

BLACK SUN by Gary Tarn



BLACK SUN

Tragically blinded in a random street mugging, Hugues de Montalembert defied expectation and continued to travel the world, alone. In 'Black Sun' film-maker and composer Gary Tarn constructs a poetic meditation on an extraordinary life without vision.

Executive Producer Alfonso Cuarón on BLACK SUN:

“A first person narrative of a man who loses his sight and learns to cope with his dark companion. Black Sun is a beautiful meditation on perception and the relativity of the senses. Gary Tarn embraces the film’s easy form and the most cinematic of all the senses; blindness.”

BLACK SUN Short synopsis

While living in New York, painter and filmmaker Hugues de Montalembert fell victim to a random attack. As he fought for his life, paint remover was thrown in his eyes – causing him to be permanently blinded. Gradually, de Montalembert learned to come to terms with his loss of sight, and discovered a rare ability to create an internal visual world. He eventually started to travel again – alone – documenting his travels in a series of books. BLACK SUN deals with loss, perception, memory and faith. Combining de Montalembert’s audio narrative with stunning visuals, the film articulates the immediate and longer-term consequences of the attack as de Montalembert reflects on his perceptions of the world. Black Sun is a poetic cinematic meditation on an extraordinary life without vision.

BLACK SUN Long synopsis

Hugues de Montalembert had hardly met a blind person when suddenly, violently, he became one. On a late-spring evening in 1978, the French painter and filmmaker entered his New York apartment and was viciously assaulted by two men looking for money. In the struggle, one of the attackers threw a vial of paint remover in his face. The pain was instant, searing; de Montalembert's screams scared the muggers off. Throwing himself under the shower, he could already feel his sight fading: he awoke in a Soho hospital, completely blind.

De Montalembert was forced to come to terms with the fact that he would probably never see again. Drawing on half-a-lifetime of visual stimulation, he found that his brain, compensating for a lack of images, would create its own. Initially disconcerted, he soon came to take this alternative reality for granted, to the point where later he would sometimes be unable to distinguish his real memories from his imagination.

After 2 years of rehabilitation, he felt ready to travel again, and it was in Bali, that he was nurtured and, in a sense, reborn. Writing by hand, he recounted the events and his feelings of the past two years. Within a year he had amassed eight hundred pages.

The manuscript was sent to Paris where it was immediately published and became a national best-seller and later an international success.

De Montalembert has continued to journey for the past twenty years and is currently completing his third book documenting these travels.

BLACK SUN - DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Hugues de Montalembert has lived an extraordinary life. A rich source of inspiration, his story is one that I am surprised is not better known. Any one of us could have suffered such a random fate, but I don't believe many of us would have coped as well. His example is humbling, and can put many of our own problems and concerns into sharp perspective.

I have always enjoyed the analogue of film to dreams (you're awake, it gets dark, you see pictures, you're awake again) – and a more poetic approach to sound and imagery seems to elicit this. De Montalembert's curious side effect, creating 'films in his head', as a result of being denied images through his eyes, seemed the perfect story to tell in this way. My own journey in making this film, and tracking some of de Montalembert's travels, allowed me to create my own version of such 'films'.

The project started in the spring of 1999. I had been working as media composer for some years, and was frustrated by the projects I was offered to score. Eventually, I decided to make my own film, and set as my goal to produce, shoot, edit, score and direct, just to see if it could be done. I would learn each job as and when I needed to, and I started to think about what kind of story would work for the kind of film I had in mind.

I knew I wanted a spoken narrative, and I knew that a conversational interview could be radically edited to create an intimate, poetic narration. I remembered a book I'd read in the early 80s, about a painter who had been attacked and blinded. With help from a journalist, I eventually tracked down de Montalembert in Denmark and pitched the idea of an 'experimental documentary' over the phone. He was interested enough to suggest that we meet, which we did a few weeks later at his apartment in Paris, in the summer of 1999.

I played him a couple of pieces where I had incorporated spoken word into an orchestral composition, and he agreed to be interviewed, which we did the next day. Returning to my London studio I set about editing, trying to create a narrative structure from the diverse material. With a vague 'shooting script' of some 20 pages, I bought an old 70's Canon Scoopic 16mm film camera over the internet, and started to shoot some images in between commercial music jobs.

Over the next few years I traveled, when I had time, to America, India and Europe – and amassed around 9 or 10 hours of film.

Ultimately I tried to balance between strong imagery and pictures that were almost so banal as to allow each viewer to impose his, or her, own interpretation on the film. I'd like to think that the audience can make their own connections – the film acting as a conduit for their own memories and experience.

