

2017

TOMORROW NEVER KNOWS - Permissions/ Ruminations

Adam Sekuler

University of Colorado Boulder

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TOMORROW NEVER KNOWS

Permissions/Ruminations

by

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B.A. University of Minnesota, Twin Cities 1999

A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

University of Colorado in partial fulfillment of the

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Department of Art and Art History

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This thesis is entitled:
TOMORROW NEVER KNOWS
Permissions/Ruminations

Written by Adam Sekuler
Has been approved for the Department to Art and Art History

Date 4/17/17



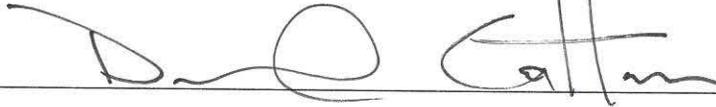
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David Gatten

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline

Table of Contents

Part I: Permissions	4
Email correspondence with Cynthia Vitale	4
Part II: Ruminations	9
Letter To Shar Jones	9
Letter To Michael Glawogger	15
Letter To Those Who Came Before	18

Part I: Permissions
Email correspondence with Cynthia Vitale

from: **Cynthia**
to: Adam Sekuler
date: Tue, Feb 9, 2016 at 11:07 PM
subject: About today

Hi Adam,

I felt a need to let you know that today was hard on both of us. This disease may make the person look like they are narcissistic. There are several reasons it looks like that. One is that their world is closing in around them and the other, which makes everything very difficult for them, is that they are losing their relevance. Shar, like you, had relevance because of who he was and he knows now there is nothing he can do to regain that even though he tries desperately. There is a book on the market titled "Learning to Speak Alzheimer's." It helps to understand the depth of the person's experiences; worth reading for anyone dealing with a person who has the disease. Please in the future never put any responsibility onto him. He is completely overwhelmed with his situation and profoundly depressed. He is intentionally trying to stay upbeat and when he sees he is not caring for me he gets very depressed and it reminds him he does not have the ability to help me. He is not in a situation to take that on. Yesterday the social worker tried to do a similar thing and I had to assure Shar that he should not worry about me. That is too complicated for him and brings on too much sorrow for him. His depression is profound - He suffocates under it and so do I.

And for the description of "Short term memory loss" - I see that as being a gross oversimplification. My intention is not to offend you but I feel offended every time I hear that statement. That is what is noticed by others at the very beginning. But by the time short term memory loss shows up the person is deep into the disease.

The following are additional descriptions by the Alzheimer's Association:

- Loss of Memory
- Difficulty Performing familiar tasks
- problems with language
- Disorientation to time and place
- Poor or declining judgment
- Problems with abstract thinking
- Misplacing things
- Changes in mood and behavior
- Changes in personality
- Loss of initiative

The Alzheimer's association does not say this list is a subset due to Loss of Memory. They put them all equal. And my experience shows them as being equal.

When Shar cries like he does it is partly due to his great sorrow of losing his relevance and also the damage the disease has done to his brain. My father died due to a brain tumor and he used to do a similar thing. Crying and laughing oddly.

Previously, Shar would think of songs in his head when something reminded him of one but would not say it out loud. Those filters are gone and it makes him feel good. It gives him relevance.

Those with Young Onset Alzheimer's still have ambitions and still have strong memories of what they wanted to do. When people are older they mostly, not all, have slowed down in their expectations of themselves. In either case, young or old, it is very difficult for them. I remember what you said about your girl friends grand mother. Some people can be like she is but most are not.

It takes profound courage for Shar to take the road he wants to take. My feeling it takes profound courage to take either option - to follow the disease to its end or not to. At this stage of the disease it may take more courage to take the disease to its end.

Any way, I would like to know your thinking on what I have said here. I need to understand your thinking and understanding of this disease and Shar in this disease. Also, what your thinking and feelings around Shar choosing to not follow this disease to its natural course by stopping eating and drinking.

