

ON LOOKING, NOW

Digital Video Stills by Susan Morris

On the windowsill of my childhood home stands a honey jar half filled with water, two wasp-sized holes punched into its lid. No wasp can escape this lure and once inside the jar, cannot get out again. Falling into the water, they just smell the honey.

Marcel Proust suggested that 'to see' and 'to desire to imitate' were one and the same thing.¹ One could observe that this kind of mimicry is often performed blindly, in the service of love for instance, and that this automatic and compulsive movement leaves a very particular trace. One falls blindly in love. Drunk with desire, one can also get blind drunk. The one state often leads to the other. But at what point in the drinking do drunks and lovers go blind, and why? Perhaps blindness occurs when the subject is no longer aware of being looked at. By forgetting that you yourself are visible, you no longer register anyone else. Recovery brings about a dependence on those who could see, for testimony of what your uncanny other did the night before. Dreaming can also distract you in the same way, by triggering the blind search that is sleepwalking. Sleepwalking takes you into your own blind spot - real time and space are replaced by a parallel event; that of involuntary recollection.

*Michel the Crane Child, found isolated in his room, moved as if in imitation of a machine, and uttered only strange, inhuman noises: 'Through the curtainless window Michel could see the cranes working nearby. He could see them waving at him talking to him. This was the only language Michel could learn, and the window was the only mirror in which Michel could read the repetitive signs of what he was.'*²

If a desire to look at - to get under the skin of or experience - is aligned with a desire to imitate, and if identification of oneself with another being is, in Lacanian terms, 'the very process by which a continuing sense of selfhood becomes possible',³ then it could be argued that all acts of self expression are synonymous with those of mimicry, and are also absolutely tied up with looking and being looked at. Subject and object become synchronised within this visual field, the thinker an echo of thought. In the case of Proust this thought, this occupation, was of and by death and, as Walter Benjamin has noted, his syntax 'rhythmically and step by step reproduces his fear of suffocating'. Asthma, which kept him trapped in his room, became intertwined with the breath of the remembered. Proust succumbed to their heartbeat. Tracing blindly, he submitted to memory's laws, laws 'of night and honey'.⁴