BLACK SUN - PRESS

“...one of the most remarkable British films to appear for a long time. Scratch that: it’s one of the boldest, most beautiful and haunting films to have appeared from anywhere...An extraordinary evocation...more adventurous even than of the late Jarman...Exquisite, woozy colours ripple and refract, drift and fade... lush and subtly melancholic portraits of modern society that recall Chris Marker’s landmark *Sans Soleil*...‘Black Sun’ is a film about blindness that makes us see the world hungrily, deeply, anew.” *Daily Telegraph*

“ ‘**So through the eyes love attains the heart, for the eyes are scouts of the heart and the eyes go reconnoitring for what it would please the heart to possess...**’ It might have been written 800 years ago but this sensual declaration by troubadour Guiraut de Bornelh catches precisely the primary intentions of this remarkable new British film, an extraordinary essay on the epiphanies of looking. In 1978, French artist Hugues de Montalembert, enjoying great success in New York, was mugged in an acid attack and lost his sight. Astonishingly, within a matter of months, he was travelling alone to Indonesia, reversing all expected responses to an assault that, in a single corrosive moment, destroyed his profession and vocation, while threatening the foundations of his identity and humanity.

In a feature-length voiceover, the artist reveals the inevitable despair that initially ensued, but then moves into an emotionally and philosophically charged celebration of being alive in the phenomenal world. A remarkable statement of personal resistance, it is accompanied by a river of images, of cities and landscapes – the locations visited by de Montalembert – that deploy a lyrical but grounded visual language similar to that of work by Jonas Mekas, Peter Mettler and, most relevantly, Chris Marker, with ‘*Sans Soleil*’. But this project is no pastiche of influences. Entirely Gary Tarn’s film, ‘*Black Sun*’ never seeks easy illustration of its subject’s journey, physical or otherwise; rather, it catches the luminous materiality of the seen as a means to the most searching spiritual enquiry. A work for all places and times, for anyone who seeks fully to live, to engage, it is indeed essential viewing.” *Gareth Evans*, ***** **TIME OUT No 1 CRITIC’S CHOICE**

French artist and filmmaker Hugues de Montalembert was living in a borrowed New York apartment when he was mugged. Two attackers forced him inside at knifepoint and, when they found nothing to steal, beat him up and threw paint stripper in his eyes. His screams frightened them off, but the liquid wasn’t soluble in water and couldn’t be washed out; he managed to call a friend but, despite being rushed to hospital, his sight failed. De Montalembert recounts the horrific story in a monotone that stifles feelings which, 20 years later, (the attack was in 1978, the recording in 1999) must still have been too painful to recall with equanimity.

How, though, to make a film about going blind? New to filming, directing and editing – all of which he took on himself – Gary Tarn adopts a free-wheeling approach in which sometimes the visuals match the narrative and at others form a poetic parallel. The journey to hospital, for instance, is accompanied by shots of New York gradually fading into blurry abstractions. After 18 months in rehab, De Montalembert attempted a nocturnal walk; he recalls how sound bouncing off the skyscrapers enabled him to form a mental picture of his surroundings and, on screen, we see a diagram of the city portrayed as simple blocks.

The attack was a beginning not an end, though; this inspiring story is about resilience and the wisdom engendered by overcoming adversity. As he describes his life from this point on, De Montalembert's voice is full of enthusiasm; he recalls travelling to Bali – where he wrote a bestseller about his experiences – and later to India, Nepal and Singapore. He recounts how, on arriving in Delhi, his bags were stolen but then returned by the airport beggars.

Tarn's visuals vary from documentary shots of the places visited to computer-manipulated scenes that, in their heightened colour, resemble Fauvist paintings. This extraordinary tale is enriched by fascinating observations. Deprived of external stimulus, the erstwhile filmmaker's brain began creating its own visuals, so that running inside his head is a film as vivid as normal sight. 'Vision is a creation not a perception', concludes the man whom a friend described as 'having the eyes of an assassin'. 'I was looking so intensely that it was disturbing,' agrees De Montalembert; 'I was not looking, I was peering.' This intensity perhaps allowed him to absorb enough sights to last a lifetime.

A compelling story, wise words and stunning visuals; a winning combination.

