The Work of James Blue
A Retrospective

CONTENTS

FILM SCHEDULE

Thursday, October 13, 6:30 – 9 p.m. at Burchfield Penney

AN OVERVIEW OF BLUE'S WORK

6:30 – 9 p.m. Reception and overview of James Blue's Career, including screenings and discussions of Blue's early work, rise, and influence

Friday, October 14, the Center for the Fine Arts, rm. 112, UB North Campus at 7 p.m.

USIA & JAMES BLUE

THE SCHOOL AT RINCON SANTO, COLUMBIA (1962, 10 min., 16mm)

A FEW NOTES ON OUR FOOD PROBLEM (1968, 35min.,16mm)

Documentary about the world's food crisis. Nominated for an Academy Award in 1968.

THE MARCH TO WASHINGTON (1963-64, 33 min., 16mm)

Documentary about the historic Civil Rights March on Washington.

Saturday, October 15 at 2 p.m. at the Burchfield-Penney Art Center

VIDEO AND THE CITY

WHO KILLED THE FOURTH WARD? (1 hr. excerpt, 1976/77)

INVISIBLE CITY (1 hr. 1979) discussion with producer Lynn Corcoran

Saturday, October 15 at 7 p.m. at the Market Arcade Film & Arts Centre

INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM : BLUE'S APPROACH TO WAR IN ALGERIA

AMAL (1960, 21 min., 16 mm)

A short film about land development and farming in Algeria.

OLIVE TREES OF JUSTICE (1962, 90 min., 16mm)

Blue's only feature film, which received the Critics Prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

Sunday, October 16, 1 pm at Burchfield-Penney Art Center

BLUE AND ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

KENYA BORAN PARTS I & II (with David MacDougal, 1974, 66 min. 16mm)

The Kenya Boran series was filmed in 1972 in the Marsabit District of northern Kenya.

The Burchfield-Penney Art Center is pleased to have collaborated with Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center on this retrospective that recognizes the significant contributions that James Blue has made to the cultural and intellectual life of Western New York. Over the past few years, the Burchfield-Penney has taken steps to begin a notable expansion of its media arts programming and collecting in order to recognize the contributions of Western New York media artists to the field. This James Blue retrospective is an important step for the museum in developing a collection and program that will be worthy of these artists and their accomplishments.

On behalf of the entire staff at the Burchfield-Penney, we thank guest curator Dr. Gerry O'Grady for his contribution and for providing the mass of materials necessary for the success of this project. We also thank Lynn Corcoran, Dr. Anthony Bannon, Gill Dennis, Elmer Ploetz, Richard Blue, and Bill Jungles.

On a personal note, I thank Ed Cardoni for acknowledging my enthusiasm for James Blue's work and suggesting this collaboration. I would also like to thank Edward Sobala who first informed me of Blue and his documentaries when we were both students at SUNY Buffalo. Finally, and most significantly, a special thanks to Joanna Raczynska, Media Arts Director at Hallwalls, whose tireless effort and dedication to this project are most commendable. It has been both a pleasure and education working with her in the development and production of this retrospective.

Don Metz
Head of Public Programming
Burchfield-Penney Art Center

THE WORK OF JAMES BLUE: A RETROSPECTIVE, co-presented by Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center and the Burchfield-Penney Art Center, marks the 25th anniversary of the death of filmmaker James Blue. Blue was an artist, an educator, an avid film historian, an internationally renowned documentary filmmaker, and an advocate of experimentation in the non-fiction form. A professor at the University at Buffalo's Department of Media Study (known then as the Center for Media Study) in the mid 1970s, Blue influenced a generation of media makers and worked tirelessly to promote the craft of telling true stories with moving images.

This 2005 review of Blue's work will hopefully introduce his films to many who have not yet had the benefit of experiencing them, and underscore his unique and very broad contribution to cinema. I feel that it is particularly important to screen Blue's work now, at this historic moment. There is no organization that actually distributes Blue's films and videos; subsequently, they remain largely neglected. Through Dr. Gerald O'Grady's generosity and the hard work of the film preservation team at the Eastman House where these films will be housed and treated after this retrospective, that fact will surely change.

Many thanks are due to the people who made this exhibition and film/video series possible, especially Dr. O'Grady whose generosity, enthusiasm, and guidance have been invaluable to this project. I'd also like to thank reporter and documentarian Elmer Ploetz; it was from our shared interest in the documentary form that this project was initiated.

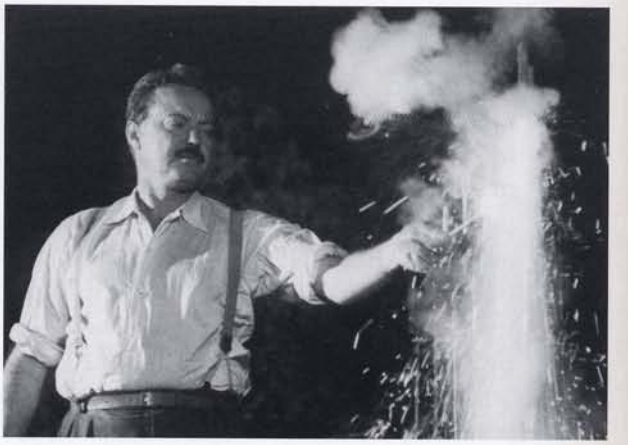
Heartfelt thanks also goes to co-organizer Don Metz, Director of Programs at the Burchfield-Penney for his patience, wisdom, friendship, and generosity, and to Lynn Corcoran for her invaluable insight, support of this project, and vital participation as a guest speaker.

