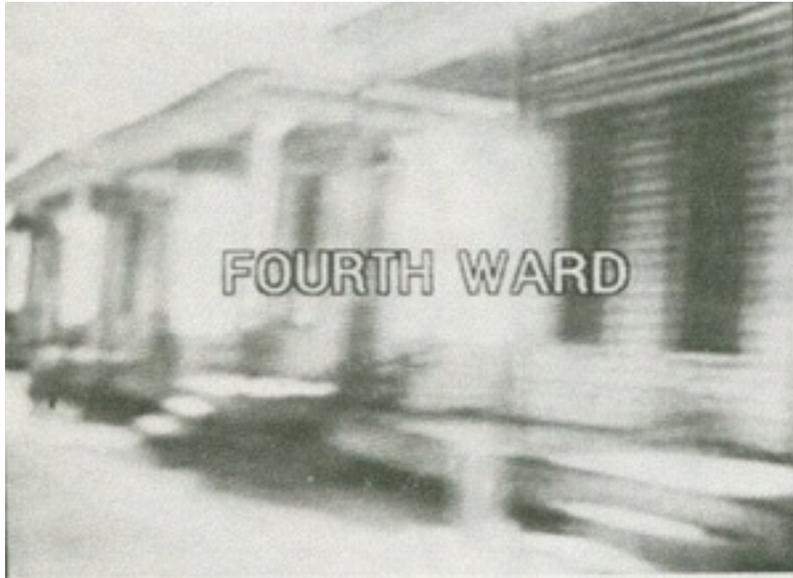


WHO KILLED THE FOURTH WARD? (1977)



Who Killed the Fourth Ward? begins with James Blue interrogating himself, in voiceover narration, as he drives into a low income inner city neighborhood threatened by the rapid expansion of Houston's skyscraper filled downtown. What am I doing, he asks, and why am I doing it. His self doubt stands in contrast to his appearance of authority: his grey hair, worry lines, and faint air of constant, quiet concern. Blue hadn't appeared in his previous films, but you always felt his restless, questing presence from behind the camera. In *Who Killed the Fourth Ward?*, we see him as a cinema verite filmmaker revealing himself to the audience as part of his narrative strategy, and we see him as an experienced teacher and mentor, secure enough in his methods to allow the young cubs, Brian Huberman and Ed Hugetz, his crew, climb all over him and worry him with their baby teeth.



As the title reveals, the film is framed as an interrogation. Blue, Huberman, and Hugetz take turns posing questions to Houston residents, and to each other. Blue says he wants to answer the question “who is responsible for the death of this inner city neighborhood?”, but we see he is as interested in the answer to the question “what will happen if we approach a total stranger with a microphone?” What will happen if we bring an African American journalist into the office of a white city bureaucrat? What will happen if we let all members of the community tell their story? His goal is not to find answers. His goal is to see what happens when you let the questions out.

Hugetz remembered Blue saying, “This is going to be an ugly film.” Shot on 8mm, with fuzzy images and terrible sound, he was right. This is not the film you expect as a teaching vehicle. In the discussion following the screening, an audience member questioned Blue’s studied innocence, expressing doubt that anyone would expect to get honest answers from the city fathers about the remorseless erosion of a vulnerable neighborhood. Richard Herskowitz, the curator of the James Blue Tribute, reminded us that James Blue was a trained actor. This is not journalism, this is theater. Blue is enacting community. He is revealing politics as theater.

Does Blue believe the bureaucrat sitting behind a desk? Does he believe the Fourth Ward resident who describes his neighborhood as a checkerboard of

churches and bars? He either believes all of them, or none of them. The third possibility is that he is not interested in serving as judge.

The consensus within the audience was that whatever else James Blue might be doing in *Who Killed the Fourth Ward?*, he was not engaged in polemic. I disagree. I believe he adopted a posture of helplessness as a polemic against the dominant discourse, which is that holding a camera confers power. He assumed the position of powerlessness deliberately, not only to examine the self-justifying illusions which comfort the city fathers, but to confront our own. This could be done only at this point in his career, after earning his awards and his worry lines. In this public television documentary, shot on equipment designed for home movies, James Blue picked up a camera not to create beauty, or to find truth, but to create community.

