

The Glimpse Given Life: An Elegy for Bill Douglas

by Rhys Graham



My Childhood (1971)

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In 1991, when Bill Douglas died of cancer at age 54, Britain lost a filmmaker who should have become one of the most significant figures in modern cinema. Although it is not true to say that Douglas went unrecognised in his lifetime, there is no doubt that this Scotsman was an artist who, due both to a great lack of support from the British film bodies and his premature death, never fully realised his potential. He made only four feature length films (although strictly speaking the shortest of these was only 48 mins) and several short films and should, ideally, have made many more. For, although he has not acquired status as a 'master' filmmaker (and is usually excluded altogether from texts discussing British cinema), three of the four feature films that he directed combine to form one of the most extraordinary and distinctive bodies of works in the cinema. Furthermore, he produced these films with defiance and independence, always maintaining a belief in his own hard-won approaches. The result is a cinematic language that is as poetic as it is humane. While it is important that he was acclaimed in the initial stages of his career, such admiration is worthless unless the structures that enable film production in countries like the United Kingdom foster an environment for the filmmaker to mature and flourish. As it was, Douglas' first three films, a remarkable autobiographical trilogy detailing his life from the ages of 8-18, were followed by an 8-year hiatus before he made his final film. This was tragic for a man whose passion for cinema saw him rise from dire poverty, via a circuitous life path, to directing his first film in his thirties. This, then, is an elegy for a man of a singular brilliance that was only briefly permitted to shine.

The childhood trilogy, which consisted of *My Childhood* (1971), *My Ain Folk* (1973) and *My Way Home* (1978) stands alone as a work of importance in cinema narratives. The vision expressed in these three films is distinguished by a visual language that combines formal rigour with elusive, haunting and often dreamlike expressions of a harsh emotional landscape. The childhood experiences and memories of Bill Douglas are invested into Jamie, a young boy living in extreme poverty, in a tiny mining town outside of Edinburgh. The muddied face of Stephen Archibald, the young boy Douglas found to play the role of Jamie, is heartbreaking

and one of the most memorable faces in British cinema. While looking for a boy to play him as a child, Douglas happened to cast the roles of Jamie and his older brother Tommy, when two young boys approached him for cigarettes in an Edinburgh bus station. The two boys, Archibald and Hughie Restorick (Tommy), would, like François Truffaut's autobiographical character of Antoine Doinel, grow up on film and be forever linked with our understanding of the filmmaker and his life.

Douglas was born in 1934 in Newcraighall, near Edinburgh. Hit by the depression and sustained only by the coal pits, the town, so starkly rendered in black and white 16mm film in the trilogy, was deeply impoverished and Douglas' family more than most. In the films, as in Douglas' life, Jamie and Tommy live a life of great deprivation. Their youth, full of terrible suffering and cruelty, also had moments of transcendental kindness and humour in the face of hardship. Throughout his films, the world is seen through Jamie's subjectivity, rendered by Douglas in an impressionistic and deeply personal way. Relationships are ambiguous and the actions of people are often irrational, excessive or surreal. This is the lens of memory and of a child's perception. It remains unimportant to Jamie, to his brother Tommy, or to the viewer, why things occur in the way that they do. What matters are the emotions and sensory responses that they trigger. What matters are that these things happen, and life goes on.

In *My Childhood*, the first instalment of the trilogy, Jamie and Tommy are raised in squalid and impoverished surroundings during World War Two by their Grandmother, a Dickensian figure shrouded in black. Tommy's mother dies at the beginning of the film, but it becomes clear that Jamie does not know his real mother or father. Deprived and desperate for affection, Jamie befriends Helmuth, one of the German POWs that work the field near the town. Tommy is also unaware of the identity of his father but knows that he and Jamie share different parents. This is only the first of many ambiguous relationships between the children and the adults that circle warily around them. One day, Tommy's father arrives and gives him a canary, but his grandmother drives the man away. Jamie is bewildered that he and Tommy do not share the same father when Tommy, pointing to a local man, reveals that he, in fact, is Jamie's dad. Later, Jamie is taken to visit a woman in an asylum who he learns is his mother. His attempts at affection are thwarted when a nurse steals the apple he has brought for his mother who, sadly, does not recognise him. When the war ends and Helmuth returns to Germany, Jamie is distraught. His grandmother dies one morning and, leaving Tommy behind, Jamie runs down to the railway bridge and leaps into the back of a coal train which disappears into the distance.

