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Darkness visible; blindness and borders/memories and movies

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The author considers a trio of films of recent vintage in which the primary narrator is sight impaired and consider the role memory and recollection play in the telling of their accounts. Each film – Notes on Blindness, Blue, *and* The Diving Bell and the Butterfly – *are biographical and depicted in documentary or hybrid/stylised documentary format. Common threads and themes unite the seemingly disparate characters and these focus on water and waiting. How a 'sightless' scene is recreated for film is at the heart of this article.*

> *The true picture of the past flits by. The past can only be seized as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again. – Walter Benjamin*

The visual so informs the recall and formation of memory, it's hard to imagine recounting our past without couching our conversations or our storytelling in the concrete evidences of looking longingly, watching intently, peering intently, gazing deeply, glancing furtively and storing that rich information for future recall. Though not exclusively, our memory is visual; we remember a lover's lips, but not always the sounds emitted from them; we recall a dream, not the sleep; a particular stairwell in a particular house burns its vision into our mind and make us recollect the memory of childhood, the way we view (and viewed) innocence, the shape of our bodies and the condition of our soul within that tiered space. The noted neuroscientist/neurobiologist Antonio Damásio writes 'one might argue that images are the currency of our mind … even the feelings that make up the backdrop of each mental instant are images' (Damásio 1999, 319). When we recollect past experiences, we tell tales, recount incidents, and share information based on what our eyes tell us. Sight largely provides the narrative link to fuel our power of speech as well as our ability to take in that of those around us, whether in a face-to-face encounter or a mediated experience. We see. We say. We trust those visions and their corresponding recollections. We accord faith to described or prescribed visions. We enter into testimony in courts formal and of public opinion matters of 'fact' based on sight: eye witness accounts, an observer's account, a spectator's remembrance. 'I saw it with my own two eyes,' is affirmation and confirmation.

In *In Search of Lost Time* (or *Remembrances of Things Past*) Proust wrote of these sorts of sensory impressions and lived experience as *mémoire involontaire*; certain actions or particular sensations can awaken these recollections. They have an immediacy. A forced recalling of such moments, in his view, result in a different bringing forth, the *mémoire voluntaire*. Benjamin's subsequent dissection of Proust's notions offers a framework to examine notions of looking, learning, living and the creation of memories.

> I begin again to ask myself what it could have been, this unremembered state which brought with it no logical proof of its existence, but only the sense that it was a happy, that it was a real state in whose presence other states of consciousness melted and vanished. I decide to attempt to make it reappear. … Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, has tried to follow it into my conscious mind (Proust 2013, 53).

But what happens if this process of seeing and remembering is radically interrupted? What becomes of memory if that primal sense – vision and its wide-ranging implications and informations – is removed from embodied experience or extracted from our stories and language and blacked out as a perceptive power? What becomes of the arguably primary source of the narrative of memory? It might pose a daunting task for such a narrator to guide us through his/her experiences, to share the day to day, or to recollect a past event. To further problematise this scenario, imagine the Herculean task of an artist attempting to give visual voice to the memories of a sightless or near sightless narrator. How might that look? In short, what might the deeply personal and internalised memories of a blind person, or one with severe sight impairment, look like when made concrete and externalised for others to share – how is such a narrative brought to the screen? How is this language performed? Three films of recent vintage – *Notes on Blindness (*2014), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), and *Blue* (1993) – take on this challenge. A textual analysis of key scenes from

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each of the films will investigate how the filmmakers articulated this (re)vision as well as point towards thematic linkings between the projects.

SEEING SIGHTLESSNESS

There exists a history of portrayals of the sightless in cinema; Audrey Hepburn's portrayal of Susy Hendrix terrorised by a misguided trio of bad guys in *Wait Until Dark*, released in 1967; Patty Duke's Oscar-winning turn as Hellen Keller in 1962's *The Miracle Worker*; the would-be blind preacher/con man, Hazel Motes, of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood,* released in1979, and the dystopian nightmare that befalls the city in *Blindness* (2008). These protagonists or antagonists are often depicted as helpless or hopeless, prophets or professors of things unseen. However, these are very mannered, narrative-by-the-book genre pieces concerning sightlessness. In this article, I dissect how the filmmakers of *Notes on Blindness, The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* and *Blue* utilised an inherently visual medium, film, to share the self-described memories and thoughts of the day-to-day lives of the blind.