Thanks also to Ed Cardoni, Polly Little, Carl Lee, and John Massier of Hallwalls; Kathleen Heyworth, Tom Holt, and intern Rebekah Sipos of the Burchfield-Penney; James Blue's brother and script collaborator Richard Blue; Anthony Bannon, Executive Director of the George Eastman House, for his participation and permission to reprint excerpts from his interview with Blue; writer and educator Gill Dennis; Programmer Jim Healey, Curator Patrick Loughney, and Preservation Officer Dan Wagner at the George Eastman House; Ed Hugetz; Adele Santos; Steina and Woody Vasulka; Tony Conrad; Roy Roussel and Meg Knowles of the Department of Media Study, University at Buffalo; Beth Manos and Mark Brickey of HERO Design; and David Cady, Ron Santora, and Joseph Steinmetz of WNED, channel 17 in Buffalo. It is also important to thank all of those engineers and technicians at WNED who made the airing of the original series THE FRONTIER a reality, including Russ Gill, Gena Christian, David Jacobs, Nancy Kolack, John Lindner, John Pasco, Wiley Watkins, and John Sobota.

Finally, I would also like to thank Nicole and James Dormeyer for contributing a short 8mm film that James Blue made very early on in his career, which until now has not be publically screened. I would also like to thank them and so many of our out-of-town guests for travelling to Buffalo to participate and enjoy this project.

THE WORK OF JAMES BLUE: A RETROSPECTIVE is co-sponsored by Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center; the Burchfield-Penney Art Center; New York Council for the Humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities; the New York State Council for the Arts; the Samuel P. Capen Chair in American Culture, UB; and the Department of Media Study at the University at Buffalo. A very warm thank you goes out to all of our funders and the members of Hallwalls and the Burchfield-Penney Art Center for supporting this project.

Joanna Raczynska
Media Arts Director
Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center




FIN

Some background on James Blue's documentaries

Blue's first allegiance in film was to reality–the observed environment. In it, he found magic and poetry. His task, as he saw it, was to record the world and its peoples as faithfully as possible. He was aware, though, that creating a document of reality can be a thorny matter indeed, one where the subjects may be very well influenced by the disposition, experience, and tools of the recorder.

At opposing poles of possibility for any filmmaker are the impulse to honor film's unique fidelity to the objects and situations it pictures, and, at the opposite extreme, the recorder's opportunity to shape and assemble those images. Whether the events pictured dictate the shape of the film, or whether one fashions its form according to one's own manipulative potential, is a dilemma that describes the making of art since its inception. The thrill of early cinema was its true-to-life quality. But the subsequently discovered ability to manipulate–to control the flow of time through edited changes in continuity–called into question the possibility of an accurate representation. Once the shudder of believing the shadow image to be the same as its likeness had quieted, once audiences no longer ran from theaters at the sight of an oncoming train on the screen, it became possible to consider film for what it was–a representation, not some sort of magical surrogate....

Blue emerged as a professional filmmaker, graduating from the Institute of Higher Education in Cinematography in Paris in the same year (1958) that Jean Rouch released his pioneer cinema verité film, *Moi un Noir*. And Blue remained aware of Rouch's contribution to the documentary, for Rouch's films are documents not only of an action in front of the camera, but of the involvement of a filmmaker with his subject.

Blue also was mindful, in Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s words, that the boundary between the documentary and the fiction film "is tenuous indeed." Schlesinger wrote:

"Both are artifacts; both are contrivances. Both are created by editing and selection. Both, wittingly or not, embody a viewpoint. The fact that one eschews and the other employs professional actors becomes in the end an economic detail. And the relation of any film to reality depends, not on the amateur standing of its elements, but on the artistic vision of those who must put the elements together" (Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Fiction of Fact – and the Fact of Fiction," in The Documentary Tradition, Lewis Jacobs, ed. New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1971, p. 383).

Blue's relationship to fiction, however, is better expressed by Jean-Luc Godard. In our interview, we discussed the following remarks by Godard. The first was "All great fiction films tend toward documentary, just as all great documentaries tend toward fiction...each word implies a part of the other. And he who opts wholeheartedly for one, necessarily finds the other at the end of the journey."

And the second was: Beauty–the splendor of truth–has two poles. There are great directors who seek

truth, which, if they find it, will necessarily be beautiful; others seek beauty, which, if they find it, will also be true. One finds these two poles in documentary and fiction. Some directors start from documentary and create fiction-like Flaherty, who eventually made very carefully constructed films. Others start from fiction and create documentary: Eisenstein, starting in montage, ended by making *Que Viva Mexico!*

Just as the introduction of recording or measuring instruments alters the event measured, the camera and its operators in a documentary situation introduce a variable to the pure reality of the events pictured. Documentary filmmakers, then, from Dziga Vertov in his pioneering The Man with the Movie Camera on through history, have felt the pull of making their presence known. The questions have always been, "How, why, when, and to what effect do I make my presence known?" ...

Throughout his career, Blue had an enormous respect for the events of the world and their consequences. He found poetry there, and magic. His response was to acknowledge the method and the limitations of his art and move as far as possible toward the truth he admired. His works stand as documents of discovery and as catalysts for change. "I love to do things," he said, "that are useful and important to society."

Anthony Bannon: What drew you into making documentary films?

James Blue: One thing was I never felt really comfortable considering fiction. I was never quite certain that that was what I was good at, regardless of the fact that I have a fairly strong sense for telling stories. There was something about establishing the credibility that's necessary to fiction, making it believable, that scared me.

Another thing is a little bit more positive. I had a feeling that there was something magical about film that was not being used. An element that had not been fully exploited was its capacity to make art and meaning out of images from the real world. And I felt that there was an incredible poetry in that, let alone the significance of the document. It was always more extraordinary for me to find things that spoke poetically than to invent them.

Some people could say, "Well, you're inventing them even though you're finding them." David MacDougall [the noted anthropological filmmaker] told me once that the way he'd analyze it, there were two kinds of filmmakers: the kind that went through all sorts of experiences, had it all bottled up, and it came out later; and then the other kind of filmmaker who worked with the experience itself, and as it came in it was synthesized or dealt with. I think I'm the latter kind. It's in the [Roberto] Rossellini line, and I'm not comparing myself to him, but it is the kind of filmmaking Rossellini does. He depends on starting something out there that he then tries to understand. I love working that way, so that things are always being suggested to you, rather than having to reach in to pull it out. I think many documentary filmmakers work that way, and I think that's another reason why I chose it.