When we return to the bleak town of Newcraighall in *My Ain Folk*, Tommy is taken away by welfare and Jamie escapes to the house of the father who abandoned him. Without Tommy, Jamie leads a desperate, solitary life; his only joy exchanging jam jars for a ticket to the pictures. His paternal grandmother takes care of him while his father keeps his distance, but she treats him with erratic cruelty. Her harshness softens slightly when Jamie's grandfather returns from a long absence but this does not save him from misery or loneliness. He takes to spending long hours sitting outside his abandoned childhood home. Jamie hears that his mother has died one day in the asylum, and after a series of emotional ruptures and tragedies between his father, his uncle, his grandmother and grandfather, Jamie is

taken away by the authorities.

At the opening of *My Way Home*, Jamie returns to Newcraighall from a children's home in Edinburgh. His father wants Jamie to live with him, along with his new wife and her callous son. It is a disaster and he returns to his grandmother. When he is threatened with being sent down the mine, Jamie tells his family that he wants to be an artist. They are disgusted and Jamie takes off, returning to Edinburgh and the boy's home. Not long before being drafted for national service, Jamie returns to his hometown once more and all remnants of his past life have been erased. His father, his grandmother, all of the relatives who took it upon themselves to care for him at various times have gone. Only the grimy streets and the hollow shell of his mother's home remain.

The final triumphant part of *My Way Home* takes place in the desert of Egypt where Jamie has been posted after being drafted into the army. The landscape appears like a dream alongside Newcraighall. Here, during his service, Jamie slowly, carefully, becomes the friend of a highly educated Englishman named Robert. When they first meet Robert is unable to understand Jamie's thick brogue, prompting Jamie to ask "D'ye nae unnerstan' Inglash?" Ultimately, Robert takes it upon himself to bring Jamie out of his extremely reserved state and they begin to share words and ideas. They also learn that they share a love of cinema. When Robert returns to London, he invites Jamie to go with him, finally, after a life of waiting offering the young boy a place to call home (1).

These events may seem overly convoluted or unremittingly bleak. Yet, Douglas, through the stern face of Jamie, brings to his autobiographical tale a sad and beautiful account of the endurance of the imagination. And in his filmmaking, he introduces a narrative sparseness and inclination to formal beauty that have emerged, for survival's sake, from a childhood dependence on the inherent possibility of beauty in the world. It is for this reason, that I am focusing my discussion on Douglas' childhood trilogy and not his fourth and final film, *Comrades: A Lanternist's Account of the Tolpuddle Martyrs* (1986). The elements that distinguish Douglas as a filmmaker are most clearly distilled in these early works, while this final work, made after eight years break, was clouded by many of the external factors that made it difficult for Douglas to continue to make films. *Comrades* does deeply reflect Douglas' belief in the communal spirit of cinematic story telling but it is the trilogy that most potently indicates that he is an artist primarily concerned with the intangibility of memory and emotion and its poetic expression on the screen.

When I think of the three films that constitute Douglas' childhood trilogy I think back to a favourite passage from Raymond Carver's introduction to a collection of his own stories. He writes:

V.S. Pritchett's definition of a short story is "something glimpsed from the corner of the eye, in passing". First the glimpse. Then the glimpse given life, turned into something that will illuminate the moment and just maybe lock it indelibly into the reader's consciousness (2).

Clearly, I am not discussing short stories or the response of readers to the printed word. Yet something about the *glimpse given life* seems to enlighten the work of Bill Douglas. Working as he does in the interstices of memory, imagination and realism, his approach provides glimpses, small shining moments of a single event within the context of an entire life. Where this begins to work in constructing a particularly cinematic language is that these glimpses add up. The narrative itself is not a glimpse. The story he tells is full of the complexities of a life interwoven with illusory images and emotions that outweigh the factual circumstances of their origin, of fleeting impressions, staggering beauty and incomprehensible pain. This life which, at a distance, retains a certain coherence, is made up of the fragments and glimpsed impressions to which Pritchett refers. Each scene created by Douglas stands alone: a discreet, transitory moment loaded with uncertainty. Each image is a moment whose inherent meaning is ambiguous, but which is enriched by the sequence of impressions that follow. To a certain extent, this is created through Douglas' use of dialectical montage - one of the few 'techniques' it is possible to see Douglas drawing from his own particular cinematic passions (he is said to have admired the early Soviet montage stylists and Donskoi in particular (3)) - but it is perhaps less tangible than this technique alone.