What you think and feel about everything I have written here is important for me to know.

Cynthia

from: Adam Sekuler
to: Cynthia
date: Wed, Feb 10, 201
subject: Re: About today

Hi Cynthia,

I should first say that today was probably one of the more difficult days of shooting. At least emotionally speaking. I feel like the longer I'm working with you and Shar, the deeper we dive in terms of where Shar is at and the more emotionally engaged I find myself with the two of you. I don't think Shar has come off as a narcissist in the least bit. In fact if anything, there is realism to Shar and his story that we all could learn much from. This is why I continue to make this work.

My hope with this project and with the kinds of questions I'm asking is to help the audience gain an understanding of Shar and his intentions. I really do see this film as a collaborative process, most importantly with Shar but likewise with you. Since Darci approached me about filming, and since Shar is interested in this film existing, I think having him discuss his intentions is important part of the process, and an important part of making this work. There's a sincerity, and profound truth that I think I'm learning about living and dying by bearing witness to Shar's story. He is such a unique person, and I think today's session really began to touch on some of that. I think what came out today had a lot to do with what you describe below as one's relevance. The profound sadness that comes with losing that to this disease, the difficulty of accepting that, the processing, coping, and living with that reality as it increasingly becomes more and more a part of your lives.

I do also believe this is an important part of what you are going through and a very difficult part to bear witness to. I find myself inside of making this film with so many questions, concerns, and thoughts about living and dying. But I respect and in fact admire how strong you both are through this process, and not for a second doubt the decisions you are making. Having never faced them myself, of course I acknowledge the difficulty of making them, but trust that you and Shar are living what I believe to be an intentional life, that could serve as an example to many of us.

My sincerest hope is that ultimately the audience finds themselves not just knowing who Shar is, but gradually finding themselves fond of him. Of who he is. How he's lived his life. And that we get that more than just through the stories he has shared, but mostly through how he moves through the world. The honesty with which he has engaged in his life and continues to engage his life.

I will say I was surprised when you stepped in today. I actually didn't anticipate it,

but I should have. In fact, increasingly I suspect you'll continue to play a larger role in the film, much like you are in Shar's life. I'm learning as I go, so please forgive me if there are any missteps in this process.

That being said, I apologize if I suggested anything about short-term memory loss. It is in fact not something I would have thought to mention, and am rather surprised if I did. I believe, through my own experience with my great grandfather and my girl friend's grandmother, and in fact others in my life who have suffered from this disease, that as I suggested today, memory loss manifests in ways we don't even think about. That isn't short term, but long term, that our memories are embedded in so many aspects of what we do, our body and our mind, our behaviors, our skills, and so many other things. To hear Shar talk about how he is losing all of these things is incredibly moving.

Ultimately, what I can say is that I'm doing my best to offer Shar's perspective of his life and his death. I have approached this with empathy and affection. I'm so grateful to you both for letting me into your world. For sharing your story and for trusting me to do good by you.

I'm looking forward to the coming weeks with you both and find myself already mourning his passing. Yet, I'm deeply humbled by your ability to face life and death with such courage. Thank you for your generosity, honesty, and strength. You have both already changed my life.

Much affection and appreciation,

adam sekuler

from: Cynthia Vitale
to: Adam Sekuler

date: Wed, Feb 10,
2016 at 9:04 AM

subject: Re: About today

Hi Adam,

I cannot tell you how much we appreciate your response. It was very difficult yesterday and affected both of us. Shar was depressed last night and, today, I am running on 2 hours sleep. We are so very close to the edge that it does not take a lot for us to hit the edge and tumble. Shar is much better today than last night.

We do appreciate your work and sometimes we will be pushed harder than any one would realize. So, if you could allow us to express our concerns, possibly with intensity, as we go along we would be able to tolerate our situation a little better.

Thank you for being who your are. We really are grateful that you are doing this with us.