Some surface commonalities link the back story and main character of all three films. Each of the projects is autobiographical and has at its centre the story of a white male with ties to Continental Europe, John Hull of *Notes on Blindness*, Jean-Dominique Bauby of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, and Derek Jarman of *Blue*. At midlife, each of them became blind either partially or fully. The trio were men of letters, as well. Hull was a theology professor of long-standing at the University of Birmingham. Bauby, was a celebrated journalist, author, and editor of the French edition of *Elle* magazine. Jarman was a notable film director, author, diarist, and artist from London. The men were not born sightless, rather through various catastrophic illness or injury, they lost that sense. The films share their highly personal accounts of their experience with illness and blindness. They are linked by the retelling of memories, though they do so in different fashion.

Volumes have been written on memory, its definition, its embodiment and the cognitive and neural processes delineating it. Oral historian and academic Portelli offers a useful and distilled way of thinking about memory, 'Memory in fact is not a mere depository of information, but rather an ongoing process of elaboration and re/construction of meaning … Just like memory, the narrative itself is not a fixed text and a depository of information, but rather a process and a performance' (Portelli 2005, 5). The philosopher Merleau-Ponty writes of the 'colouring of memory,' or the notion that objects are not seen in the present, but rather lensed through previous experience. 'Before any contribution by memory, what is seen must at the present moment so organize itself as *to present a picture* to me in which I can recognize my former experiences' (2005, 23 emphasis added). And the neuroscientist, Damásio, offers this notion of memory

> The nonverbal kinds of images are those that help you display mentally the concepts that correspond to words. The feelings that make up the background of each mental instant and that largely signify aspects of the body state are images as well. … Images represent physical properties of entities and their spatial and temporal relationships, as well as their actions (70) … The process of mind is a continuous flow of such images, some of which correspond to actual, ongoing business outside the brain, while some are being reconstituted from memory in the process of recall. (2010, 70-71)

The idea of the image and the visual courses through each of these definitions of memory. No mention of other sensory capacities is herein offered, which is not to say that the fragrance of a madeleine is not capable of stirring great memory, or the sound of children's laughter to bring back days gone by. But the reliance on tethering the visual to memory is insistent and makes this exploration intriguing for a number of reasons; if sight is not privileged by the subject, what is?; what is the vocabulary of the sightless when describing memory, 'vision', their worlds, and how can those visuals and visions be brought to the screen?

This author seeks answers to those questions by examining a trio of films whose protagonists are sightless narrators. The films were selected for their aforementioned similarity of narrative perspective. I give the films a close reading, by which I mean an examination that is

> An active and creative process of engaging with what is before our eyes, paying close attention, selecting focus, analyzing the material seen, and in other ways drawing on our general and specific knowledge to make sense of what we see and how it is organised as a visual text (Webb and Schirato 2004, 197).

It is of note that this is but one way to look at image or to perform textual analysis.

SIGHTLESS SCENES

Notes on Blindness is a stylised, short work of film making; an area somewhere between documentary and

feature, its makers say (a Skype interview was conducted with the directors on 8 February 2014). The film made its North American premiere at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival to great acclaim. The project, 12 minutes in duration, was part of the festival's documentary short program (a full-length feature film, supported by Creative England based on the same material, was released in July of 2016). The well spring of the film's source is 16 hours of audio-cassette recordings made 30 years prior by Hull in which he recounts the gradual loss of vision. Reflective and eloquent, his ruminations are prose and poetry. Hull made the diaristic recordings of his 'discovery of a world beyond sight' over a three year period immediately following his vision loss. *Notes on Blindness* shares Hull's personal story using a cast of actors. The voices or narration, however, are drawn from the audio recordings; the actors on screen do not speak. This situates the visual (actors, sets, ephemera) within the time frame Hull's narration describes, at once crafting a believability and a suspension of conventional narrative.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly draws from the autobiography of Bauby in a more typical Hollywood feature-film style, making use of a large cast of actors and crew. It hews closely to Bauby's book, *Le Scaphandre et le Papillon*, though some have noted discrepancies in the depiction of one of Bauby's personal relationships. Helmed by the noted painter and film director Julian Schnabel, it liberally uses artistic experimentation in its visual depiction, often placing viewers uncomfortably within the body of its protagonist. The film relates the story of Jean-Dominique (known as Jean-Do) Bauby and the aftermath of a massive stroke which, in effect, severed his brainstem. This resulted in the editor and author living with a condition known as Locked-in Syndrome or, medically, pseudocoma in which he had no means of motor movement. That is to say, he had complete paralysis including any ability to verbalise. Still, Bauby retained mental lucidity, competence and a stinging wit. In his case, the afflicted man retained the ability to blink an eye, which he used to communicate. His right eye was stitched shut because of a medical complication and he was able to 'see' through his left eye, but in Schnabel's interpretation, this was a near occluded vision, murky and milky with a lack of focus. He is able to view through that left orb, albeit poorly, and when he takes in his own visage for the first time post-stroke, it is revelatory:

> Reflected in the glass I saw the head of a man who seemed to have emerged from a vat of formaldehyde. His mouth was twisted, his nose damaged, his hair tousled, his gaze full of fear. One eye was sewn shut, the other *goggled like the doomed eye of Cain*. For a moment I stared at that dilated pupil, before I realised it was only mine (Bauby 1997, 32 emphasis added).

Blue is the most *avant-garde* in its visual depiction. Beneath, over and around the persistent blue screen (Jarman based its tonality on Yves Klein's International Klein Blue hue) an aural soundscape invites the listener/viewer into Jarman's spoken-word autobiography. Part stream of consciousness and fully an immersive soundscape, the first-person narrative of his life, and his harrowing decline of health, is experienced via the delivery of the tale from Jarman and a few of his actor acquaintances, Tilda Swinton among them. No one and no thing appears on screen, but the mind's eye is highly activated. *Blue* – "a good end film" he told an *Independent* reporter months before his death – recounts the tribulations, horrors really, that accompanied his medical treatment for AIDS, which claimed his life at age 52.

WAITING AND WATER

Thematically, the notion of waiting is present in all the films. This might be expected. The varying conditions of the men and their afflictions found them in countless doctors' offices and hospital reception rooms or undergoing treatment or varying therapeutic modalities. There they await updates of conditions, sobering news, signs of hope. Because of the severity of Bauby's condition, he remained hospitalised throughout his life following the initial stroke. He has no choice; with his locked in condition, he can only wait. For him, the waiting was the long stretches of between times of doctors, physical therapists, visitors and a personal assistant. This aide transcribed Bauby's dictation painstakingly creating his autobiography, waiting as a single word might take two to three minutes to decode. And, most importantly, waiting for those brief, transcendent moments when he moves from the diving bell (his locked in condition) to the butterfly, those fanciful flights of freedom to wander in his mind. The end game of the wait, a restoration to full health, will never arrive. For Hull, who lost sight in his left eye as a teenager, his wait is an inexorable crawl to blindness in his right eye and the years and years of treatment and inevitability he calls an 'dreadful sense of impending doom, a desperate feeling of being enclosed.' His documentation of his condition was first documented in the self-authored book, *Touching the Rock; An Experience of Blindness* (1990). The cover of the most recent, paperback edition of the book offers a rich blue hue of a body of water, rain creating perfectly formed

ripples on its surface) in which he bears witness to his loss of sight, viewing it as a rich, spiritual gift. If Hull offers a sort of clear-eyed grace in his book, this is not the sort of lightness that underscores Jarman's project. He presents his failing health with a jagged anger, a biting wit, and an epic sense of doom. This is a last will and testament of a film and it's consistent in its tone of a man bored with dying. Jarman gives voice to this in one raw scene from *Blue*.

> Here I am again in the waiting room. Hell on Earth is a waiting room. Here you know you are not in control of yourself, waiting for your name to be called: "712213". Here you have no name, confidentiality is nameless. Where is 666? Am I sitting opposite him/her? Maybe 666 is the demented woman switching the channels on the TV (Jarman 1993, para. 42).

So too, a dominant visual motif links the films, that of water. Again and again, floating, liquid, flow, moisture and a host of other associations afford the men recollections of bodies of water. The sound of bubbling or boiling water. The gravitational pull of the ocean, the tides of life, swimming upstream, being drenched in rain, the slick of mist on the flesh. A tear moves languorously down a cheek. Images are blurry, water-soaked. The murky associations of what lies beneath. Jarman, Hull, and Bauby. And the homonyms see and sea are constant reminders of a presence and absence, creating a tension visually expressed in all three films by rough waters, chop, waves, disturbance, roiling. Water brings a sense of melancholy: 'The drip ticks out the seconds, the source of a stream along which the minutes flow, to join the river of hours, the sea of years and the timeless ocean,' intones Jarman in *Blue*. Complementing and contrasting, the narration and the vast blue expanse convey a sense of drift; Jarman is asea in emotion, in memories washing over him.