The third reason was simply that I have a kind of social consciousness. I felt that was important that we find ways to develop our knowledge of the world about us. In a complex society you need to find complex ways of dealing with knowledge and allowing people to make decisions. If you put all those together, all my work has in some way been documentary, except for a few little farce comedies which I did in Algeria....

AB: How would you be critical of your own career? Do you think that you've headed on a line to where you are now, or have you had some frustrating cul-de-sacs?

JB: I feel like I'm always doing what I should be doing. The only thing I really regret is not having

gotten more involved with the feature format. I've always wanted to do a quasi-documentary feature, fiction but also fact, about my own family–extrapolated from that anyway. I spent a summer, or several months, doing interviews with most of my relatives before they got too old. The film would be about a subsistence farm in the Middle West at the turn of the century and how that produced the people who then created the years of the '30s and how the people of the '30s created the people of the '60s and '70s.

AB: Will that film happen?

JB: I hope it will, I hope it will. Right now, a really rather good writer is working on it. His name is Gill Dennis. It's been a long range thing that we've returned to several times and never seemed able to find the spark to make us finish it. It's complicated. There is a question of too many dreams, too many expectations placed on the film. As I say, it's documentary material which would be rethought and distilled, and then created.

AB: You've had some attractive opportunities, but you've remained in Buffalo. You're pleased here, apparently?

JB: I have more opportunity here than anywhere else. The situation at the school [SUNY at Buffalo, Center for Media Study] allows me a lot of free time and a lot of time to develop. I enjoy the teaching here; I think the atmosphere is very supportive and it provides an exciting context for developing a documentary movement, with teams dealing with the city on a local level. The area and regional level is very strong here. Media Study/Buffalo is very much behind that. I think that's exciting.

AB: What do you see as the possibilities for the documentary group that you hope to create here?

JB: The city has plenty of need for communication and for an understanding of its structural situations. Documentary has always been so crisis oriented. It's been oriented toward making things about Three Mile Island, say, but nobody deals with why it happened, really, or gets into the whole involved problem of why we need nuclear energy in the first place. I think that kind of thinking needs to be shared with a larger audience, but in order to share it we have to find ways to make it attractive.

And then, another part of what kept me here is this moral imperative, this ability, this need I have to do some things that are useful and important in this society. Important in the sense that it really helps the world. Feature movies is not an area where I think I can make a big contribution. I'm fairly committed to trying to explore the regional and the local. You cannot finance in-depth structural things under the present system, only short news reports.

AB: Do you have any plans for documentary work in Buffalo?

JB: Yes, I'd love to, when I get back from England. I hope to have a year after that to really settle down and start doing some things here.

AB: What would they be?

JB: Some of our students are working on unemployment in Buffalo. I've been trying to find a way to train people to begin thinking about these issues. They're so enormous that I think our first works have been very tentative steps. There's only one work that's even near completion. But I think that ultimately we should be able to have some fairly well-trained people. They've not only got to have a film sense, they've got to have a sense of the forces that work in society, in a city: how does a city function, what are the area's laws, what are the things you need to know in order to survive in that city? It's got to be translated

in a way that makes people interested, makes them want to watch.

AB: What impact would such an endeavor have upon Buffalo? Why bother?

JB: I think the city would function better. There would be less paranoia. The city government would be in touch with its people. Cities are always looking for feedback systems, but they generally don't have any. I think that City Hall needs the people to know some things, and there are things that the people need City Hall to know. It's as important as garbage collecting, and we have to realize that....

AB: What in your career are you proudest of?

JB: I think the later period, which has been the hardest, and to have made even a little bit of headway on doing local stuff, like creating the media center [at Rice University] and helping set up SWAMP [Southwest Alternative Media Center] in Houston. And having had a part to play in the development of consciousness about independent cinema. I've never been satisfied with any of my films, but no one ever is.

AB: What value do you place upon your teaching?

JB: I learn what I think. I do have a fairly well-organized course, but when I get into the class itself I generally improvise. It has a great value for me in that regard and I enjoy people beginning to wake up to documentary work. I love tracing the history of documentary as a tool for teaching filmmaking. For me that becomes an opportunity to rediscover and rethink the whole set of questions each time... I find that we cannot create in a vacuum; we're creating out of a tradition. We're not following what somebody else did, we're following with another argument, or an old idea that we've found a new reason for.

AB: Why do you work in Super 8? Why not video?

JB: It fits in with my notion of the regional and the local although *Invisible City* is mostly video. It's a question of democratization of the media, of giving access to more people....

I guess that's the only point that's important, keeping access available to people who don't have large amounts of money to put into sophisticated equipment. It seems to me that Super 8 is the only answer. It's also the only answer for people who demand flexibility of equipment, like the anthropologists.

AB: What do you see for the future, for yourself?

JB: I need to get back into the swing of fiction in order to do the film on the Midwestern town. I'm very interested in fiction structures because they always tend to show up in documentary for me. ... quoting Godard, you start with fiction and you approach reality, and vice versa. I firmly believe that. I believe that documentary is a form of expression and the definition of the term speaks more to the goals the film sets for itself, to the kind of material used, than to documentary being something totally different from fictional expression. But that said, documentary does have another responsibility to the real world than fiction, because it's speaking about our lives and the real world in a way that is different from the way fiction is describing it.

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Dr. Anthony Bannon is the Director of the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY.

James Blue's Octagon

by Gerald O'Grady

for Gertrude and Howard Barnstone

When James Blue and I, colleagues for the first time, were in a small white cottage on 3812 Montrose Boulevard, The Media Center, which I founded at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, we could look across to the corner of 1409 Sul Ross Street and watch the progress of the construction of The Rothko Chapel, completed in 1971 by a great friend to both of us, the architect Howard Barnstone and his partner, Eugene Aubry. Writing in *The Smithsonian* 2,5 (August 1971), David Snell observed that their project "marked the first time in perhaps 400 years that a religious commission of this scope to a major artist had brought about such a degree of concurrence between art and architecture." The patrons were those of our own media program, John and Dominique de Menil. Rothko's huge dark monochromatic canvases were installed in an octagonal structure inspired by the floor of an eleventh century baptistery which he had seen on the island of Torcello in Italy. Recently a medievalist, I knew that 8 symbolized the eighth day of the week, the resurrection and rebirth. It was this shared experience which prompted me to honor James Blue in this form.