Shar and Cynthia

Part II: Ruminations

1. Letter To Shar Jones

Dear Shar,

The other afternoon I went to a screening of Roaul Peck's I AM NOT YOUR NEGROⁱ. You're probably unfamiliar with Peck, but I'd guess that you do know something of his subject, James Baldwin. An incredible literary figure and like yourself, a civil rights activist. The film, which charts Baldwin's attempt to reconcile and metabolize the deaths and approaches of three of his friends, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr, is derived from 30 pages of notes provisionally titled, *Remember This House*. Somewhere in those notes, Baldwin made the following statement, "the line which separates a witness from an actor is a very thin line indeed." I jotted this down, and began to think of our time together, of our film, and of the relationship a filmmaker has with his subject in documentary.

There are so many questions that get raised inside of making a film like ours, and so many more when it's finally shown to others. Filmmaking, as you so often noted, is a creative medium. Maya Deren would say, we as filmmakers "manipulate the laments of a reality into a work of art"ⁱⁱ. The decisions caught up in that manipulation, especially in documentary practices, are often cause for concern amongst viewers or critics. Questions of ethics, participation of the subject, the filmmaker's portrayal of the subject, and that ever-elusive thing we call "truth". After all, "the cinema is not an art which films life: the cinema is something between art and life. Unlike painting and literature, the cinema both gives to life and takes from it..."ⁱⁱⁱ Or so Godard would have us think. How much did we take from life Shar?

A filmmaker friend, whose untimely death sparked my interest in exploring death as a subject, offered me a clear eyed view of how to tackle such troubling concerns of cinema's snatching from reality. Speaking of his work he vowed, "My filmmaking is very visible—I don't do any kind of 'candid camera,' I don't go anywhere I'm not allowed to go, because I need close relationships with the people there, and I need time there, and I need presence there. I'm not a kind of filmmaker who goes there and 'steals' some kind of images..."^{iv}. Well, I don't feel as though I stole any of our images. My attempts to make that apparent to our viewers can be seen in the traces of moments in which you or Cynthia suggest as much. I believe there is a visibility of the filmmaking in the work itself, a relationship between us, a clear sociability in the world of the film. Probably even more than you might be able to detect in the work of my friend Michael Glawogger, who said those words. I believe that our year together wasn't simply a filmmaking exercise. It was the creation of everlasting friendships. Between you, Cynthia and I. Your death, like Michael's, may have left me with even more questions than when we first met.

I suppose the first, and most visible to me as a maker, has to do with what you hoped would come of sharing your story, and what I managed to wrestle from the one-hundred plus hours of material we shot together. There's certainly a disparity in there, but we

discussed that a number of times and at length throughout our process. To be clear, after a year of interviewing you, our film mostly includes my observations on the final two weeks of your life. Despite my best efforts, your affinity for the notion of Two Spirit as espoused by various Indigenous tribes is only offered a cursory reference. Further, I'm afraid, the traumas you experienced while working as a transgendered person for the US Government is mostly left by the wayside. That is to say, much of what we discussed during our time together, during our friendship, can be found on the cutting room floor. Despite this, I believe I deliver my best understanding of what transpired in that final year of your life, during that time when we became friends. Or, at least as I experienced it.

I hope I've created a clear space for others to find empathy for your situation. Steven James put it best when he said of his work, "my aim is to understand people, if not feel something for them. But my idea is also to be clear-eyed and see people as complex individuals, true to who they are. I mean I don't want to stack the deck for the audience, but rather to help you feel some compassion towards people and have a deeper understanding of them."^v That is indeed my aim with you, Cynthia, and your story.

The frame, though Shar, is a deceptive tool. It creates the seeable and the unseeable. The frame continuously tends to its own limit – not in an effort to contain and explain, but in order to reveal the limits of what is seeable and sayable at a given moment in time. It draws a boundary to keep our eyes inside, and to keep much of reality outside. Frederick Wiseman calls it the "fictionalization of truth."^{vi} It's what allows us, as John Grierson suggests, to enact a "creative treatment of actuality."^{vii}

You didn't like boundaries though. In fact you preferred the slippages between them. That seems fitting to me since our film is about something we so often try to not to think about. Yet, something so inevitable that we can't avoid. How does one even tackle that in a film?