Often the glimpse is literal in his films. In *My Ain Folk* there is a scene in which Jamie's grandmother sends him back to his decrepit home to find his mother's hidden pearls. He finds them after tearing apart an old mattress in a cloud of whirling down, but then runs away and buries them in the coal pits. When he returns his uncle beats him terribly. Through most of the beating, the camera reveals only Jamie's grandmother's face although we can hear his screams. Then, for a brief moment, barely one second, we see a shot of Jamie's motionless face, his head back against the hearth and a blazing fire behind him, his expression held frozen in a scream of anguish. It is a strange contrived moment that continues to resonate in the mind for some time after the images progress. It is both a question of what was it I just witnessed and what is it I am now feeling as a response?

Rather than a calculated approach to montage, Douglas' strength seems to be the impression that he is relying on an intuitive mediation of memory into images. Something 'automatic'. In the most logistically dense medium of the arts, Douglas makes it seem as if we are witnessing something ephemeral and lightly-held. To this extent, he shares the narrative approach inherent in a work such as Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1974). Where *Mirror* seems to emerge from a restrained world of visual poetry articulated by the filmmaker, Douglas' childhood rendered on film is like a tangle of emotions laid bare. His films are like Tarkovsky's original title for *Mirror*: 'a confession'. Not from the guilty to the redeemer, but from one heart to another.

In *My Childhood*, one of the earliest moments sees Jamie coming home with only four pieces of coal with which to feed the fire. Tommy, acting on his own desperation, begins to brutally beat Jamie. The shot is held at length with no evasive cutting. We see Jamie being relentlessly struck, while Grandmother pleads with Tommy to stop. In the next shot, Grandmother, Jamie and Tommy are gathered around the fireplace, the fire now fed. After a long stillness, Tommy delicately extends his arm and places it around Jamie's shoulders. There is no need for forgiveness or scenes of redemption. These are the frailties of existence. Douglas is distinguished because he never attempts to transform the emotional inconstancies of his characters into some kind of over-arching character type. More often than

not, the characters remain mute, inactive, until they suddenly burst with an emotion. Crying or shrieking, with anger or despair, or until they act decisively, fighting, fleeing, or in the case of Jamie's perpetual defence, running home, even though he knows he will never get there.

Never show the audience something they can imagine better than you can show it.

An early collaborator, Mamoun Hassan, described this mantra of Douglas' as "a motto that should be on the entrance to every film and television studio. His style consisted in creating gaps between scenes - scenes which were often single shots - which the audience would mentally have to jump across. It made them run; it was exhilarating." (4) And in each film, from amongst the many fragments through which we weave Jamie's life and Douglas' autobiography, many moments emerge that, in themselves seem to speak volumes about a life. Like the best poetry, they explode out into meaning through the most carefully chosen words.

Flying on a cloud of steam.

Tommy runs to the railway bridge as the train approaches, and arrives just as it is passing. He stands on the wooden struts of the railing as it roars beneath him and stretches his arms out, his face raised to the sky. The steam bursting from the engine engulfs him and he soars in the heat, the noise, and the blinding white of the thick vapour. The coal train takes some time to pass and when finally it does, he stands there still, his arms held out and up, like a bird, or one of the jets that bomb in the night, a god, or a crucified prophet.

The cold hands.

Jamie takes the dead flowers from the chipped teacup and throws them to the floor. He does not know that they are the same flowers that Tommy collected from his mother's graveside earlier that day. Jamie's grandmother sits by the lifeless fireplace. He fills the teacup with boiling water until it overflows, spilling over the battered tabletop. He takes the teacup and pours the water onto the floor. Cup in hand, he approaches his grandmother and presses the hot enamel into her cold palms. He pats her aging hands gently as they warm.

Shoulders square, eyes forward.

Jamie's grandfather stands on the rail tracks in despair. His shoulders are square, his legs firm, and he stares toward the oncoming coal train. His heart and mind have been wandering for years, but now they seem set never to return. The train hurtles toward him. At the moment that his stooped body should be destroyed, the train roars past on the adjacent tracks and grandfather is left standing, shoulders square and legs firm, as the blackened carriages disappear into the distance.

More beauty than horror.