Sarah Kent, ***TIME OUT**

"Narrated with moving simplicity and without a hint of bathos, this account of his struggle has been exquisitely illustrated by director-composer Gary Tarn, whose use of light, colour and shape challenges the subjective nature of reality and turns New York into a place that's at once terrifying and wondrous. Rarely have the concepts of identity, memory, faith and hope been explored with such poetic courage." * * * * **David Parkinson, Empire**

"You cannot fail to be profoundly moved by de Montalembert's composure and modest narration but Tarn's courageous documentary (shot on 16mm) doesn't simply replay the events in de Montalembert's life for emotional effect; it simulates his subject's impressionistic visual experiences, gradually emerging from darkness to light. In the process we too become enlightened, as the narrator's painful, poignant story opens our eyes to a beautiful world we shamefully take for granted." ***** **Marie Findley, Hot Dog**

'a poetic, sensitive and beautifully shot meditation on a triumphant life without vision' * * * **Evening Standard**

'A quietly impressive cinematic meditation... A valuable filmic essay.' * * * **Guardian**

'Fascinating.' * * * * **Independent**

'Gary Tarn's poetic documentary Black Sun marries glowing digital images... to de Montalembert's moving account' * * * **Metro**

What does it mean to see? Is vision purely optical? Does the "mind's eye" really exist?...Director Gary Tarn's experimental documentary Black Sun attempts to show the world as it would be perceived by de Montalembert -- to reflect the very visual internal world that he has had to develop, and its interaction with the physical world. Stunning imagery accompanies de Montalembert's calm, meditative voiceover as he reflects on perception and explains what the act of seeing means to the sightless. An inspiring cinematic reflection on loss, the senses and our place in the visual world, it demonstrates de Montalembert's observation that "vision is a creation not a perception". **kultureflash.net**

Docu "Black Sun," first feature by composer-turned-filmmaker Gary Tarn, provides a window on the world of blind artist Hugues de Montalembert. Accompanied by footage of street scenes and exotic locales, often deliberately shown out of focus to mimic impaired vision, de Montalembert, who had been a painter and filmmaker, frankly recounts how he lost his sight but conquered despair to lead a full and well-traveled life. Although the relation between sound and vision occasionally strikes too literal a note, de Montalembert's compelling story and Tarn's painterly imagery capably sustain the succinct running time. "Sun" should shine for upmarket cabled.

As sweeping helicopter shots establish location in New York City, de Montalembert's voiceover explains how thieves threw paint thinner in his eyes in his own apartment in 1978, leaving him capable of seeing only light and vague shapes. At first nearly suicidal, he gradually learned how to navigate Manhattan by himself, and eventually traveled alone to Indonesia, where he wrote a book by hand describing his experience. Tarn's digitally filmed footage of passersby is elegantly composed, his rich, self-penned soundtrack even more so.
Leslie Felperin, Variety

One evening in 1978, the painter and filmmaker Hugues de Montalembert returned to his Manhattan apartment to be assaulted by two intruders. By the time the attackers had fled, de Montalembert had been permanently blinded by a violent splash of paint-thinner in his eyes. Gary Tarn's exquisite and impressionistic film about de Montalembert's ordeal uses the filmmaker's music, the painter's matter-of-fact voiceover and digitally treated urban images to suggest a first-person state of sensory upheaval and rebirth. A sensual, innovative and ultimately inspirational work about the resilience of the artistic spirit, BLACK SUN pushes documentary convention to the point where it creates its own generic terrain. - **Toronto Star**

After being mugged in New York, French painter and filmmaker Hugues de Montalembert lost his sight, and this dense, absorbing documentary charts how his inner and outer vision has changed. In slightly accented English, Montalembert narrates with cold precision, and while there's more telling than in most docs, director Tarn finds ways to illustrate or capture moments or thoughts in surprising ways. Traveling the world, Montalembert raises fascinating questions about neurology, compassion and even sexuality. The result is a hypnotic, Zen-like affirmation of life. - **NOW (Toronto Weekly)**

In *Black Sun*, experimental soundscapes and music by director and composer Gary Tarn gives painter Hugues de Montalembert the confidence to share his story of coming to terms with blindness, the result of a violent assault in 1978...a riveting and highly accomplished "portrait of a struggling artist" film -- *Black Sun* portrays a struggle more profound than the typical story of the quest for success...a unique "collaboration" between subject and filmmaker. - **The Globe and Mail**

