

Clio Barnard - *Dark Glass* (2006) - Jonathan Romney

Early in Clio Barnard's *Dark Glass* (2006), a woman recalling an old photograph of her mother uses the words, "it's a bit of performance." That, she says, is the sense she gets from the remembered image of her mother on a beach, wearing a headscarf and dark glasses, as if playing a part. We don't see the mother till later, and when we do, the woman comments, "She's happy, properly happy - it's not a performance." But in fact, everything in *Dark Glass* is a performance: the woman we see is not the speaker's mother but an actor playing her (Valerie Edmund), while the speaker heard in voice-over is also a performer, repeating the words of an offscreen protagonist, who underwent and recorded a session of hypnosis in preparation for the film. Between the two poles of performance and non-performance lie the secrets of a simple but elusive piece that highlights the primacy of acting and re-enacting within the supposedly authentic and unmediated act of remembering.

Dark Glass is ostensibly easy to describe: a single shot, lasting for approximately eight and a half minutes, filmed on a mobile phone. Its images accompany a soundtrack featuring the voices of two women in dialogue (it's a moot point, of course, whether it's the images that accompany the soundtrack, or vice versa: whether one 'illustrates' the other). The soundtrack is a verbatim reconstruction, performed by actors, of a hypnosis session, in which the subject of hypnosis (voiced by Jenna Russell) is telling the hypnotist (Robin Weaver) about images from her childhood that she is spontaneously recalling (or effectively, in her mind's eye, seeing). The images begin with the photograph of her mother on a beach, then continue with the image of a close friend from when she was ten, and then, moving further back at the hypnotist's suggestion, with a memory of herself aged six, naked with her two siblings outdoors, while their mother cut their hair. This sequence, midway through the piece (and *Dark Glass*, despite its one-shot continuity, does break down into self-enclosed sequences, linked by the camera's motion through space), seems to represent an idyllic 'primal moment' of happiness before the mother's departure: a moment that was "very free", as the subject says.

But this image is no more reliable than anything else in the film. For we don't see three children, but two, a boy and a girl, and then their mother. Does this mean that the place of the third child, the hypnotized subject's young self, is taken by the camera as it weaves around the others? Possibly - although the children never remotely interact with the camera as if it were their sister. But in any case, this is not the scene described: the children are neither naked, nor having their hair cut. Throughout *Dark Glass*, there's a discrepancy between what's seen and what's described. The mother, in dark glasses and headscarf, is described at the start, seen only at the end; the person we see at the start is a young girl, apparently the subject's childhood self, summoned up as if in a séance.

There are other inconsistencies throughout, notably between the remembering subject and the camera, which appears to represent her point of view. A curious shift occurs when the mother moves from the yard to walk up a set of external steps to a loft: a figure, apparently male, stands at the top of the stone stairs, apparently filming the action; we hear the whirring of this figure's camera (background sound of the individual moment supplement the voices throughout) but he disappears from sight as the mother reaches the top of the stairs. What's more, at first the camera has been filming the mother, but as she starts to walk, the camera seems to adopt the mother's point of view, looking down at the steps as she walks up them.

So whose viewpoint, if anyone's, does the mobile phone camera represent? That of an adult woman retrieving memories? Of the child she once was, aged six and ten? The mother's? Or is the point of view that of Memory itself in a fluid, protean guise? This overall uncertainty is echoed in the perplexing Möbius-strip form of the film which begins and ends with the same image, of long grass blowing in the wind. The grass at the start seems to be

at ground level, while that at the end seems to be on a higher plane, almost level with the first floor window in the room up the stairs. Yet, to all intents and purposes, we're back in the same place we started, in time for the session to end and the remembering subject to emerge from the 'dark' of memory: a further twist in that, over the black screen after the session's end, the subject remarks, "It seems very bright in here."

This dark/light opposition is one of the piece's themes, echoed in the twin guise of the mother, whose period as a "performer", as her daughter calls her, was marked by her habit of wearing blonde wigs. Another duality is that of time and space: when the hypnotist asks, "Shall we move back further?", the camera accordingly moves on. The journey through memory is represented literally by movement through space, as the camera moves restlessly in and out of buildings, notably a cluttered barn-like space resembling a storeroom. Here, a motionless little girl, the subject's childhood friend, stands gazing, seemingly unaware of the camera's presence: she's like one of the phantom beings, frozen in time, in Adolfo Bioy Casares' story *The Invention of Morel*, not literally a ghost but a sort of ghost-image of the sort that we keep in the 'wings' of our unconscious, ready to bring onto the 'stage' of memory when required.

When mobile phone cameras became readily available, it was easy to imagine that they would lend themselves to a sort of image-making that was somehow natural, instinctive, automatic - to all intents and purposes, unmediated. The high-definition 'transparency' afforded by iPhone video technology, introduced in 2007, brought this apparent naturalness and immediacy even more to the fore. The sense that these phones could go anywhere, their freedom of motion restricted only by the hand that was holding them, meant that - in a way once promised by the portable cameras that had fuelled the home movie revolution of the 50s and 60s - the ideal of absolute spontaneity was closer than ever before. Camera phones enabled us to film things as soon as we thought of filming them, and each captured image would inevitably be in the first person, telling us: *This is what I saw*.

Yet, as we know from the last few years' accumulation of YouTube footage, and from the use of iPhone cameras by amateur and professional film-makers alike, the new imagery has been dominated by its own rapidly forming codes, conventions and genres. Making *Dark Glass* in 2006, using a then state-of-the-art mobile, Clio Barnard was working at a moment when the new codes and conventions of cameraphone imagery were yet to fully take shape: it was a time when questions could be pointedly asked about what this new technology was, what it could do, what it could mean. Eight years on, among the countless film-makers whose work is exhibited on platforms such as the iPhone Film Festival, many proceed as if these questions had been answered, or no longer needed to be asked - although the use of the iPhone by the most sophisticated film-makers using the medium, notably Park Chan-wook in his 2011 short *Night Fishing*, and the textures and treatments available through apps such as 8mm, mean that these questions are constantly being reformulated in new forms.

Dark Glass certainly reminds us that the images captured by a mobile do not necessarily present the viewpoint of the person holding it, nor images in the present tense; and that the images presented by a single sequence shot do not necessarily denote spatial or temporal continuity. This short piece of Barnard's foreshadows her exploration of similar themes in her 2010 debut feature *The Arbor*. In this quasi-documentary film about the late playwright Andrea Dunbar, the real voices of people who knew her are lip-synched to by actors playing their parts: one effect of this is to bring the facts and resonances of Dunbar's life closer to us, while denying us the spurious intimacy and insight that fictionalised biographies so often promise.

In *Dark Glass*, the disjuncture is not as immediately evident between the people we see and the voices we hear - there is nothing, apart from a subtle heightening of dramatic intonation, to tell us that we are not hearing the original voices of the hypnotist and her subject. But the gap between what we see and what the voices tell us that we're seeing - or rather, that we might expect to see, because someone else is seeing them - alerts us to the unreliability of the whole. The subject's memories are performed, just like the session in which those memories were retrieved. The lesson is that the past can only be accessed through performances, stagings of that past - through descriptions of old photos and commentaries on what they evoke, or restagings (in the mind's eye or before the camera) of lost original moments that were perhaps imaginary. Those moments may themselves have been "very free" or they may have been "a bit of a performance" - but *Dark Glass*, a reconstruction of a reconstruction, a performance about memory as performance, shows that we can't expect to access the past without putting on a show - whether on memory's stage or reflected in the dark glass of the camera.