This was further aggravated by my fixed camera, my insistence to stay on a tripod, and of course by the fact that almost everything we shot existed in the dimensions of your small, cluttered home, an environment with few windows and poor lighting. These were difficult conditions, no doubt, under which to film your life and ultimately your death. This was such a stark contrast to my film *Open Air*, a film that brought us together in the first place. With that work, there was so much space. Even the attempts to contain that space within a boundary of a bamboo fence, were mostly futile. The boundaries of your home on the other hand, of each room, were smaller and smaller containers. My frames capabilities more and more limited. Enclosed, as I shot them, in doorways and window frames. Perhaps that's why I steered further into tighter containment, with tighter frames.

As we filmed, I tried to keep this in mind. Tried to consider what was inside and what was outside. My dance filmmaking may have helped my relationship with the frame. You were always a figure in motion, even when you were mostly still, even during your meditations. You had such a life force, so much energy you tried to contain. Your body a boundary, an object with which to contain it, or perhaps as Hollis Frampton put it, a "semi-stable pattern(s) of energy maintaining in the very teeth of entropy a characteristic

shape in space and time.”^{viii} Of course that is until you were not.

That dynamic, in the words of my friend Harun Faroki, gave us the “controlled uncertainties”^{ix} of our project. That and the fact that we had no idea when your death would come, or whether you might recognize me when I returned each time to your home? Whether there would be a measurable decline in your cognitive ability, and how that would affect your ability to remember who I was? Whether the Alzheimer’s you were suffering from would cause a sudden slip? These were questions that persisted with me until your death, the same questions that guided my emotional state, and in turn affected my filmmaking throughout.

And then, in those final two weeks, I would wonder, how would things change as these forces were working their way from the inside, to the outside? That time when your container, your body, was trying to let it all go. When your characteristic shape would simply collapse. Under those conditions, the aim in my framing was to evoke the complexity of death and to suggest that invisible forces were indeed at work. Those were the invisible forces of life trying to end itself. My choice in framing intensified the depicted gestures and summoned the invisible dimensions of death. Or as early film theorist Bela Balazs might put it, by isolating your face and various other parts of the your body, I could keep the viewer from other distracting contexts. I could use the close-up in order to suggest something about the human soul. What he might call “an inner aesthetics”^x. “Close-ups,” Walter Benjamin suggested, can also be seen “as openings to an optical unconscious that teaches the viewer to perceive things and objects in new ways”^{xi}. This is how I was conceiving of the close-up anyway, as I filmed you and your life force dissipating.

Elizabeth Grosz writes in her book *Chaos, Territory, Art*, “framing is the raw condition under which sensations are created, metabolized, released into the world, made to live a life of their own, to infect and transform other sensations.”^{xii} To no surprise at all, I found often in the process of assembling our film, that the sensations of death aren’t ones we welcome with open arms. As I began seeking feedback on our film *Shar*, many people resisted some of those images that expressed those sensations of death most viscerally. This was especially true of images of the body in which their duration affected our viewers. Was this the same response Brakhage received when he made *The Act of Seeing with one’s own eyes*?^{xiii} Is it that we’re just afraid of these bodily dimensions of thought? That such thoughts provide us with the realization of the fragile and ephemeral nature of our own existence? Or, maybe this is because much of cinema is an exploration of bodies of potential, those that are in a state of becoming, and this one where the body is in various states of unbecoming, or unmaking.