An artist in the *Black*

Black Sun is equal parts philosophical treatise and autobiography of Hugues de Montalembert, the French painter and filmmaker, who was blinded by attackers wielding paint remover in 1976. The film's subtle soundtrack and striking, evocative images – often abstracted or processed – come courtesy of director Gary Tarn, yet the film is very much about one visual artist's experience of losing his sight, as conveyed entirely through de Montalembert's voiceover. We see de Montalembert only briefly – decked out in a striking, custom-made eye shield – as the majority of the film's visuals are lovely diaristic impressions of his surroundings: New York, Paris, Bali and Singapore. Their poetic quality heightened, these images evoke de Montalembert's newfound inner vision. One of the most startling revelations is the notion that the brain of someone whose "life was based on seeing" continues to construct images, even after the sense of sight is lost. The film presents sight as an act of creation, not perception. *Black Sun* is an overwhelming yet graceful emotional and sensory experience, and de Montalembert is the most humble, candid and articulate of subjects. His refusal of both pity and impoverished life truly command empathy, particularly when he admits to considering himself lucky compared with those who have suffered even greater, if less visible loss. - **Toronto Festival Daily**

TECHNICAL INFORMATION:

Country of production: UK

Year of production: 2005

Running Time: approx 70 mins

Original Film language: English

Shooting Format: 16mm

Screen Ratio: 4:3 letterbox (full frame 4:3 hard masked 1:1:85)

PRODUCTION COMPANY:

Contact: John Battsek

Passion Pictures

33-34 Rathbone Place

London W1T 1JN

Tel + 44 207 323 9933

Fax + 44 207 323 9030

info@passion-pictures.com

www.passion-pictures.com

WORLD SALES

Contact: Julie Goldman

Cactus Three

451 Greenwich Street

7th Floor

New York

NY 10013

Tel: 212 905 2340

Fax: 212 905 2342

cactus_three@yahoo.com

www.cactusthree.com

CREDITS

edited produced and directed by

GARY TARN

co-producer

JOHN BATTSEK

executive producers

ALFONSO CUARÓN

ANDREW RUHEMANN

FRIDA TORRESBLANCO

executive producer for the BBC

NICK FRASER

co-executive producers for Cactus Three

JULIE GOLDMAN

KRYSANNE KATSOOLIS

CAROLINE STEVENS

production companies

a LAND MEDIA and PASSION PICTURES production

in association with the BBC and CACTUS THREE

original music

GARY TARN

story and narration
HUGUES DE MONTALEMBERT

cinematography
GARY TARN

additional photography
LUKE EDER

telecine
SONNY SHERIDAN
with thanks to all at THE FARM

associate producer for passion pictures
NICOLE STOTT

animation producer
BELINDA BLACKLOCK

animation designer
JAMES DAVID FIELD

passion pictures
post production supervisor
ROANNE MOORE

titles
PETER RICHARDSON

final cut pro on-line
PETER WIGGINS

aerial support (NY)
HELICOPTER FLIGHT SERVICES

special thanks to all at THE LIGHTHOUSE
Martin Yablonski
John Sanfilippo

production and location services (India)
KAS MOVIE MAKERS, New Delhi
Aruna Har Prasad
Kalyan Mukherjee

co-executive producer
in charge of post production
MARK FOLIGNO

post production
MOLINARE, LONDON

post production supervisors
DARREN WOOLFSON & NINA KHAN
dubbing mixer
GEORGE FOULGHAM

sound editors
NIGEL SQUIBBS
LISA McMAHON
AFSHIN TIRABADY

with special thanks to
HARRIET ANSTRUTHER
HAFDIS BENNETT
LINDA BENNETT
CHARLOTTA BOMAN
EIRAN DAVIES
ALISON DOMINITZ
NIKKI GROSSE
NEIL HARRIS
MIDNIGHT TRANSFER
ALL AT THE HEMIS GOMPA
NOLAN HEMMINGGS
BARRY KAMEN
ESTHER JONES
EDGARD LINARES
JEFFREY ROTHSTEIN
MARY SOAN
THIERRY VAN BIESEN

and

HUGUES DE MONTALEMBERT
for his participation and collaboration
in the making of this film

filmed on location in
NEW YORK
MAINE
PARIS
LONDON
INDIA (Ladakh, Rishikesh, Rajasthan)
and ICELAND

WWW.BLACKSUNFILM.COM

for KAREN, BIBA and BOOKER

BLACK SUN
© LAND MEDIA PRODUCTIONS LTD 2005

GARY TARN biography

Gary Tarn is a self-taught musician and film-maker, born in London, England. He started to play and write music aged 7, was performing in a punk band by 14, and by his 20's was an accomplished producer and multi instrumentalist. He became captivated by the music of Indonesia, Africa and India, and studied these, alongside European orchestral composers. A passion for film led to a career as a composer for film and television, and it was a natural progression to start to shoot images of his own. In 1999 he met the blind author Hugues de Montalembert, who agreed to collaborate on a film project. The result, BLACK SUN, is Tarn's first feature-length film.

