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Bion's *Memoir of the Future* – about the film

This is an introduction to the film based on the autobiographies of Wilfred Bion, of which some scenes were shot in India in the winter of 1983. The script was written by Kumar Shahani (director) and Meg Harris Williams. First the ideas behind the film are described, then the chequered story of its making and why it was never completed.

Description of the film

Bion's pioneering early work on *Experiences in Groups* (derived from his position as an army psychologist during the Second World War) was followed by his famous formulation in mathematical terms of the evolution of thought-processes, 'The Grid', during the middle section of his career. In his later years (most of the last 10 spent in California), both these preoccupations converged into his mature metaphoric mode of thinking about thinking, which he expressed through his characteristically stimulating but mystifying mode of lecturing, and through semi-fictional studies of his own inner world and self-analytic method. These latter works are steeped in imagery from his childhood in India, amalgamated in a rich and startling way with memories of the First World War and of public school. These primordial founts of imagery and childhood experience constitute the material of his private dream-life, which in turn is the foundation for his metaphysical speculations about the nature of the mind.

The film-sequences make use in particular of these later imaginative and artistic works: both the fantasy *Memoir of the Future* and the more straightforward autobiographical narrative *The Long Week-End* (which was acclaimed by Richard Ellman in the *TLS* as a World War I classic on a par with Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That*). The aim of the film is to dramatise Bion's concepts using his own autobiographical metaphors. Its aim is to evoke the emotional interactions involved in the process of thinking and 'learning from experience'. The method of presentation is one in which images from childhood recur in different forms, interwoven with fantasies shaped by later experience, to form an internal drama. The intention is to maintain a double perspective of external event and internal reality.

The characters in the film therefore have both a realistic and a fantasy existence. They include: Bion's parents and sister; his English foster-family the Rhodes; his Indian foster-mother the Ayah; a schoolteacher, Colman; a Priest; a Psycho-Analyst; the Devil; an invader 'Man'; a Scientist; a group of soldiers and a group of schoolboys.

Bion himself describes mental exploration in terms of an 'archaeology' of the mind which treats of the future co-extensively with the past. Taking childhood as its source, this film will not only explore biographical events in the life of Bion, but

also use the condition of childhood as a matrix for the development of his later philosophical ideas.

The ambiguities of this 'archaeology' are modelled also in the form of the film itself, which uses as a structural principle the concept of the interaction of time past and time future, through its exploration of repetition and memory. The film does not therefore adhere to traditional methods of narrative, characterisation and presentation of points of view, but focus much more on the process of struggle between different directions and dimensions within the mind, that cannot be contained within a unitary concept of personality.

Given this Bionic perspective of 'grouping' within the mind, the film is in a position to explore afresh the drama of 'groups' larger than the individual: of institutions and communities (the family, school, army); and to examine from a new viewpoint political and social themes (such as war, colonialism, cultural clashes) which already have a significant tradition in cinematic representation.

Bearing in mind Bion's own stress on the necessity for learning to observe the experience of the moment, the progression of the film is not chronological. Instead of showing the passage from one event to another, it shows the evolution of an internal Work-Group from the initial strictures of a 'basic-assumption' mentality. The repressive grip of this mentality was symbolised for Bion by the D.S.O. he was awarded during the war, which became for him a badge of shame. The film dramatises conflicts within Bion himself, by means of central metaphors drawn from his childhood experience, and figures from Indian and English religion and history: hence the Tiger Hunt, the Train and 'electric city', the Run; hence Krishna and Christ, the Devil and the Virgin, the 'green hill' of sacrifice. These conflicts represent the positions and processes defined by Bion as 'Pairing', 'Dependence', and 'Fight-Flight', and the movement towards 'K' (Knowledge) or away from it to '-K'.

The conflicts become manifest at key 'caesuras' or points of catastrophic change which, within the film, include birth; the transition between India and England made at the age of eight; and the First World War – all of which contribute to Bion's metaphor of 'invasion' of the self. The film begins and ends with an image of the birth of its subject, Wilfred Bion – the first caesura. The temporal circularity emphasises another kind of progression – the development of the relationship of the internal characters, in a way which also evokes the intuition of their origins in pre-natal experience.

Although the film's main interest is experimental in that it explores the film medium in terms of certain psychoanalytic ideas, those ideas are intended to be dramatised in such a way that the film may speak to a wider intellectual audience with a general concern for education.

History of the film

The film was an ambitious, never-completed venture, born of the inspiration of a young Bombay psychoanalyst, Udayan Patel, and his friend Kumar Shahani, who

was already known as a brilliant formalist art-film director for his film *Maya Darpan* (You Tube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CxQdrCthJk>). Shahani mentions the origins of the making of the Bion film in a web interview with *Projectorhead* film journal: <http://www.projectorhead.in/four/shahani.html>. Patel died in 2012 and his artistic focus, including his friendship with Shahani, are recorded in this obituary (<http://m.indianexpress.com/news/a-matter-of-living/928707/>).