Jamie's head rests on his school table in hunger and exhaustion. A classmate stands at the front, reading his literature project aloud. Jamie stares out the window, his

ear resting on his arm. "There is more beauty than horror in the countryside," his classmate reads, "more hope than despair."

The desert spider.

Jamie drags a wooden sweeper in circles around the soldier's quarters. The Egyptian sand smoothes behind him into vast concentric circles. His Scottish legs white, and his head bowed in the heat, he keeps dragging the sweeper, smoothing the sand that they will trample that very afternoon. Behind him, a small patch of sand starts to fragment and rupture. From beneath the flattened grains of sand, a small spider bursts forth from where it was buried and scurries away, leaving tracks behind it.

Be alive.

Jamie stands motionless, staring to the horizon. Robert runs up from behind Jamie and leaps onto his back, wrestling him into the sand dune. They stagger and lurch, Robert yelling over and over, "be alive, be alive, be alive". Robert flees and, after a moment, Jamie runs after him. When finally he catches Robert, there is no protest. Robert shouts instead, "He's alive!"

In each of the three instalments in the trilogy, Douglas was aware of the interactive space he was creating for the audience. Importantly, each film ends with a long shot of passing action that leaves an empty frame long after the moment has passed. Whether it is an image of Jamie leaping from the bridge into a coal train which slowly disappears into the distance, or the sight of a Scottish marching band passing through the streets leaving the cobble-stoned lanes more silent than before they arrived, this final time and space seems specifically provided for the viewer. Its purpose is for us to remain in Douglas' cinematic world for long enough to absorb and reflect on what has passed before the lights come up and life resumes. We remain active because the precise coherency of his images continues to resonate long after they have passed. Rather than drawing us into a world from which we are released when the film finishes, Douglas opens a door to a way of seeing. This precision of images is attained through a visual form that is spare, uncluttered and often almost tableau-like in its stasis. This formal exactitude is heightened by stripping back each occurrence, each moment of action, to its bare essentials. For Douglas, silence prevails and a scene is only the moment in which the most important emotional, visual or tonal information is required. Beneficiaries of Douglas' groundbreaking style such as Lynne Ramsay (*Ratcatcher*, 1999) have similarly approached the bleak terrain of human suffering by seeking small moments of beauty or transcendence, small moments of *touch*, through which to convey their characters movement through the world. Often this approach seems related to Robert Bresson; often it is like a cinematic document of simple but immaculate gestures of hope and despair.

There is a certain assumption that British art cinema is ruled by a realist paradigm that is motivated by politically inclined thought. Douglas can be considered realist,

however, only in the sense that his films are based in real-life situations. His treatment of these situations is not based in reality, but in an intimate and poetic interpretation of the real. Nonetheless, and despite any disavowals he might have made, they can be read as political films. Ken Loach, in describing his own approaches to fiction and film narratives explained:

Fiction is about more than a political analysis, which can often be very dry. Fiction is about the expression or the lines on somebody's face when something happens. It's about the way people walk down the street after a lifetime's work. It's about how they live in their rooms, how they've got the food they put on the table. It's about the fabric of life, the product of all those details of the way we are. Politics is implicit in all that, but it can't be dragged out of it (5).

Douglas portrays a reality that, without the self-motivated intentions of the ideologue, is all the more striking. Telling his own story is a political act, as is describing the way he lived, survived and ultimately transcended his circumstances. To this end, Jamie's life (and, therefore, Douglas' life) is treated not unlike the landscape of Ken Loach's *Kes* (1969), and their experiences are not dissimilar. In *Kes*, however, the temporary emancipation of Billy Casper is found in nature, whereas Jamie's emotional salvation comes through his imagination and, like the young characters in the autobiographical films of François Truffaut, John Duigan and Terence Davies, through the cinema. So, while they retain a sense of the political and the humane, Douglas' films are concerned, at heart, with the 'magic' of images.