> The caravan approaches, blue canvasses fluttering in the wind. Blue people from over the sea – ultramarine – have come to collect the lapis with its flecks of gold. The road to the city of Aqua Vitae is protected by a labyrinth built from crystals and mirrors which in the sunlight cause terrible blindness. The mirrors reflect each of your betrayals, magnify them and drive you into madness (Jarman 1993, para. 53).

These are sonnets of self absorption and his delivery of them reflects this standpoint; he insists you engage and listen by illuminating the movie screen for more than an hour with only a steady blue image. *Blue* is to be *experienced*, not solely seen and with viewers enraged (or engaged), Jarman has accomplished an extraordinary engagement of senses by those who have spent time with it. Within the first several minutes, he presages what is to come, melding the natural world with poison associations: 'The doctor in St. Bartholomew's Hospital thought he could detect lesions in my retina – the pupils dilated with belladonna – the torch shone into them with a terrible blinding light.' And just moments later 'Blue of my heart, Blue of my dreams, Slow blue love Of delphinium days.' Jarman is aware a natural death (both Atropa belladonna and delphinium are toxic) will not come so easily for him.

For Bauby and viewers of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, the sea offers a sense of looming threat from within, but a certain therapy when viewed from the shore, a lighthouse beacon providing a watchful eye. The film opens on a sardonic note. The song 'Beyond the Sea,' popularised in the USA by Bobby Darrin, is voiced here by its originator Charles Trenet. *La Mer* plays beneath a host of images of x-rays, presumably those of Bauby, probing the entirety of the body. The lyrics unfold: 'Somewhere beyond the sea/She's there watching for me/If I could fly like birds on high/Then straight to her arms/I'd go sailing.'

The winged butterfly, Bauby's other persona, offers redemptive powers to his locked-in state. In a scene that unfolds on a bluff overlooking the sea – his convalescing takes place at an oceanside, former Naval hospital located in a beach-resort town where he vacationed as a youth – he takes flights of fancy from his wheelchair. Here, he imagines himself fully able bodied and the camera depicts his wild imaginings. He is no longer merely 'a castaway on the shores of loneliness,' but rather soars above. A time-lapse image of butterfly metamorphosis take place onscreen as the voice of Bauby intones: 'I have realised I can imagine anything, anyone, anywhere. I can build castles in Spain, steal the Golden Fleece, visit the women I love, let the sea wash over me on the isle of Martinique' (Harwood 2007). The viewer follows the fluttering arc of the butterfly at ground level navigating wings through the fluff of dandelions, then heightens to that of a bird swooping over mountain tops, skyward through golden clouds and the heavens then to vintage black-and-white travelogue footage of ancient ruins and pyramids before swooping back to colour and the ridge lines of the Alps then the azure blues of beckoning waters and eventually to a 'come-hither' woman, nude in bed. The scene continues with Bauby, as his imagined self, rolling in the surf with a young woman *a la From Here to Eternity*.

What's dramatically notable in this scene, as well, is the freeing of Bauby and viewer from the deliberate point of view perspective that governs most of the film. In many, if not most of the scenes, viewers watch the action through Bauby's one eye that remains functional. (Bauby would eventually lose sight of his left eye.) It is an insistent and claustrophobic storytelling device and compelling in its effectiveness, imagining viewers to live, albeit temporarily, within Bauby's literal sight line. In an interview, Schnabel recounted how he used this technique. He had been an advocate for more of the film to unfold from this point of view, but was held in check by his editor.

> What's interesting about it is that usually when people talk to the camera in a movie, the movie stops. In this case everybody talks to the camera, so you don't even realise there's nobody in the middle between you and that person. It's just a convention of the film. I think it has to do with, if you see a painting of a bunch of people, you're fit into that rectangle. I'm a big Caravaggio fan and I like when the edge of the picture goes past the edge of the frame. And I like that in movies too, so the fact there's no one between you and the people that are talking to you is very satisfying to me, because it's like you're watching a fragment of a larger whole. And you're getting a slice out of that, so it feels like virtual reality: it's not a regular movie (Stock 2008, para. 11).

In one particularly riveting and wretched scene, a doctor nonchalantly sutures shut one of Bauby's eyes so as to stave off infection. For this scene, Schnabel enclosed the camera's lens in a membrane and had the doctor sew the membrane shut whilst filming, forcing viewers into Bauby's lens. 'I'd have come to see you sooner, But I've been on holiday. Skiing.' the doctor tells Bauby, needle in hand as he leans into his space, the viewer's space. 'Do you ski?' the oblivious physician asks.