Bion had agreed to do a documentary interview-style film with them in India, where he was going to return for the first time since his childhood. However he suddenly became ill with leukaemia and died a few weeks before his planned visit in 1979.

The idea of a film continued, if anything more enthusiastically than before, but in a changed form. Kumar and Udayan came to England shortly after Bion's death to investigate the possibility of a biographical film about Bion with particular emphasis on his Indian childhood. They were looking for support and information from the psychoanalytic community in London, and also for financial investment. The Melanie Klein Trust disapproved of the venture and refused. The only members in London who were interested were my mother, Martha Harris, and stepfather Donald Meltzer, and a number of their students, some of whom had film connections (such as Robby Stein) and helped to gather the acting cast on the English side. A considerable sum of money was raised by the Roland Harris Educational Trust, partly from private subscriptions in the UK and abroad, but primarily from the sale of a house in Oxford which had been bought as a result of a bequest from psychotherapist Doreen Weddell, who had asked Meltzer to spend it on psychoanalytic education. (The house was intended to become a clinic for child psychotherapists, but planning permission was refused by Oxford City Council on the grounds that Oxford children did not need psychotherapy, so the property's purpose became obsolete.) This coincided with the time at which the idea of the Bion film was being mooted, and the money went into that instead. The intention was that the sum raised in England would be matched by a sum raised in India by Udayan Patel, who had been guaranteed support by a number of businessmen and entrepreneurs wellknown to his own family.

In the event, however, at the last minute the Indian money never materialised (no doubt to a chorus of cynical 'I told you so's'). The sponsors got cold feet after being informed by the London establishment (who thought Bion was suffering from dementia) that a film based on his memoirs could never achieve respectability nor aid in psychoanalytic education. This was the main reason why the film was not completed. There were other factors, however. The non-availability of the money was only announced after filming had already been arranged in India, with airfares and accommodation booked, and some extraordinary sets already made and sites arranged, including filming of a tiger in a national park, and the 'British Museum' lifesize plaster copy erected ready for the 'Party of Times Past' scene. For months there had been urgent phone calls from India to the UK from 4 in the morning onwards. It was not feasible at that point to withdraw and re-group, so it was decided to film as many of the Indian scenes as possible. However even these were curtailed owing to a

car accident on the first filming day, which resulted in Kumar Shahani being hospitalised with broken ribs. Another, far more serious, car accident occurred some months later, after which my mother Martha Harris became permanently disabled. She had been a major supporter and facilitator of the film; Bion had been her own supervisor; her husband Roland (a poet and teacher who died in 1969) had been an analysand of Bion's and she believed he had been influential in encouraging Bion to take up a more creative format to express his ideas. It was she who invited Bion back to lecture at the Tavistock Clinic in the later 1970s, and who encouraged Meltzer to study and write about his work in lectures for her students (published as *The Kleinian Development*). Meltzer has described how her constant knitting of stripey jumpers during the filming soothed and harmonised the 'plethora of prima donnas' (*Enabling and Inspiring: A Tribute to Martha Harris*, p. 326; <http://www.karnacbooks.com/Product.asp?PID=32952&MATCH=1>). She was, she said, surprised to find herself *faute de mieux* in the role of a film producer, after originally expecting merely to offer advice and encouragement. She was well aware that any creative enterprise entailed some risk (as in the risks she was prepared to take with people, in her student selection at the Tavi) but she preferred to give intuition a chance.

I was not in India at the time of the filming myself, since at that time I was expecting the birth of my third child. But entertaining reports came in of how children scaled the walls of the public garden in Delhi where some scenes were being filmed, screaming 'Hello Minister!' as this was the time when the TV programme 'Yes, Minister' was being screened (with Nigel Hawthorne, who was playing the role of Psychoanalyst in the film), and it was if anything even more popular in India than in the UK.

The dedication of the participants was such that for some years afterwards, attempts were made to resurrect the film. Clearly however it would have been impossible to collect the same group of fine actors together again, and of course the boy who played Bion had grown up. Not only this, but 1983-4 was the point at which the previously buoyant British film industry took a downturn (in early Thatcherism) and was starved of finance. Various avenues were explored with high hopes but ultimately fizzled out for this reason. The RAI (Italian state television) was interested, but again an accident of mistiming intervened – the planned showing of the rushes in a full cinema at Pisa was aborted because the film was detained by customs officials and did not arrive in time for the showing. Instead, as the audience were all waiting, Meltzer delivered a spontaneous lecture.