In the end I decided to not push the viewer too far on this. Not out of fear that they couldn’t handle being pushed, although that might be true for some, but out of a respect to the social contract I feel you and I had, and out my interest in generating a sense of empathy for you and your situation. Let’s not forget the viewer is tied up in the creation of meaning of our images. Cinema is, after all, a medium with (inter)subjectivities, especially the documentary. That is, it’s a medium in which meaning is created with

involvement from you the subject, from our audience, and from myself the filmmaker. There dialectic between your image as composed by me, and the way it sits in the imaginary of our viewers. "The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera,"^{xiv} as Walter Benjamin put it. That relationship is encoded in the film. Or as David MacDougall proposes, "the filmmaker's acts of looking are encoded in the film much the same way as the [protagonist's] presence," in the end making the film "contain some trace of this crossing of minds and bodies"^{xv}.

Elizabeth Cowie argues that in documentary that identification inherently comes with knowledge of the embodiment of the filmmaker^{xvi}. A subjectivity, and in this case, my own. Filmmaking is not just a passive deed of recording but an active gesture inseparable from creative storytelling. In documentary, this active gesture requires the participation of those being filmed, which inherently raises more questions. Questions I had while we were filming, questions involving your performance for me and in turn for the camera. What Stella Bruzzi calls, "the dialectical relationship of the reality being filmed and filmmaking.... A performative documentary truth."^{xvii} Maybe this is what Serge Daney meant when he said, "The image always occurs on the border between two force fields; its purpose is to testify to a certain altering, and although the core is always there, something is always missing. The image is always both more and less than itself."^{xviii}

What of performance then? To what extent was our exchange a series of performances for the camera? Robert Ezra posits, "Everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role."^{xix} This would suggest all of us are always in a discursive construction of self; a performance. However, you, with your exploration of gender, this question comes up two-fold. Judith Butler theorizes that "gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts"^{xx}. What about the repetitive act of filming then? We were together for a year after all. With my nearly fifty visits to your home, were these performances more and more conscious on your part? To what extent were you playing a role for the camera, despite your deteriorating mind? Your preparation of music for these visits and for the film seemed to indicate so, and still I never managed to work that into the film.

Then what of my performance? As filmmaker and cameraman, was there a role I too was playing? The gazer? And in truth, my gaze as seen through my lens, indeed kept looking, even when there were moments when I wondered should I continue filming. Truth has it, I did in fact keep filming. Kept playing the role of the 'unflinching' filmmaker. Should that role be celebrated? I hear those words often describing cinema. "An unflinching look at..." But what do we lose when we keep looking? What do we gain when we keep filming? I imagine these are questions that will arise as we share the film with others.

There's so much to be grateful for Shar in this film of ours, and in this experience we shared. Your bringing me into your and Cynthia's lives, your visible courage in the face of so much difficulty, your seemingly endless supply of love, your sharing of this great tragedy and your tremendous strength, and most certainly your enthusiasm for the film

itself. All of this allowed me to make the film I did. For that and for so much more, I'm forever in your debt, forever grateful to have known you, to have had the great fortune of sharing so much.

With sincerest gratitude and love,

Adam

2. Letter To Michael Glawogger

Dear Michael,

I remember when you pricked me, punctured a hole, that moment of collision, that moment at the top of a mountain, a few tourists taking photos as the subject, a worker we've been following from the sulfur mines arrives. That moment, when the image says all we need to know, about the world and about human relationships. A collision of two experiences, no need for didacticism, just that collision, Eisensteinian, but instead of montage between images, a montage inside the image itself. An arrival and a departure, and of course, stasis. That's the image I always strive for, an elusive moment when suddenly there's a punctum^{xxi}, as Barthes would say. This image stays with me still.

I appreciate that your images, despite their documentary value, are in pursuit of this punctum. Your intent, something more than journalistic. Barthes suggests, there "mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value." These are the images I hope to create. The images you always seemed to. You said you needed "places that show, that disclose themselves...without language."^{xxii} In my current film, I tried my best to offer such opportunities, but I did so alone, without the aid of a cameraperson, recording sound directly into the camera, using a variety of microphones, in less than desirable filming conditions. And yet, I hope that my images speak for themselves.