“There used to be just one way. There was one way you could do things. There were people who protected it like a copyright, a secret cult only for the initiated. That’s why I don’t regret making BREATHLESS and blowing that all apart.” Jean Luc Godard, in interview

We meet Blue in the driver’s seat, asking questions and showing vulnerability. He remains there, metaphorically, throughout the film. He pointedly maintains his status as citizen, that is, as a person plagued with doubts and uncertainties, throughout, in order to model his belief in the citizen filmmaker. He was subverting cinema as escapism, as all documentarians do, but he was going a step further and also subverting our expectation that documentary filmmaking is an expression of power. Does using a camera confer insight? He challenges this expectation. He defies it. What if, instead of using the camera as some kind of sheriff’s badge, or search warrant, to exercise or impose narrative power, we use it as a searchlight. To see things.

“There is a point beyond which training and practice cannot take you. Neami, the superlative fourteenth century Noh drama playwright and director who was also a Zen priest, spoke of this moment as “surprise”. This is the surprise of discovering oneself needing no self, one with the work,

*moving in disciplined ease and grace...At this point one can be free, **with** the work and **from** the work."* Gary Snyder, in *On The Path, Off The Trail*

This moment of surprise and freedom is what I see in the blurry 8mm images of *Who Killed the Fourth Ward?* James Blue is too wily and astute an artist to be confined to his own mission statement, or to his own onscreen persona. He is exercising more power than he is letting on. He was choosing to be non-authoritative and low budget for the same reasons as Bill Viola chooses to use slow motion, and Nam June Paik chooses to use more than one television. It was perfect for what he wanted to do.

James Blue appears to be interrogating Houston's power structure, but what he is really doing is interrogating our understanding of cinema. He is critiquing the perception that movies are all about the director, and instead is reframing them as the glue which binds together the audience. Why are you sitting on your butt out there in the dark?, he says. You could do this. I could be you. I am you. He is using his access to power, the whole structure of grant supported filmmaking, the authority of his achievements, the entry his white skin and professional identity confer upon him, to critique his access to power. He departed Hollywood, and is returning to the tribe with a gift, but part of his gift to the tribe is to refuse to be locked into what the tribe thinks he should be doing.

I doubt the true purpose of the world's first three hour television documentary shot on 8mm film is to answer the question it purportedly raises. It's more: how do I do this? How do I use what I know about filmmaking to engage this community in dialogue and self awareness?

In his next film, *The Invisible City*, James Blue reassumes directorial authority. He begins relying on video, and takes a more purposeful direction. But *Who Killed the Fourth Ward?*, made in 1977, the same year he founded the Southwest Alternate Media Project, is an authentically open ended exploration of the potential of regional filmmaking.

Brian Huberman and Ed Hugetz, the crew members who joined James Blue on his journey into the Fourth Ward, introduced the screening in Eugene via

Skype. They were sitting in Huberman's office at the Rice University, where Huberman is associate professor of film in the Visual and Dramatic Arts department. Both Brian Huberman, and Ed Hugetz, who is now the Associate Vice President for Planning for the University of Houston, have had long and active careers as regional filmmakers.

Coming up next:

The next film in the James Blue Tribute retrospective will be screened on April 23, 2014, at the Schnitzer Museum of Art in Eugene. David MacDougall, who partnered with James Blue to direct **Kenya Boran** (1974), will be present to introduce that film. Admission is free! 7:00 PM.

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Notes On James Blue is a blog kept by Anne Richardson, of **Oregon Movies, A to Z**, to cover the 2014 James Blue Tribute. The six month long Tribute, organized by Richard Herskowitz, celebrates the bequest of James Blue's films to the University of Oregon by **The James and Richard Blue Foundation**, a 501 c3 non profit organization dedicated to preserving the legacy of filmmaker and film educator James Blue.

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