I FEATURE FILMMAKING ALGERIA

THE OLIVE TREES OF JUSTICE (1962-3)

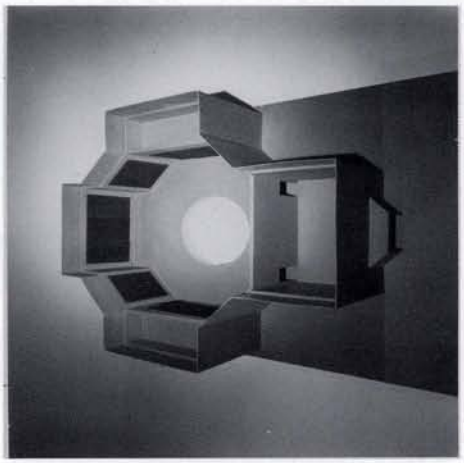
Just 75 years before this retrospective of James Blue's films in Buffalo, New York (October 13-16, 2005), he was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma on October 10, 1930. He was raised in Portland, Oregon. He died at Roswell Park Memorial Hospital in Buffalo on June 14, 1980. After graduating in Theater from the University of Oregon, and then serving in the Army, he pursued a graduate degree before he earned the highest French professional degree in film from L'Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques in Paris (1956-58). Because French law restricted his taking employment in that country, he worked in Algeria for Georges Derocles' Studios Africa, which also had production facilities in Tunis, Rabat and Casablanca. There he made a number of short films, including *Amal* (1960) for the Moslem population.

He co-wrote the script and directed the 1962 feature, *Les Oliviers de la Justice*, based on Jean Pélégri's prize-winning novel of the same title (Paris: Gallimard, 1959). When I met Pélégri after James Blue's death, in April 1981, he allowed me to copy over 100 reviews of *Les Oliviers de la Justice* from every city and town in France. It created a controversy on both the right and the left. It was the only fiction feature made in Algeria during the war years. When I later interviewed the Bulgarian cameraman, Julius Rascheff, in February 2002, he described how the editing rooms were bombed several times during the production, which itself included a scene of a terrorist's bomb in the streets.

The structure of *Les Oliviers* is a seamless forward-moving narrative present with flashbacks to the past memories of childhood. Blue paid homage to John Ford in the rural setting, and shot the urban street scenes like Roberto Rossellini's neo-realism. Part of the film is shot in a very different style, that of the recently innovated cinema verité which Jean Rouch and Richard Leacock had just instituted in France and the United States.

II FIVE DOCUMENTARY FILMS FOR THE UNITED STATES INFORMATION AGENCY, THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES & WASHINGTON, D.C.

LETTER FROM COLUMBIA, 1962
THE SCHOOL AT RINCON SANTO, 1962
EVIL WIND OUT, 1962
THE MARCH, 1963-64



When John F. Kennedy became President in 1961, George Stevens, Jr. saw *Les Oliviers de la Justice* at Cannes, and brought Blue to the USIA, where he subsequently made five films, beginning with three made in Central and South America. When the March on Washington was announced for August 28, 1963, Blue directed 12 cameramen who shot in a variety of network and cinema verité styles. He himself wrote the voiceover soundtrack, narrated the film, and edited it. It included the full text of Martin Luther King, Jr.s' "I Have A Dream" speech, as well as songs by Joan Baez, Odetta, and Marian Anderson; the soundtrack of King, the singers and Blue was translated into 52 languages and shown all over the world.

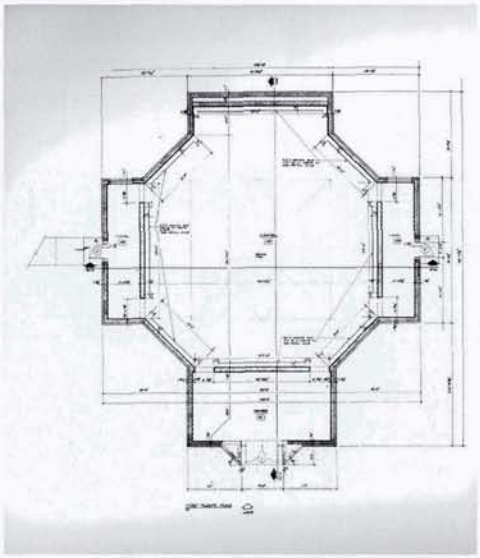
After Blue's death, when *The March* was shown for the first time in Houston at The Rothko Chapel in celebration of King's birthday on January 15, 1984, it was so popular that it had to be shown three times. After each screening, all those in attendance surrounded the reflecting pool, the site of Barnett Newman's "Broken Obelisk," and joined hands to sing "We Shall Overcome." All ceremonies there emphasize the interdenominational and global aspects of faith and hope.

When I had first met James Blue in Washington, D.C., he had just returned from New York City where he had completed the final mix of his first film in color, *A Few Notes On Our Food Problem* (1968), soon to be nominated for an Academy Award. It dealt with the green revolution, the improvement of agricultural production on three continents, and was shot in Taiwan, India, Uganda and Brazil. Again, he was director, scriptwriter, narrator, and editor of a poetic work which Basil Wright, the famous British documentarian, wrote in his comprehensive history of international film: "[It] has great claim, through the force of its message and its cinematic beauty to be regarded as one of the few really great documentaries" (*The Long View*, 1979)..