"I look out for situations and places where I can show and learn something about the human condition... And about the human soul,"²³ you insisted when interviewed a couple of years before your death. I feel like I at least managed this. How could I not? My film is about a confrontation with death. Isn't all of cinema to a degree? Well, this was head on. Almost unreal in my subject Shar Jones' willingness to stare it straight in the face, to see the unseeable and say the unsayable. Probably due in part to his encounter with his gender; neither strictly male, nor female, Shar embodied a more slippery state, ignoring these fixed boundaries. Transgressing a barrier as difficult as life and death itself.

I'm somewhat indebted to you for this project, my interest in death due in part to my experience of yours. We met again that summer before you died, for a few hours at a cafe in Vienna. Discussing your untitled project, I realized that all documentary filmmaking is about discovery. Yours was a film that had no subject from the outset, but one you would discover on your journey across the globe. A project halted in its progress by your death. Then, my mourning for you, for your lost project, and for your vibrant cinema stopped in its tracks. Stopped mid-progress, akin to the frames of cinema. I can always revisit your work, but that would be our last conversation. Until now...

Death certainly seems to be a subject for which there is a never ending pursuit of discovery, perhaps the ultimate unknowable. The photographic image itself, a way of trying to examine it. Likewise, the process of making cinema is always a process of mourning, a process of the experience of loss. The loss of time, lived and experienced, halted in its place as it continues to move forward. We mourn for the moments fixed to

emulsion or imprinted in a digital code. Ceased in their progression at eighteen, twenty-four, twenty-nine, thirty, forty-eight, sixty, one hundred twenty, and various other frame rates imagined or actualized. By making cinema we make our own mourning real. We make it true. We make it tangible. We give it time and space. We make a temporality from emotionality

Andre Bazin, went so far as to say that cinema and photography more broadly had the effect for those captured by its images, “To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance ... to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life.”^{xxiii} The captured image is a vessel for holding a life, or at least a moment of a life. Storing it away in frames, slices pulled from their contexts, isolated in lonely envelopes of preserved time. This has a strange effect on us, as Roland Barthes pointed out in his book *Camera Lucida*. It changes our understanding of ourself. Shifts our relationship to the self. The subject that is photographed is rendered object, dispossessed of itself, thus becoming, ‘Death in person.’ Susan Sontag likened this experience of the photograph to a death mask, writing “all photographs are memento mori that enable participation in another’s mortality.”^{xxiv}

But cinema is also a memory machine. It’s an apparatus for conjuring the past and an engine for creating it. Designed to deny the fact of death, rather putting in its place a perpetual present, inducing a haunting comforting presence of a ghost-like figure. The subject. Could that ghost also be the filmmaker? Casting an even bigger shadow than those we film? The unseen hand of the maker, our gaze forever emulsified in the images we leave behind. Not of ourselves, but of our view, our way of seeing. Not a ‘you were here’, instead ‘I was here and this is what I saw’. “There is no reality out there that you’re supposed to reflect,” you said. “There is only a reality out there that you pass on through your eyes”^{xxv}. Is that passing a reflection of our own reality, for all of time?

Chris Shilling argued such “conditions of high modernity have made the modern individual’s confrontation with death especially difficult... Death has become a particular existential problem for people as a result of modern forms of embodiment, rather than being a universal problem for human beings which assumes the same irrespective of time of place.”^{xxvi} Memento Mori are themselves a formerly social display of mourning, an exhibition of the body of the deceased. The photographer's gaze upon the subject. We no longer create such images, and in fact avoid their creation. Where the occasion of death used to be a public one, with events taking place where the body of the deceased was arranged for photography, those are now institutionalized, and privatized for a specialist such as the coroner. They are restricted to spaces for examination, not memorialization.