Would the film have been completed had it not been for this series of accidents, or had the British Psychoanalytical Society given support for it? We shall never know. Shahani recounted to us his interview with Hanna Segal to ask for a grant from the Melanie Klein Trust, which was turned down. At that time Bion was not as famous as he is now, despite his former presidency of the Society, and maybe suspected his fate would be to be 'loaded with honours and sunk without trace' as he put it, obliterating his living ideas. The official view of the Kleinian establishment was that he had in

effect gone senile from the time he left England for California; his publications from 1970 onwards were (and still are by some) disregarded, split off from his earlier works as if in some way dangerously offbeam if not quite crazy.

The reason Kumar asked me to collaborate with him on the script was that I had written an essay on the *Memoir of the Future*, whose third volume had just been published (by the Roland Harris Educational Trust's Clunie Press, in fact). I was a literature student at the time and this was the first work of Bion's that I read, although inevitably I heard him talked about in my family. Tom Bayley was an open-minded editor of the *International Review of Psychoanalysis* and in 1983 he published my essay, which was of course a literary one; meanwhile Lisa Miller asked me to write a review-article on *The Long Week-End*, also published in 1983. Kumar and Udayan wished to approach Bion's ideas from an artistic vertex, and to convey a metaphorical self-analytic process via the story of this particular thinker. In preparation for writing the script, hours were spent in the genuine British Museum (Library) researching the First World War, and with Kumar, watching archived films in the Imperial War Museum. Discussions were held with Mrs Francesca Bion with the opportunity to read some as yet unpublished material. I also went on my first trip to northern India, accompanied by my husband, father-in-law Arthur Hyatt Williams (who knew Hindi), and two small children. Many hilarious and lively meetings were held at our extended-family house in Highgate and in the mountains of Tuscany, where the structure and content of the film was worked out. Meltzer joked that it would overtake *ET* (currently running) at the box office. That was, in fact, the way we felt about it, whilst being well aware of course that in actuality its audience would only ever be miniscule.

Looking back, it is remarkable how almost everyone involved in making the film, including its distinguished cast of actors, retained a special feeling for that experience, despite its never achieving fruition; several said it took on the significance of a life-event. I suspect this was largely due to the 'combined object' style supervision of Meltzer & Harris. Much psychology lay behind the on-site knitting in the courtyard of the 'British Museum' mockup in New Delhi. Psychology that was itself based on my mother's Bion-inspired skills at managing work-group situations at the Tavistock. People were knit together rather than unravelling.

After my mother's death, at the instigation of Alaknanda Samarth who played the major role of Bion's childhood ayah (nanny), I wrote the story of the filmscript in the form of a narrative poem, specifically for Alak to do a performed reading. The ayah was in effect Bion's 'Indian mother', the first source of his eastern philosophical influence, deeply internalised in his psyche. In a sense, as an internal object, she governed the course of much of his subsequent thinking and marked out its difference from the standard psychoanalytical dogma of any western school. Many of those involved in the film, including Nigel Hawthorne, Trevor Bentham, and Angela Pleasence, came to Alak's first reading in London, to reunite in memory of the Indian adventure. I published this verse narrative at the end of my book *The Vale of Soulmaking* ([http://](http://www.artlit.info)

www.karnacbooks.com/Product.asp?PID=18426&MATCH=1) and used parts of it in my revised reading of Bion's autobiographies in *Bion's Dream* (<http://www.karnacbooks.com/Product.asp?PID=29078>).

The above story is intended to convey some of the significance which this film acquired in the lives of the wide 'family' of those involved in the attempt to bring it to fruition, and the bittersweet quality of the memory of the enterprise. It must be remembered, after all, that the film as it currently exists is not a film at all, but a collection of unedited rushes. Hence the reluctance to show it to an audience, however well informed they may be about Bion and his ideas. In particular I regret that none of the Norfolk scenes of Bion's schooldays were filmed, despite our lengthy driving around in search of the best sites – reedy rivulets, expanses of blue sky, Ely Cathedral riding the landscape like a ship ...

Meg Harris Williams, November 2013

Note: it is intended to publish the filmscript in 2015

To see the rushes of the unfinished film, put on Youtube with thanks to Mike Eigen and Jim Baumbach, click here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKVS7hhqUL4&feature=youtu>

With Portuguese/English subtitles, thanks to Estanislau Alves da Silva, Jr:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqwRNSRqf9Q>

Cast of characters and actors from 1983

Jonathan Page (Bion as a boy)

Robert Burbage (Bion as a young man)

Carol Drinkwater (Bion's mother)

Tom Alter (Bion's father)

Alaknanda Samarth (the Ayah – Indian nanny)

Nigel Hawthorne (the Psycho-Analyst, also the schoolteacher Colman)

Neil Cunningham (the Devil)

Peter Firth (the Scientist)

Jalal Agha (the Indian priest)

Nick Clay (Heaton Rhodes, the army officer)

Angela Pleasence (Mrs Rhodes)

Shona Morris (the pregnant girl, Kathleen)