III

THE OBSERVATIONAL/ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM – KENYA, AFRICA

KENYA BORAN, 1974



I invited James Blue to formulate the filmmaking curriculum at The Media Center in Houston, which later moved to Rice University where I had taught earlier. He, in turn, invited David MacDougall to join him there, and, in 1974, James went to Africa for the third time, now to Kenya and Uganda, to co-direct and take sound for *Kenya Boran*. David was soon to become the world's most prolific ethnographic filmmaker and Director of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies. In 1998, Princeton University Press published his essays on *Transcultural Cinema*, in which he discusses James Blue in several places.

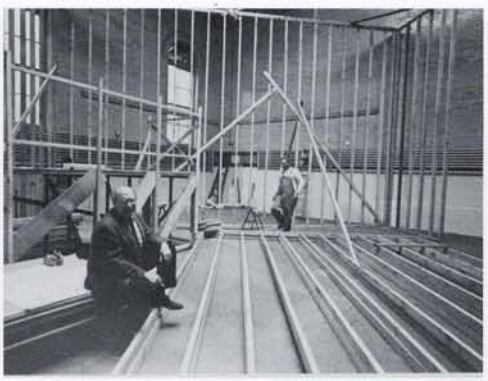
Their new style of observational cinema involved single shots of unusually long duration and invited the subjects being shot to participate in the making. It was standard practice at the time, especially in the use of African languages, to simply silence them or have an English-speaking narrator translate or summarize any dialogue. James Blue insisted that part of the meaning was in the linguistic performance, and thus he recorded all speakers exactly, and then included an English translation in the subtitles.

The *Kenya Boran* project actually included five films and was one of five such projects called *Faces of Change*, 25 films produced by the American University Field Staff under Project Director Norman Miller, and funded by the National Science Foundation. The other countries were Afghanistan, Bolivia, the Soko Islands off the Chinese coast, and Taiwan. Each series included a film on the political and religious organization, education, the role of women, technological modernization, and the rural economy. When Margaret Mead saw it at The Smithsonian Institution in 1977, she pronounced it the best ethnographic film she had ever seen.

Perhaps most interesting is the film's portrayal of the young Peter Boru, a herder's son, as he engages in and comments upon the pursuit of his education. Another notable scene is the introduction of electric pumps to draw water for the cattle.

IV
THE COMPLEX DOCUMENTARY, HOUSTON/BUFFALO

WHO KILLED THE FOURTH WARD? (1978)
INVISIBLE CITY (1979)
UNEMPLOYMENT IN BUFFALO (n.d.)



The complex documentary began with a concern for and a commitment to changing a particular situation in an urban culture in which Blue himself lived. It was not to take a side but to explore all the facts in their complexity, and to research the problem in books and interviews and consultations with as many citizens from every strata involved in the issue, either as manager or victim. It also enabled him to utilize a fictional genre of television, such as that of the investigative detective (Columbo), as a narrative in which he himself, as the filmmaker, could perform the role of detective, so that the work became more of a story than an essay, and thus engaged a wider audience.

Who Killed the Fourth Ward? is a three-hour documentary. With Brian Huberman (camera) and Ed Hugetz (sound), Blue dramatized the City of Houston's acquisition of an historic Afro-American church for commercial expansion on the edge of the business district. It was shot just before Blue came to Buffalo, and Hugetz came with him to earn his master's degree by editing it.

During the summer vacation, Blue returned to Houston to make *Invisible City* with Adele Santos, an architect at Rice, whose students had researched the film. It was shot by Lynn Corcoran and Tom Sims. The problem was the decay of Houston's housing stock, and it engaged real estate officers, builders, heads of city housing agencies, and the poverty-level renters of the properties.

In 1979-80, Blue engaged his class of students on unemployment in Buffalo. The first semester was spent on research and informal interviews with political leaders, workers, and heads of social agencies; in the second, a design for the film was sketched and shooting locations chosen; the third involved the shooting; the fourth semester would be given over to editing, securing all rights, and making arrangements for a public broadcast so that it could effect the life of the community.

V
SCRIPTWRITING, UNITED STATES
WATCH FOR THE RAZOR ACT (1968)
KING'S MOUNTAIN AND ITS HEROES (1970)

James Blue's training at IDHEC had involved scriptwriting for features and documentaries. He had written *Les Oliviers de la Justice* with Jean Pélégri, awarded the Cannes Film Festival prize for best script by l'Association Français des Ecrivains du Cinéma. When Pier Paolo Pasolini was casting *Oedipus Rex* (1967), he asked James to play the lead role. Brian Huberman cast him as Sam Houston in his feature film made in the 1970s. The first film Blue directed, made in 8mm and shown on May 16, 1951-52, was *Hamlet*, advertised as "special version filmed and directed, on campus, by Jim Blue." As his interviews with Fellini, Capra, Robbe-Grillet and others indicate, he had always avidly followed stylistic developments in the dramatic film.

In 1976, with the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, James Blue collaborated with his brother Richard and Gill Dennis on *King's Mountain and Its Heroes*, a feature film for television. It was based on the split allegiance of an Anglican minister, and his debates and warfare with his neighbors, now revolutionaries in the Cape Fear region of Cumberland County in North Carolina.

Another script being developed earlier by the Blue/Dennis team had the working title of *Watch for the Razor Act* (1968), which referred to a magical performance which had actually been done by Blue's uncle. It featured the kaleidoscopic panorama of the century-long movement of a family across the American continent from the Southeast to Oklahoma and Oregon, and it was based on Blue's trips across the country in a camper to interview all the surviving members of the Blue family and their relatives, on whom he gathered a massive amount of photographs, slides, super-8 movie footage, letters, and documents of all kinds, including the vast audiocassette collection of all the interviews. It was supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship, but the project, which extended over many years, was tragically left unfinished.

VI
INTERVIEW PROJECT
INTERNATIONAL DIRECTOR OF FEATURE AND DOCUMENTARY FILMS 1964-1980

James Blue received the first grant ever given to a filmmaker by The Ford Foundation (1964). His proposal was to interview the international directors who were beginning to use non-actors in their works, as he himself had done in *Les Oliviers de la Justice*. These included Roberto Rossellini and Federico Fellini in Italy, Jean-Luc Godard and others in France, Milos Forman and Ivan Passer in Czechoslovakia, and Satyajit Ray in India. He also took account of the makers using the recently discovered "cinema verite" or "direct cinema" or "uncontrolled cinema" in the United States, Canada, France and Japan, and included Richard Leacock, Albert and David Maysles, Shirley Clarke, Jean Rouch, Gilles Groulx, Pierre Perrault, and Susami Hani.