While this project was initiated by your passing, the passing of your compatriot Harun Farocki, and my dear cousin Dorothy all in just a few months, this film might have also come about for me so as to explore death as a public act, a reinitiating of a type of ritual. There was certainly a ritualistic element at play in how Shar chose to die. An arduous process of not eating or drinking, sustained through a spiritual practice of Buddhism, and supported through the institutional practice of marriage., The mere act of documenting that death, thereby making it available for a future public viewing. Shar’s desire for that

public viewing of his death and his interest in sharing his passing with others, this harkens back to the memento mori. Then the act of public viewing itself, through the mechanism of the cinema, a communal arrangement, the soul's "affective participation" in the cosmos as Edgar Morin wrote about it in his examination of cinema going.^{xxvii}

There is a ritualistic element to my work in general. With my labor film WORK IN PROGRESS, a look at our daily rituals as seen through how we toil and an extraction of that toiling into two minute shots. My Weatherman Daily Photo project, a snapshot representation of a moment in time, a record of my existence, and my relationship to the natural world as executed through the daily photographing of the weather. The Interpretive Sites, a series of physical explorations of historical charged landscapes, void of visible traces of those histories, visited multiple times so as to build a relationship to place. With Shar, there was a weekly revisiting, always on Thursdays, always for the same amount of time. Let's not forget Shar's assembly and reassembly of his playlist for the film, and his selection of a parting song, *Tomorrow Never Knows*.

I suspect you realize, the title of the film was lifted from that Beatles song. The same song I had Shar sing on nearly every visit to his home. Sometimes with relative ease, and others with him struggling to remember the words. Yet the tune itself was never a struggle. His singing incorporated into the fabric of the film just twice, neither time as diegesis, instead as part of a dream induced state, once fully vibrant, the other as he lay dying. Incorporating Shar's singing allowed me to also help him fulfill his wish of dying while that song was being played. A rewriting of history as Shar would have liked it. That as you might say, is the power of cinema.

I was just re-reading the diary entries you published in Der Standard on your final journey and found it kind of eerie that they ended with the following passage, "The next morning, he saw rush a hearse with a blue light through the streets. Since when does death need a blue light, he heard himself thinking." Re-writing history were you?

With continued sadness and constant appreciation,
Adam

3. Letter To Those Who Came Before

To those who came before,

I'll begin with Deleuze, "The world is neither true nor real but living"^{xxviii}. And so let it be, and so is cinema.

Is there an organizing principle? How does one even tackle that in a film? decide to breathe life into the already shot material of documentary and is there a process for ordering that material? Does each shot have a life of its own, suggesting its own narrative and aesthetic function? According to Mary Ann Doane, cinema is lauded for "its apparent capacity to perfectly represent the contingent to provide the pure record of time."^{xxix} Call it cinema's breath, an in and out, a measure of the past and the present. That being film's promise of an indexical link to the world and therefore our belief in its powers.

The edit, Godard proposes, is about making connections, "simply bringing things together"^{xxx}. Not about things themselves, but that which can be found between things. The moment between lived moments. A gap, and in that gap an attempt to create continuity and meaning. Using sound and image, finding relationships, building bridges. The entire enterprise of cinema constructed on foundations that aren't physically there, but are also always present; ideas and experiences, but never the entire realities. Just fragments. The purpose of which is to constitute an experience of time and some semblance of a lived experience. To keep things moving, slow them down, make the viewer wait with bated breath and exhale with relief. These are the principles by which I edit. The manner in which I assemble time.

Henri Bergson on experiences of time noted that moments of time can't be isolated, but exist in a cohesive unison, "each permeating the other and organizing themselves like notes of a tune, so as to form what we shall call a continuous or qualitative multiplicity with no resemblance to number."^{xxxi} Time appears as tension and scansion, rhythm and flux, continuity and discontinuity, and also always in repetition. Each note may be spatialized, one coming after the other, but only heard as qualitative of the sum.

