'accident' the myriad of creative possibilities of digital video platforms became increasingly apparent to us. Sign languages are uniquely visual-spatial and kinetic in nature, and digital platforms such as Zoom can enable co-creation where the sign language and the Deaf people themselves can move to the heart of the creative process in a uniquely innovative way. The video conversations will form a video archive that will be available to BSL linguists, researchers in East London and its Deaf community, and to the Deaf community itself.

The use of Zoom also illuminated a striking difference between conversations in BSL and English. One of the major constraints of Zoom in spoken language is that





everyone, but especially so for the Deaf community, who have traditionally been a close knit community, relying on face-to-face contact to support each other. Often local people aren't aware of the long-established Deaf community living in their area. *Lightwave* created a great opportunity for Deaf people to meet up, talk, celebrate and take pride in their history and in their language and culture. It offers everyone a fascinating glimpse into this particular community's lifestyle and showcases its great diversity."



Bencie Woll, the academic partner in the project, has been involved in research on BSL for 40 years, and founded DCAL in 2006. Her research interests embrace a wide range of topics, including the linguistics of BSL and other sign languages, and the history and sociolinguistics of BSL and the Deaf community. The video recordings made during the creation of *Lightwave* will complement the BSL Corpus <https://bslcorpusproject.org> a collection of video clips showing Deaf people using BSL, together with background information about the signers. The BSL Corpus is a publicly accessible, online

overlapping interaction is impossible because only one audio channel is available at any one time. For BSL conversations, there is no such constraint, so the flow of conversation and turn-taking appear very different from interactions in English. These differences have led to a new and topical line of research on 'BSL in Zoom', which is currently being prepared for publication.

record of BSL used by Deaf people in the UK and includes videos of 250 signers of a wide range of ages from eight different regions. We know that BSL is changing rapidly due to changes in the Deaf community, so it is important that we have a record for the future. In the past, sign language researchers carried out their research by filming Deaf people, but often the videotapes and the data collected were never shared with other researchers or with the Deaf community. Having the BSL corpus online means that anyone with a computer and an internet connection is able to see the video data. This allows for a greater

Rubben is a practising artist and art therapist; filmmaking isn't in her background. Lockdown resulted in the project changing direction from the originally intended art piece for East London into a film. It required Rubbena to adapt her skills and learn editing, producing and directing to create a film for audiences to enjoy and feel the rawness of Deaf culture by a more direct means (where viewers can watch the artist in action rather than only bear witness to the final piece): a story that led to an unconscious process, of learning new skills and the creation of an unexpected outcome: the film – *Lightwave*.

Rubben Aurangzeb-Tariq, the project's lead artist, is a BSL user and has also lived and worked in the East London area. She commented:

"Lockdown has been hard for



exchange of ideas and information between sign language researchers in universities and the Deaf community. The corpus and the Trellis recordings also lead directly to an improved understanding of BSL structure and use. This information is important for the education of Deaf children, for training sign language interpreters, and for BSL teachers.

Lightwave contains much humour but deals also with the serious issues facing the Deaf community today, including the continuing inequalities and barriers to access to education and career opportunities, and the recent struggle for all Deaf BSL users to get immediate access to information about the Covid-19 pandemic. The availability of all the conversations for viewing and research is an important bonus.

The film was launched in April 2021 and attracted a range of comments from those that attended the screening. Many enjoyed being able to “read the ‘crossword’ of Deaf culture”, and hearing viewers reported being able for the first time to observe the directness of the Deaf community in their daily communications and in their attitudes – a painful awakening for some. The film projects key issues in society and leads to the Deaf community questioning, with curiosity, how they can be heard by wider society. It remains difficult for Deaf people to thrive as successful professionals in roles such as artists, creators and



researchers. Many Deaf people are buzzing to make a greater impact on the arts yet are still refused the opportunities to collaborate with other artistic communities and to influence different ways of working together that can simply be achieved by minor adjustments.

The launch evening was full of smiles and laughter and buzzing with chat. Some viewers couldn't keep up with the range of dialogue while many recognised familiar faces giving honest reflections on the real DEAF experience in the film. Interviewees freely expressed their views and their desire to see changes in the future to Deaf education, better access to information and employment and a better life for them and their families by being recognised as equal participants in society.

To see *Lightwave* and to find out more about Trellis and the Trellis Festival, please visit <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture-online/trellis-festival> where the film will soon be made available to view. The artworks that appear in the film can be seen at www.rubben.com



BATOD Magazine

This article was published in the Sept 2021 issue.

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BATOD
British Association of
Teachers of the Deaf

MAGAZINE • Sept 2021 • ISSN 1336-0799 • www.batod.org.uk

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