For *Notes on Blindness*, the camera enacts Hull's recorded memories in highly stylised fashion. Viewers witness action happening around and to Hull, not the subjective or locked-in point of view as experienced by Bauby. On occasion, we share Hull's point of view, but it's usually at an askance angle from his shoulder or just above an ear. The project, by filmmakers Peter Middleton and James Spinney, is a hybridised documentary. It uses the original taped recordings as the audio track that provides the backbone narration of the film, but employs actors to portray scenes of movement/motion of Hull and his family (the actors bear an uncanny resemblance to the Hull family). Vintage photographs – sometimes animated to special effect – are employed as actual depictions of the family, as well. The filmmakers have shared that its visual look was informed directly by a quote from Hull: 'Blindness is the borderland between dream and memory.' The film works from varying palettes – the inky blacks of night punctuated by blaring and glaring points of light, a faded Kodachrome tonal range that evokes a vintage feel, sepia hues bleed into a fuzzy, slightly off kilter pastiche – in creating the colours of memory.

The sea is introduced from the opening frames of the film. That is by design. Peter Middleton, one of the directors of *Notes* speaks to the theme of water. 'It sets up John's journey … the film grew encompassing this dramatic wholesale repositioning of his blindness and this sea change of his consciousness,' he notes. An overhead, tightly framed image of water churning from a ship's propellor, introduces viewers to Hull. The churning wake of the water, blistering emerald with white froth cresting atop is visible. Then an edit brings us to a medium shot of father and son, silhouetted holding hands in a large door way of a transport boat, facing the sea, the water-and-horizon line moving rapidly by in front of them. A gentle image of a large hand cradling one smaller fills the screen. Then, Hull begins to speak. It is a conversation between himself and the child, his son, voiced solely by the father: *'When did you get blind?'* The 'child' asks. Skip a beat. The viewer now takes in Hull directly face to face, the rhythmic rise and fall of a heartbeat provides the audio track. He is in a hospital room, his great, bushy beard covering his chin, a set of headphones gripping the top of his crown. He is listening to his son's heartbeat in utero. A live sonogram image appears over his right shoulder. *'It happened just a few days before you were born.'* The screen next fills with a tightly framed shot of the father and son. Then, a dizzying display of sunlight, water refractions, prisms bending and blending. *'What made your eyes go poorly?'* Here, the water and sonogram/heartbeat sounds ramp up in intensity and the swirl of watery images grow more violent.
A drowning. A sharp cutaway to the roiling wake of water exiting the boat's aft and another tick up in intensity. Then. Just as quick. The sound dies down, almost as a storm winds to a gentle breeze. Father delicately caresses son's hair. *'They were sick and the doctors couldn't make them better.'*

Water of another form is a recurring theme in *Notes* – rain fall. Hull describes his passion for rain; it gives added dimension to his world. Opening a window within his home, he turns his face to the downpour, breathes it in,

and at once his visage is serene, relaxed, almost as if in adoration. The rain splashes against the roof, drip, drip, drips into puddles, cascades down leafy trees and windows.

> Rain brings out the contours of what's around you in that it introduces a continuous blanket of differentiated and specialized sound, uninterrupted, which feels the whole of the audible environment. If only their could be something to rain falling inside, then the whole of a room would take on shape and dimension.

And here, the filmmakers echo Hull's words in images with one of the more breathtaking scenes of this short project. Inside Hull's humble home, it begins to rain; an indoor storm fills the cozy space. The stacked dishes catch the rain and bounce it back onto the counter, the kitchen sink serves as an indoor puddle, trapping the ricocheting drops and amid it all is Hull, clad in tie and cardigan seated at his breakfast table, gently lifting his cup of tea from its saucer. He soaks it all in.

> I can also say that this is an experience of beauty. Instead of being isolated, cut off preoccupied internally, you are presented with the world you are related to the world, you are addressed by the world. Why should this experience strike one as being beautiful? Cognition is beautiful. It's beautiful to know.