In my film *Tomorrow Never Knows* the past can't be separated from the present or the future. We experience them all in a unified whole. They occur all at once. Heightened even more so in the opening few images. We begin in what feels like the present, a death, with the opening image, then move to the past, the same dead body now animated and living, through a dissolve, then back to a present, mourning, with the dissolve again. Only after the experience of death in the form of the last breath some eighty minutes into the film, and a return to mourning once again through a dissolve, do we then move forward. The film is a constant jumping between various stages of living and dying, and in the final ten minutes, a clear forward trajectory to cremation.

Editing is about memory for both the maker and the viewer. It's the sorting of the images giving a perceived trajectory. The events are memories unfolding in time. A

reconstituting of the past in the present, if you will. Sociologist Emily Keightley proposes, “Memory is a modality with both partial and temporal dimensions, one remembers events of the past that are both a geographic and temporal remove from the present.”^{xxxii} Or as filmmaker Robert Gardner said, editing is, “a way of finding ideas. A re-seeing of something only intuitively glimpsed at a certain moment... You’re given another opportunity to think about your experience as an observer and to re-order these impressions into something of a composite of feelings and ideas.”^{xxxiii}

It’s strange then that with this film, my memories are mostly of the fifty weeks prior to the process of Shar Jones, the film’s subject, dying. Memories of relationships developed over weekly visits to his home. Relationships with caregivers, family members, friends, doctors, hospice workers, social workers, and of course with Shar and his wife Cynthia Vitale. Almost all of those moments gathered in those fifty weeks were presented in the form of conversations, not strictly interviews in the traditional sense, but discussions with all of these people about the nature of memory, memory loss, the choices around living and the process of dying. Yet, in my editing nearly all of them are lost. I instead chose to focus primarily on the final two weeks of Shar’s life. The moment he chose to stop eating and drinking. The reconstituting of these images, all in service of presenting a rationale and path towards his final breath. Creating an argument for conscious death and in turn creating a life for the film.

All life requires breath, cinema notwithstanding. Aristotle reasoned, “life and death are bound up with the taking in and letting out of the breath.”^{xxxiv} And in cinema, the flashes between frames, also a breath. In the case of *Tomorrow Never Knows* the use of diaphanous dissolves at the beginning and the end. That very notion of breath, a structure on which both the sound and image hang in this work. Beginning with the meditative breath of Shar, bringing to life the film itself, and then the end not only finishing his life with his last breath, but also the breath of Cynthia his wife, as she sighs in relief, a release of over a year’s worth of tension. Finally, over the credits, you can hear the sound of my breath, the filmmaker, in the moments after he’s passed. All of this a nod to the invisible and the immaterial, that thin line between living and dying.

In filming this breath, my camera often lingered on the visible experience of the body, through a chest rising and falling, and in the face, the site of respiration, the nose and the mouth. It’s here that I attempted to make visible the invisible life of the body to make it material and in so doing, to suggest the vulnerable tethering between life and death. A tethering that would end as my camera witnessed Shar’s final breath, in a close-up of his chest, rising and falling for the last time, then a long moment of silence.

The experience of watching breath at such durations creates a deception at the end of life. A kind of illusion, making that rise and fall so normalized, so repetitive that it almost ceases to exist. When it does stop, the sinking and sudden realization that it won’t start, that instant of departure, an unforeseen absence that can in no other way be visualized, a narrow and immediate moment, when everything that was there fades away, a collapse of time and space, a breath and then none at all. Caught between the frames of time. Gone.

Much like that final frame as it exists the gate, and all that is left is the afterimage, a lingering of the flicker of cinema. A memory.

So many have given me memories. So many I've known and so many I only experienced through your gifts. To you who have come before, the words you wrote, the images you left, the flickering of the past, those moments when you exhaled, it is of you I think in creating new strategies of remembrance.

“Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness
And not in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory do we come.”^{xxxv} – William Wordsworth

Wondering when you'll write again,
Adam

ⁱ I Am Not Your Negro. Dir. Raoul Peck. Perf. Samuel L Jackson, 2016

ⁱⁱ Maya Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1978), pp. 60-73.

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