Later yet, he extended this series of interviews, now often done on videotape, to the makers of the American documentary classics of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Willard Van Dyke and Leo Hurwitz, and to the new ethnographic documentarians like Robert Gardner, John Marshall and David Hancock. Those on cinema verité published by Gordon Hitchens, the Editor of *Film Comment* (New York) became the most quoted sources for the various academic histories of that style. One appeared in *Objectif* (Montreal), another in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Paris), another in *Sight and Sound* (London), and several in *Media Study/Buffalo*. Those with Godard, Rossellini, Renoir and Leacock have been republished in books.

In all, Blue did more than 75 interviews, many more than two hours long, later including Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Frank Capra, King Vidor and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Many were done in French and Italian, and the cost for transcribing and translating them was prohibitive. For that reason, I am now exploring the possibility of transferring the entire collection of interviews to digital audio and making every minute available to all listeners, world-wide, on internet, thus giving access to one of the most important film history projects of the second half of the 20th century.

VII
ACCESS TO TELEVISION FOR THE WORK OF INDEPENDENT MAKERS
HOUSTON; BUFFALO 1975-1980

James Blue was deeply committed to the inclusiveness of the works of American –and Canadian– independent film and video makers on television when they had no access to that medium. In Houston (1975), he teamed up with Ed Hugetz to induce KUHT-TV, Channel 8, the PBS affiliate of the University of Houston, to transmit *The Territory*, programs by independent filmmakers in the Southwest. He told me that he had taken the name from the musical, *Oklahoma*:

> Territory folks should stick together,
> Territory folks should be pals,
> Cowboys, dance with farmers' daughters!
> Farmers, dance with ranchers' gals!

In Buffalo (1979), he accepted the invitation of J. Michael Collins, the General Manager of WNED-Channel 17 and myself to be the Executive Producer of *The Frontier*, and collaborated with video maker Lynn Corcoran of Media Study/Buffalo to produce a first season of 16 weekly programs featuring 27 makers from Western New York and Southern Ontario, the range of the station's broadcast signal. At that time, when over 200 public stations existed, only six –those in New York, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Houston and Buffalo– provided access to the independents. The Media Study/Buffalo project was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and The Canada Council.

During the week Blue was dying, there took place a series of screenings on "The Advantages of Diversity" at the Tenth Public Television and Independent Film Seminar at Arden House in New York. He had coordinated it and was to moderate for 100 makers and PBS managers, the theme being the exposure to work by Afro-American, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, Native American and Ethnic Minorities. It was the first time that a group of Native Americans had brought their work and philosophy to the Seminar and, on its last day, Larry Littlebird recorded on cassette a "Song for the Journey" (from *The Sweathouse*), and that gift was in the mail when James' journey began.

VIII
TEACHING
LOS ANGELES, HOUSTON, BUFFALO, LONDON, NEW YORK
1965-1980

James Blue was the only feature and documentary director for film and television that I ever knew who was intimately engaged in film pedagogy at all age levels, and loved to be. At his death, Willard Van Dyke, then Director of the Film Department at The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Chair of the Media Panel at the National Endowment for the Arts, said that Blue was the best teacher of film that he had ever met and David MacDougall once remembered that he had thought it impossible to teach filmmaking until he saw James Blue do it so well.

Stevan Larner wrote: "James Blue was one fantastic teacher. He was highly articulate, taking pains to explain all the way down to the barest essentials what the aesthetic, practical, and emotional reasons would or should be to choose a particular approach to a given situation. His explanations were on a human level; he never insulted anyone's intelligence nor did he ever take a patronizing stance."

Blue had taught Francis Ford Coppola, Paul Schrader and Joan Churchill at UCLA; he had helped start the American Film Institute's Center for Advanced Film Studies with Frantisek Daniel, formerly Dean of the Prague Film and Television Academy, and taught at the National Film School of Great Britain, invited by its founder, Colin Young. When Daniel, with Forman and Passer, initiated a graduate feature film production program at Columbia University, Blue agreed to add this assignment to his duties at Buffalo. He established the documentary film curriculum at Rice University and at the Center for Media Study in Buffalo. These were known for their professional training, their openness to experiment, their foundation in the whole history of international documentary practice, and their commitment to social change. He had the admiration of all of his experimental artist colleagues at Buffalo: Tony Conrad, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Woody Vasulka, and Steina.

James Blue once showed me a Super-8 film by an Afro-American teenage girl from a small Texas town. She had interviewed her blind grandmother, sitting in her bedroom, about racial conditions in her youth. Blue pointed out that only that young girl, using that lightweight, user-friendly equipment, and having the trust of her subject, could give us access to that history. He designed programs to teach documentary film to high school students in small towns in Texas, in New York's inner-city for John Culkin's Center for Understanding Media, and for my own New York State Summer School for the Media Arts in Buffalo.

The purpose of setting James Blue's work beside the composition, construction and ceremonies of The Rothko Chapel is to suggest a parallel to his own lifework which was eight-sided and focused on a set of intense images which interrelated with each other in a quest for permanence. As completed compositions, his films have the characteristics of monuments but, simultaneously, each is centered in his great passion for performance. That the performances were by non-actors, by common people, by the whole herd of humans on all the continents, reflects the re-definition of religion as an interdenominational human experience.

What have I experienced in meditating on James Blue and his works for the last 25 years? *Les Oliviers de la Justice* is accepted as an enduring classic. *The March* is acclaimed as an essential record of American history. Blue's 20 years of interviews are about to become a primary tool for film research. I tried to feel what it must have been like for him to live not only unheralded and unrewarded, but unacknowledged and unrecognized, for his achievements, and yet continue to work on one or another side of his octagon, the sign of this retrospective and rebirth.