Water and the sea offer deep connection in each man and in each film. It is celebrated in literature, painting, and song. It is evocative of a host of sounds, smells, sensations. It is medium and metaphor so richly evocative that it need not be seen. It can activate *mémoire involontaire*. The narration or written word of Hull, Bauby, and Jarman travel differently; they recount the past via *mémoire voluntaire*, a recounting, or rereading, of experience, writes Benjamin. This does not discount the power of the storyteller. Narration is a particularly powerful lens, but it is not always lived experience, not necessarily a firsthand encounter. Rather, it is often a distinction isolating experience and its recollection. And, because we privilege sight to such a degree, we want our narrators to be steeped in the visual so that we may experience it so to speak, with our own eyes – a shared vision. Perhaps this in part explains the return time and again to the sea, to water, to its possibility of rebirth or death. It holds, what Benjamin identifies as an aura, a certain gravity and ability to reflect, bounce back, see and be seen. The aura is seen in natural object as

> (A) projection of a social experience among human beings onto nature … The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in return. To experience the aura of a phenomenon means to invest (*belehnen*) it with the capability of returning the gaze. This experience corresponds to the data of *mémoire involontaire* (Benjamin 2007, 158).

STRUCTURING SENSES

This idea of bearing witness, or addressing the burden of visual truth circulates and those notions tethering to memory exert a strong pull in all the films, particularly as concerns relationships. For *Diving Bell's* Bauby, vision is depicted as a direct measure of intimacy. The director Schnabel lenses those closest to the protagonist, those things *most* important, in full frame. That cinematic space, of course, reflects an emotional one, a metaphor for what we hold close and those whom are embraced. And *Blue*, though absent those visual and narrative cues and clues associated with traditional motion picture storytelling, symbolically resonates a more personal intimacy in demanding its viewers confront and consider themselves in relationships, intimate, uncomfortable, and existential. In cinematic and filmmaking parlance, *Blue* affects point of view (POV) in unique fashion; viewers are seeing *themselves* in nothingness. That POV insists on considering the blue void, the vastness of our relationship to our interior self.

Perhaps these relationships – to self, to others to memories – is no more tenderly rendered than in a scene in *Notes on Blindness*. In this touching moment, the voice of Hull's wife Marilyn, who occasionally recorded her musings surfaces: 'I suppose the major loss for me is that he can't see me. It's really as simple as that. I can't look into his eyes and be seen,' she says. Visually, dust motes float lazily past the golden glow penetrating a window. A gauze-wrapped aesthetic, soft focused and thick with nostalgia colours the screen. Shown is a woman's torso against a delicate floral wallpaper, a complement to her loose sun dress, and the sun speckles her skin as she stand in the window's glance. Outside, ribbon grass and other meadow flora gently pirouette in the breeze. Sunlight flickers and licks at the greenery. Her voice continues *'There's no beholding in that sense of being held in somebody's look. And I think when you're very close to somebody that is a huge loss.'* Then, her husband's voice joins hers, *'To be seen is to exist.'* He is on the water, it laps gently at the small watercraft he's floating on. From the side he looks down to its blue-steel expanse. It is dusk. Then it is not. There is a young woman with the mid-day glow of the sun kissing her flowing red hair. She wears a green blouse against a sky so perfect with clouds, it seems

a dream. Hull continues: *'This is what lies behind the thought my older daughter has expressed, "Oh daddy, I wish you could see me."'* Earlier in the film, Hull has lamented, *'To lose the face is another thing. To what extent is loss of images of the face tied up with loss of the image of the self and the consequent feeling of being a ghost or a mere spirit?'*

Benjamin considered the face a particular entrenchment of aura for its ability to look back, return the gaze. His was not merely a critique of modernity, rather in this unfinished manuscript the *Arcades Project*, he offered numerous ways to consider memory and its ties to visual: 'The decay of the aura and the atrophy of the vision of a better nature … are one and the same' (Benjamin 1999, 362).

This thread, or threat, of loss is constant in this trio of films and is a corollary to the aforementioned thematic concern with waiting. Loss of self, loss of spirit, loss of image, loss of sight. And yet, what also holds true and knits the films together is a sense of things gained. One notable gain is in other sensory awarenesses and aptitudes. Peter Middleton, one of the filmmakers of *Notes on Blindness* shared that this gain, this direction informed their planning and execution of the film's narrative.

> John starts out refusing to accept blindness really and over the course of three years he discovers the beauty in blindness and comes to consider it as a dark and paradoxical gift and though its not exactly linear there's definitely an arc that runs throughout his story. (Middleton, Skype interview, February 2014)

For Hull there is life with sight and another without. Science has demonstrated cognitive and cortical remapping takes place with sightless individuals to such a degree that other sensory perceptions are heightened (Rauschecker 2008, 48). Each of the filmmakers has taken great care in these films to create an aural aesthetic that blends and bends, modulates and modifies sounds of all sort. Sound becomes a player in the unfolding dramas and they are so rich, so evocative, so carefully sonically textured – the pitter patter of a light rain shower, a toddler's laughter, a wind chime, the gurgle and swervey-dervey of dislocation, the ambient hum of the workplace, the plaintive strains of an oboe – as to, ideally and strategically, induce *memoire involontaire* with those traversing the auditory landscape. The clink and clatter of everyday life create textures allowing for pictures, mental images, personally lived associations.