For Douglas, the scenes based around the cinema in *My Ain Folk* (6) are particularly significant. Memorably, this second film opens with *Lassie Come Home* (1943) playing in saturated technicolour while Jamie and Tommy watch from their grim, black and white world. Later in the film, Jamie is seen exchanging jam jars for a ticket into the cinema. Douglas recalled the importance of these events in his essay "Palace of Dreams: Making of a Filmmaker":

I hated reality. Of course I had to go to school - sometimes. And I had to go home and apply myself to the things one has to do. But the next picture, how to get in, was the thing that occupied my mind. There was never any money to buy a ticket. Still, there were ways. I could get into the Pavilion, or The Flea Pit as we called it, for the price of two jam jars, washed or unwashed. (7)

His descriptions of the ritual of cinema-going are equalled only by Truffaut and his alter-ego Antoine Doinel. Like Truffaut, the love of cinema exceeded all else, and the lack of a ticket was no obstacle. "Sometimes," Douglas writes, "when I could not find any jars, I had to sneak in by a side door. What an agonising experience it could be lying in wait, down the side of the cinema, hearing only the sounds of the magic show inside, waiting for what seemed an eternity for that heartening clack of the door opening." This love continued from his teenage years, when he finally found a job to pay for tickets, right up until, via an acting career, he found the opportunity to direct for cinema.

(When) I was seventeen - a certain ritual took place. Returning from

work, I would shave, comb my hair repeatedly, bring my shoes to a high polish and perfect my tie to keep my date - with the cinema. At thirty I was still nowhere near my goal. In fact it looked as though I was going to preserve the dream forever.

Of course, he would be afforded a brief shot at his dreams. But his unique and brilliant vision was never allowed to flourish. Some simply argue, in the face of the disparate responses to *Comrades*, that his narrative skills were only really suitable to make the films of his life. But, for Douglas, all cinema and all story-telling is best relayed through the intimacy of remembered experience. "Chekhov put it better than I," he wrote, "I can write only from memory, I never write directly from life. The subject must pass through the sieve of my memory, so that alone what is important or typical remains there as on a filter.' It is as simple as that." And indeed, Douglas' filmic poetry laboured to be one of simplicity. His approach was visually and performatively unadorned (although he was notorious for his fragility and complexity on set). The results were spectacularly rich and intricate.

John Berger wrote around the time of Douglas' death:

What is saved in cinema when it achieves art is a spontaneous continuity with all of mankind. It is not art of the princes or of the bourgeoisie. It is popular and vagrant. In the sky of the cinema people learn what they might have been and discover what belongs to them apart from single lives. Its essential subject - in our century of disappearances - is the soul, to which it offers a global refuge (8).

The cinema created in and through Bill Douglas' extraordinary works was one that retained a modesty of ambition and an economy of means that seems to have been clearly intended to speak directly to the hearts of its viewers. This was a cinema that should have been popular and vagrant. Yet, ironically, the cinema that we now see as popular is that which is least accessible as a means to share stories and create a continuity of feeling or thought by the general populace. It is dominated by the tricksters and illusionists that Douglas loved when they wandered the country side casting shadows on the wall, but which he distanced himself wholly from in their modern guise. His cinema was a song of the soul and sought to bring the viewer close to the emotions that propelled the narrative. He never concerned himself with diverting or weaving an illusory web for his audience. Douglas was offering up his own intimate secrets, his personal way of seeing, his memories, his childhood, and he was never deliberately elusive or abstruse. He wanted most of all to share a love of the magical potential of images. A love of the poetry of cinema. Of the magic of the light on the wall and its ability to reflect and illuminate the interior life of dreams, memories and whispering souls.

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Endnotes:

1. The film ends here, but in reality Douglas did return with this young English soldier. The soldier, Peter Jewel, would become Douglas' lifelong friend, and the enormous collection of cinema and pre-cinema memorabilia that they

collected throughout their life together now resides in the Bill Douglas Centre in Exeter. 

2. Raymond Carver, *Where I'm Calling From*, The Harvill Press, London, 1993, p.xiii 
3. John Caughie, "The Way Home", *Sight and Sound*, November 1991, vol. 1, issue 7, p. 27 
4. Mamoun Hassan, "His Ain Man", *Sight and Sound*, November 1991, vol. 1, issue 7, p. 24 
5. Ken Loach quoted in Graeme Fuller, (ed.) *Loach on Loach*, Faber & Faber, London 1999, p.114 
6. This second film intriguingly shares its name with a British wartime musical directed by Germain Burger. This film would have been screened in the period depicted in Douglas' autobiographical version, during which young Douglas fell in love with cinema. 
7. Bill Douglas, *Palace of Dreams: The Making of a Filmmaker*, reprinted The Bill Douglas Centre, <http://www.ex.ac.uk/bill.douglas/> copyright Bill Douglas Estate, 1978 
8. John Berger, "Everytime We Say Goodbye", *Sight and Sound*, June 1991, vol 1, issue 2, p. 17 