filmography

BLACK SUN, 2005, 70 mins, director, producer, editor, camera. composer

MAKING MIYAKE, 2004 , 16 mins, director, producer, editor, camera. composer

THE PHANTOM MUSEUM, 2003 (dir. THE BROTHERS QUAY) composer

FAITH , 2003 (collaboration with photographer NICK KNIGHT) script

SPACE INVADER , 2003 (dir. TATIANA STRAUSS) composer (film winner Best New Director, Brooklyn Film Festival 2004)

1991-2003 Over 100 on-air commercial, directors The Brothers Quay, Michael Hausman, Wim Wenders, Frank Budgen, Tim Royes etc...

JOHN BATTSEK **Producer, Passion Pictures**

- 2006 **Crossing The Line** –1965, four US soldiers, serving in South Korea, defected to North Korea. One morning, whilst on a tour of duty at the 38th parallel, they simply walked across to the other side. No-one knows why they did it. The third in a trilogy of North Korean feature docs, the film will incorporate the testimony of two of the soldiers still living in Pyongyang, to tell the remarkable story of the five defectors. Co-produced with VeryMuchSo and directed by Dan Gordon. Currently in post-production.
- 2006 **1000 Days** A remarkable, intimate film documentary of Kiran Bedi – India's highest ranking female police officer and controversial, revolutionary public figure working in a world of corruption and antiquated bureaucracies in India. Garnering contempt from her employers and unwelcome disdain from the male-dominated establishment; Kiran Bedi is a modern-day Gandhi in the eyes of the public; and an obsessive workaholic in the eyes of her immediate family. Directed by Megan Doneman. In production
- 2006 **Homeland** is a feature length documentary to be directed by Doan Hoang, a 26 year-old Vietnamese-American woman following her as she travels through America and Vietnam uncovering an extraordinary secret family past. In post-production.
- 2006: **Once in a Lifetime**, feature length documentary for GreenStreet Films NY, about the NASL New York based soccer team during the 1970s. The film premiered at the Berlin Film

Festival February 2006 and will be released by Miramax in North America and Pathe in the UK, May 2006.

- 2005: **Black Sun**, feature length documentary directed by Gary Tarn. Blinded in a random mugging, Hugues de Montalembert's audio narrative is combined with stunning visuals to articulate the immediate and longer-term consequences of the attack, as he reflects on his perceptions of the world. **Black Sun** is a poetic cinematic meditation on an extraordinary life without vision. The film premiered at Toronto Film Festival 2005; screened at London Film Festival 2005 and has been invited to several 2006 festivals, including Tribeca, Sydney, Argentina & Berlin. **Black Sun** will be released theatrically in the UK by ICA Cinema spring 2006.
- 2004: **Lila Says**, feature film, Anglo/French co-production. A modern love story set against the urban decay of Marseilles. Directed by Ziad Doueiri ('West Beirut'). **Lila Says** premiered at Toronto Film Festival 2004 and screened at the 2004 London Film Festival & Sundance Film Festival 2005.
- 2003: **A State of Mind**, feature-length documentary focusing on three families as they prepare for and perform in the 50th Anniversary Mass Games in North Korea.
- 2003: **Cerro Rico**, 60 minute for BBC about the legacy of the named Bolivia mountain and the men who mine it for tin and silver in fatal conditions.
- 2003: **Live Forever**, feature-length dissection of British popular culture since the early 1990's. For BBC, Horsebridge and The UK Film Council. **Live Forever** was released theatrically in the UK March 2003.
- 2002: **The Game Of Their Lives**, feature-length documentary for the BBC about the 1966 North Korean football team who knocked tournament favourites, Italy, out of the World Cup finals in England. Winner RTS Best sports documentary 2003 and nominated for two Grierson Awards 2003.
- 2001: **Peace One Day**, documentary, the remarkable story of one man's attempts to persuade the global community to adopt a universal cease-fire.
- 1999: **One Day In September**, conceived and produced by Battsek, a feature-length documentary about the tragic events of the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. The film is co-produced with Arthur Cohn, directed by Kevin MacDonald and narrated by Michael Douglas. The film won the Academy Award for Best Feature Length Documentary in 2000 and the Emmy for Best Historical Documentary in 2001.
-