Another universality of the films is the narrative arc of each. This also draws on emotion and recall and in strictly formulaic terms closely resembles a sort of dramatic structure that is attendant with grief. This is detailed in Kübler-Ross' stages of grief. Though more contemporarily this model has been debated, there are some truths that lie at the heart of her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*. Kübler-Ross identifies these stages as denial/isolation, anger, bargaining/rationalisation, depression, and acceptance. Though not all stages will necessarily appear as the griever moves towards acceptance (nor, necessarily will a griever move through any of these phases), they do map rather seamlessly onto the protagonists of the films examined here. Though acceptance in each case comes with no small amount of resistance and resentment, a profound and graceful awareness is realised.

Hull describes his anger at his condition, the gentle but sonorous tones belying a frustration: *'How could this happen to me. Who could ask me to go through this? Who had the right to deprive me of the sight of my children at Christmas time?'* Visually, as this unfolds viewers are forced into an odd perspective. It is a moment of disruption until orientation is gathered. An eerie jumble of angles and a singular, wavering electronic keyboard note holds the promise of unpleasantness. Then, after a fashion, things become more clear. That light streaming through the spot-soaked glass and smudges is a car window and the light is a street lamp. The perspective is from that of a person lying down, moving through the streets on a Bible-black evening. A slight pullback and tilt of the camera reveals Hull. He is on a gurney being transported by ambulance. Earlier, he has gone through his bargaining phase. He's playing a game of high stakes rationalising with himself and in conversation with his son. *'God helps me. He keeps me strong He give me courage,'* he tells the boy. *'But he doesn't help you to get your eyes back,'* his son tells him. Screen goes black.

That cinematic moment was a challenging, says the film's creator. as were a number of the visual recreations in *Notes on Blindness*.

> Working in film as soon as you start from (blindness), then the imagery takes on a different production. It's not necessarily a viewpoint, it's not necessarily a literal visual image its not necessarily true and that something we've embraced within the imagery within the film. There are moments of impressionism and visual metaphor. … The film is something that we've had to be very careful in how we use our shots, because

> normally when you cut to a reverse angle you're implying a viewpoint. And that sort of imposes a set of restrictions we've tried to impose upon our approach to it … although we do want the camera to depict certain things, it's kind of a liberation to be stepping outside that (Middleton 2014).

So too, Bauby has a scene in which he's being transported by gurney. Initially he is being rolled in an 'invalid chair' down a hospital corridor. He's mindful in tackling his depression and gaining in acceptance with a dark humour as he is wheeled about. *'You can handle the wheelchair,'* he says repeating the instructions of a nurse. *'It has the ring of a life sentence.'* Later, he is being pushed along sterile hallways on a gurney. Glass, in the forms of enclosures or compartments, architectural flourishes and walls of windows cast a warped, fun-house effect as he catches his soft focus reflection, all shimmer and warp, through his left eye. An oddly out of place bubble-gum pop music plays. *'My life is here. A constant repetition. In this place.'*

With *Blue*, Jarman offers no tilts or pans, there are no 360º panoramas; the movement is within the viewer's eyes and imagination as the story of the director's battle with AIDS unfolds against that unremitting blue screen that appears to shimmer, pulsing, recede and move back again – it is though as a wave filled with desperate emotion is coursing through the screen. Jarman long bucked traditional narrative storytelling and *Blue* is his most defiant act. For a filmmaker known as 'painterly,' (perhaps most notably *Carvaggio*) the film is rich in austerity, a single hue projected on the screen colours the accompanying narration, driving its intensity, bringing forth images in the mind's eye. Indeed for this visceral experience this may be his most effective cinematic painting. In seeing one thing, one colour, eyes and minds are opened to other sensual riches and emotional wanderings. As he comes to grips with his failing health and sight he notes, 'One can know the whole world without stirring abroad. Without looking out the window. Once can see the way of heaven.' With ferocity of purpose *Blue* is non-representational and in this way, one then can have a vision without sight. In one of his last interviews, the director explained, in part, his process: 'It's sort of Scheherazade, you know, and the telling the stories and of course because there are no images, you can be as free as you like' (BBC 1993).