Gerald O'Grady, Ph.D. was actively involved in the early years of electronic art, founding several departments of media studies, particularly at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The faculty at SUNY Buffalo included such eminent artists as the Vasulkas, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad, Peter Weibel and James Blue. Dr. O'Grady has taught at several U.S. universities, including New York, Columbia and the New School for Social Research. Most recently, he was a fellow of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research and a member of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University, where he conducted research on the films of the Civil Rights Movement. Now retired, Dr. O'Grady was recently the first guest professor (Gastwissenschaftler) invited by the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, Germany, where he gave a series of lectures on the work of Marshall McLuhan, on whom he is writing a book. In 2002, Dr. O'Grady was Researcher in Residence at the Daniel Langlois Foundation, Quebec, Canada.

Since 1979, Dr. O'Grady has edited, independently published and contributed essays to over 30 catalogues for film retrospectives or series including The Films of the Civil Rights; Remembering Malcom X; and Czech Filmaking, 1963-1990 for Joseph Papp's The Public Theater; on the Brazilian filmmaker Nelson Pereiros dos Santos for the Film Society of the Lincoln Center; on Theo Angelopoulos for the Museum of Modern Art in New York; on Dziga Vertov for the Collective for Living Cinema (NY); on Dusan Mizoguchi for the Cinématheque Ontario (Toronto); on David MacDougall for Media Study/ Buffalo; and Articulate Energy: The Emergence of the Abstract Film in America for Harvard University and Anthropology Film Archives.

James Blue, Buffalo, and the Complex Urban Documentary

by Elmer Ploetz

For an all too brief time in the 1970s, it seemed as if Buffalo truly was the center of the alternative media universe. It was a city where avant-garde artists like Tony Conrad, Hollis Frampton, Woody and Steina Vasulka, and Paul Sharits taught at the University at Buffalo. Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo co-founded a new gallery called Hallwalls. In music, Lukas Foss, Morton Feldman, Michael Tilson Thomas were making noise and crossing boundaries. Throw in poets like Robert Creeley and cultural critics such as Leslie Fiedler, and Buffalo's significance intensifies.

"Marshall McLuhan said that Buffalo was the center of the Earth," says Anthony Bannon, today the director of the George Eastman House in Rochester, but then an arts critic for the Buffalo News. "McLuhan, (Buckminster) Fuller and Gerry O'Grady conspired, agreed, and (futurist) Magda McHale thought it was a good idea too. They all agreed that Buffalo would be the center of the world and the media port of the future."

That was the world James Blue stepped into when he came to Buffalo, and one into which he seemed to fit seamlessly. It was also the time and place where Blue did his most significant, if least known, work as he sought to take his documentaries beyond the standard forms he had shown he knew so well in his 1960s pieces (*A Few Notes on Our Food Problem, The March,* and *The School at Santo Rincon, Colombia*).

In 1975, Blue was hired to teach at UB's Department of Media Study, but his presence extends back at least to 1973, when he first taught at Media Study/Buffalo's Summer Institute. Gerald O'Grady, who had created both the department and the unrelated media arts organization, was responsible for many judicious hires, Blue among them.

Lynn Corcoran, who went on to make *In Our Own Backyard* about the nuclear waste dumped in Love Canal and many other documentaries, recalls meeting Blue for the first time.

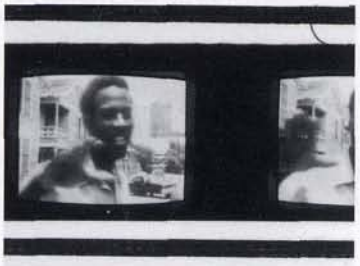
"It was in the first Media Study, a storefront on Bailey Avenue," says Corcoran. "I simply walked into Media Study one day to see a film that they were showing ... and there was James. He had arrived. He was still (working) in Houston then, and he was coming up summers to do these exhaustive and truly wonderful long workshop programs. He was surrounded by a bunch of people and ready to begin a workshop, talking to people, just kind of a very magnetic sort of personality.

"I walked up to him and I said, 'You know, I've got this problem in my neighborhood and maybe one of your students would like to come and film this. And he said, "Oh no, *you* should get the camera."

It's a story repeated over and over by Blue devotees. Ed Hugetz, who worked extensively with Blue in Houston, entitled an article on him: "Here Is A Camera; Make A Film."

The potential for democratizing film by putting small-scale Super-8 millimeter cameras and, later, video into the hands of regular people who didn't have huge budgets was an idea that enthralled Blue.

"Super-8 is home movies," says Bruce Jackson, a UB professor in English and American Studies and himself a documentarian. "No commercial filmmaker would use Super-8 for anything except as a prop, and he was getting ordinary people to go out and use ordinary Super-8 equipment to do documentary. ... Filmmaking was owned by elites, and even the documentarians were elites. And when people like James – and he was an innovator in this – started helping people make films using Super-8 equipment, it was perhaps the first phase in the whole movement of helping people



take control of documentation of their own lives."

As co-director of the Rice Media Center in Houston, Blue had tried to bring the community into the university to do exactly that kind of documentation, but it was resisted by the academics there. When Gerald O'Grady offered Blue a chance to join the UB's faculty, Blue took it.

Most of the people who were on the scene remember a hectic time, with artists and professors constantly flying in and out of town for workshops, screenings, performances, with social gatherings at various places around town. One of them was the big, old house Blue bought on Mariner Street in Allentown.

"James was a really romantic figure," says Joe Steinmetz, one of his students. "He looked like Clint Eastwood in *A Fist Full of Dollars*, he wore this poncho and he had cowboy boots and he was a really good looking guy. He had a real charisma about him." But almost all who knew him also mention his questioning nature.

"My mind goes to a person who has such a greedy desire for understanding, such a remarkably articulate way of sharing and an intelligence that I found staggering," says Bannon, who participated with Blue in the Buffalo Documentary Group, which at one time had as many as 35 members involved in watching and critiquing each other's work.