Blue, also offers a similar disorienting moment at the film's beginning, which sets the tone, literally and figuratively for the aural soundscape to follow. A chime, it it? Perhaps a doorbell? A piano note *sustentato* gives way to, a wind chime, a cacophony or rhythmic, it caresses like a breeze, but the sort that chills the skin and raises the hair of the arm. It reverberates as though four walls of sound, piercing and penetrating then gives way to a voice, *'You say to the boy open your eyes, When he opens his eyes and sees the light, You make him cry out'* then the haunting sounds of a woodwind underscores the words. The aural dimension sustains and maintains such a presence throughout the film.

BLUE IS THE COLOUR OF VISION

Of the three films, perhaps *Blue* best articulates the shared narrative arc of resistance through acceptance. And *Blue* may be the most effective in meeting the hypothetical scenario posed at this essay's beginning – to give concrete visual voice to the memories of the sightless. I've made little mention of the look of *Blue* to this point. The film's aesthetic is contained within its title. It is singular chromatic saturation. It is blue.

Jarman's 79-minute film soaks the screen in cobalt blue, the colour of seas and the hue of sadness. For the entirety of the film, the screen holds a static, blue image. It does not waver and, for several moments of viewing, seems sterile, disconnected. But, for Jarman, blue is pregnant with meaning. It confronts viewers in the same way Jarman confronted the relentlessness of his affliction, angry and spirited. The dialogue offers narration, explication, confusion, abstraction and is voiced by several voice actors, Jarman included. Voices are pitted against ambient sound, a cacophony of swirls of music, dissonance, occasional silence" These are the 'colours' of the sonic palette and they are as varied as the visual palette is fixed; the screen fairly pulses as Jarman describes his journey and gives voice a sonic array to attempt to evoke *mémoire involontaire*. Its elegant word play and soundscapes create a sensual experience, heightening the awareness of listening and, for some uncomfortably, making one aware of the space and place around them without visual cues or clues.

'My mind, Frosted with drugs ices up, A drift of empty snowflakes, Whiting out memory, A blinkered twister, Circling in spirals, Cross-eyed meddlesome consciousness, Shall I? Will I, Doodling death watch, Mind how you go' (Jarman 1993).

Because of the confrontation with colour, Jarman forces viewers to become listeners, 'experiencers,' theatre goers who taste life and find it bitter, then sweet, and bitter again. Sometimes his words and energies seem to make the screen ripple, an internal dialogue tearing through the colours to be heard. Blue in: 'Charity has allowed the uncaring to appear to care and is terrible for those dependent on it. It has become big business as the

government shirks its responsibilities in these uncaring times. We go along with this, so the rich and powerful who fucked us over once fuck us over again and get it both ways. We have always been mistreated, so if anyone gives us the slightest sympathy we overreact with our thanks.' Blue out. His memory seemingly sears the screen a black, red inferno, though it is fixed in the deep cobalt-blue hue. And, by turns, by sheer persistence, a relinquishing, a giving in, Jarman casts a reflective tone: *'Our life will pass like the traces of a cloud/And be scattered like/Mist that is chased by the/Rays of the sun/For our time is the passing of a shadow.'* This creates a palpable sense of mourning and memory in those attending the screen.

This is an epiphanic retelling, a sharing of *mémoire voluntaire* so vivid as to create in viewers sensing and seeing in a new way, the past in a present moment. Jarman richly shares this insight twice in the film when he bellows and coos 'Blue is darkness visible.' This theme echoes throughout each of the films, particularly taken in total offer ways to understand vision's relationship to memory and, conversely, an insistence that memory can be enacted or embodied by non-visual means. As Damásio (2010) notes

> The mind includes images regarding a simple and very common sequence of events: an object engage by the body when that object was looked at, **touched or heard**, from a specific perspective; the engagement cause the body to change; the presence of the object was felt; the object was made salient. (p. 203, emphasis added).

In sum, and more specific to the marriage of art and consciousness, the films considered here serve to prove Merleau-Ponty's contention that movies are well suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other. 'A movie is not thought; it is perceived' (Merleau-Ponty 1964). In such a way, this trio of projects not only exploit the medium's ability to animate or bring to life the act of seeing, but makes dynamic the memories of those without. As well, they instil in the viewer the true awe made possible by sight – the memories of vision and what a world might look like absent both.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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