"He had a lot of nervous energy and he was always moving and thinking and scratching his head, rearranging himself and you could see in him a kind of active thought process," says Corcoran. "He was very restless about getting things right, getting his students' work right, getting his own work right, but I think above all he just knew what questions to ask (so) that everybody could understand what he meant."

And there was a lot to understand, because Blue was exploring the documentary form more deeply during his Buffalo era than at any other time during his career. He had begun to deal with a participant-observer approach in *Kenya Boran*, an ethnographic film made with David MacDougall, but developed it with *Who Killed the Fourth Ward?* With that work, Blue took on the role of trench-coated detective trying to ferret out the facts not in the death of an individual but in what was killing a community.

Hugetz came with him from Houston and edited the project, which also reflected Blue's interest in Super-8, in Buffalo.

"I should be considered a hero for this," quips Hugetz, referring

to the editing. "This was this tiny spaghetti stuff that I had to try to keep in sync. ... somebody had made a copy of a Steenbeck (flatbed film editor) for super-8 for about $1,200, and you can imagine this tiny little film and the magtape to go with it ... If anything is in sync on that film, it's amazing."

The film's real achievement was in crystallizing Blue's concept of the "complex urban documentary." He tried to bring in all of the major players in his search for answers, attempting to go beyond journalism's simple "he said, she said" substitution of "balance" for truth.

"James had that vision of society as a balance of interests, and he honest-to-God treated all these interests respectfully," says Hugetz. "... (Blue) would take the head of the chamber of commerce or the mayor of the city and ... he would really look for the humanity in them and try to articulate that in them, as well as what he would hear from the person on the street or the young person who's suffering through drug addiction or the woman whose plumbing didn't work. He really wanted to set a table bringing all of these interests together and tried to find a common ground."

Blue's next project, *The Invisible City*, was made in collaboration with Adele Santos (then an architect in Houston) and Corcoran. It was even more ambitious, with five programs shot in rapid succession, each playing off feedback from the prior entry. The final film is actually a condensation of the five programs, which were aired on public television in Houston."

This project brought Blue in front of the camera, this time setting the stage by pulling tapes from a shelf and inserting them into a deck, reminding the audience that a documentary is still a constructed product. But the real difference, and the point in which Blue extended the complex urban documentary, was in the audience's involvement. *The Invisible City* created an ongoing conversation with the audience the likes of which may have never occurred before.

Since he was working in Buffalo during the school year, the project was shot in Houston during the summer. Corcoran describes "four people in a tiny Fiat without air conditioning in Houston in June, July, August. Four people and all the equipment; it was a harrowing thing."

Blue never got to see *The Invisible City*, of course, because he died of cancer on June 14, 1980, at 49 years of age. This was his last work, and like *Who Killed the Fourth Ward?* it was a community work that few outside the communities of Houston and Buffalo saw.

When Blue died, so did his plans for a documentary program at UB. He had started to focus on Buffalo itself, designing a four-semester sequence (in-depth sessions on research, plan and design, shooting, editing) at UB which would lead to a finished documentary for public television. The video would exam where Buffalo – then plummeting into Rust Belt decline – had gone wrong, using similar techniques to those he has used in Houston.

Concurrently, the scene in Buffalo struggled too. New York State froze hiring for its university system, and UB was unable to even attempt to replace people like Blue. State and federal funding for the arts started drying up, and Media Study Buffalo died in the mid-1980s. *The Frontier*, the public television series of independent media produced in the Western New York-Southern Ontario region that Blue had helped found with Corcoran (loosely based on his Texas series, *The Territory*), lasted about as long.

"I think that locations are blessed within spans, and the spans now are a lot shorter," says Bannon. "Given the speed of our digital networking now, things happen much faster and last for a shorter span. It's a movable feast. It moves on.

Elmer Ploetz is a reporter for the Buffalo News as well as a graduate student specializing in documentaries studies within the American Studies Department at the University at Buffalo and an adjunct journalism instructor at SUNY Fredonia. He lives in Eden, N.Y.

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HALLWALLS

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Photo credits

pg. 6 stills from films by James Blue, top left to right (clockwise), *Olive Trees of Justice*; *The School at Rincon Santo, Columbia*; *Olive Trees of Justice* (2); and *Amal*
pg. 11 James Blue with director Roberto Rossellini (top) and Alfred Hitchcock (bottom)
pg. 12 The Rothko Chapel Exterior, Houston, Texas, 1974. Photo credit: Hickey-Robertson. Courtesy of The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas
pg. 13 S. I. Morris Associates Scale Model of The Rothko Chapel, 1970. Photo credit: Hester + Hardaway. Courtesy of the Menil Collection
pg. 14 Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry, Architects, Diagrammatic Plan of The Rothko Chapel, 1970. Courtesy of The Menil Collection
pg. 15 Mark Rothko in his 69th street studio, during construction of the Chapel mock-up, New York City, 1964. Photo credit: Hans Namuth © 1991 Hans Namuth Estate. Courtesy of Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona
pg. 16 The Rothko Chapel interior, with skylight scrim, 1974. Photo credit: Hickey-Robertson. Courtesy of The Menil Collection
pg. 17 The Rothko Chapel and Barnett Newman's Broken Obelisk, 1988. Photo credit: Hickey-Robertson. Courtesy of The Menil Collection
pg. 18 "Audience Who Have Seen James Blue's film *The March*, Join Hands and Sing Civil Rights Songs at The Rothko Chapel Reflecting Pool, January 15, 1984." Photo credit: David Crossley. Courtesy of The Rothko Chapel
pg. 19 The Cathedral Baptistry exterior, Torcello, Italy. Photo credit: Museo di Storia della Fotografia Fratelli Alinari, Florence, Italy. Courtesy of Art Resource, New York, NY
pg. 20 Dr. Gerald O'Grady with James Blue in Buffalo, 1970s
pg. 22 (top to botto) James Blue and Adele Santos during the production of INVISIBLE CITY; three still images from same.

Buffalo, NY
2005