James Blue’s Octagon
by Gerald O’Grady

for Gertrude and Howard Barnstone

When James Blue and I, colleagues for the first time, were in a small white cottage on 3812 Montrose Boulevard, The Media Center, which I founded at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, we could look across to the corner of 1409 Sul Ross Street and watch the progress of the construction of The Rothko Chapel, completed in 1971 by a great friend to both of us, the architect Howard Barnstone and his partner, Eugene Aubry. Writing in The Smithsonian 2,5 (August 1971), David Snell observed that their project “marked the first time in perhaps 400 years that a religious commission of this scope to a major artist had brought about such a degree of concurrence between art and architecture.” The patrons were those of our own media program, John and Dominique de Menil. Rothko’s huge dark monochromatic canvases were installed in an octagonal structure inspired by the floor of an eleventh century baptistery which he had seen on the island of Torcello in Italy. Recently a medievalist, I knew that 8 symbolized the eighth day of the week, the resurrection and rebirth. It was this shared experience which prompted me to honor James Blue in this form.

I

FEATURE FILMMAKING ALGERIA
THE OLIVE TREES OF JUSTICE (1962-3)

Just 75 years before this retrospective of James Blue’s films in Buffalo, New York (October 13-16, 2005), he was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma on October 10, 1930. He was raised in Portland, Oregon. He died at Roswell Park Memorial Hospital in Buffalo on June 14, 1980. After graduating in Theater from the University of Oregon, and then serving in the Army, he pursued a graduate degree before he earned the highest French professional degree in film from L’Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques in Paris (1956-58). Because French law restricted his taking employment in that country, he worked in Algeria for Georges Derocles’ Studios Africa, which also had production facilities in Tunis, Rabat and Casablanca. There he made a number of short films, including *Amal* (1960) for the Moslem population.

He co-wrote the script and directed the 1962 feature, *Les Oliviers de la Justice*, based on Jean Pélégri’s prize-winning novel of the same title (Paris: Gallimard, 1959). When I met Pélégri after James Blue’s death, in April 1981, he allowed me to copy over 100 reviews of *Les Oliviers de la Justice* from every city and town in France. It created a controversy on both the right and the left. It was the only fiction feature made in Algeria during the war years. When I later interviewed the Bulgarian cameraman, Julius Rascheff, in February 2002, he described how the editing rooms were bombed several times during the production, which itself included a scene of a terrorist’s bomb in the streets.
The structure of *Les Oliviers* is a seamless forward-moving narrative present with flashbacks to the past memories of childhood. Blue paid homage to John Ford in the rural setting, and shot the urban street scenes like Roberto Rossellini's neo-realism. Part of the film is shot in a very different style, that of the recently innovated cinema verité which Jean Rouch and Richard Leacock had just instituted in France and the United States.

II FIVE DOCUMENTARY FILMS FOR THE UNITED STATES INFORMATION AGENCY, THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES & WASHINGTON, D.C.

*LETTER FROM COLUMBIA, 1962*
*THE SCHOOL AT RINCON SANTO, 1962*
*EVIL WIND OUT, 1962*
*THE MARCH, 1963-64*

When John F. Kennedy became President in 1961, George Stevens, Jr. saw *Les Oliviers de la Justice* at Cannes, and brought Blue to the USIA, where he subsequently made five films, beginning with three made in Central and South America. When the March on Washington was announced for August 28, 1963, Blue directed 12 cameramen who shot in a variety of network and cinema verité styles. He himself wrote the voiceover soundtrack, narrated the film, and edited it. It included the full text of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech, as well as songs by Joan Baez, Odetta, and Marian Anderson; the soundtrack of King, the singers and Blue was translated into 52 languages and shown all over the world.

After Blue's death, when *The March* was shown for the first time in Houston at The Rothko Chapel in celebration of King's birthday on January 15, 1984, it was so popular that it had to be shown three times. After each screening, all those in attendance surrounded the reflecting pool, the site of Barnett Newman’s "Broken Obelisk," and joined hands to sing "We Shall Overcome." All ceremonies there emphasize the interdenominational and global aspects of faith and hope.

When I had first met James Blue in Washington, D.C., he had just returned from New York City where he had completed the final mix of his first film in color, *A Few Notes On Our Food Problem* (1968), soon to be nominated for an Academy Award. It dealt with the green revolution, the improvement of agricultural production on three continents, and was shot in Taiwan, India, Uganda and Brazil. Again, he was director, scriptwriter, narrator, and editor of a poetic work which Basil Wright, the famous British documentarian, wrote in his comprehensive history of international film: "[It] has great claim, through the force of its message and its cinematic beauty to be regarded as one of the few really great documentaries" (*The Long View*, 1979)..
I invited James Blue to formulate the filmmaking curriculum at The Media Center in Houston, which later moved to Rice University where I had taught earlier. He, in turn, invited David MacDougall to join him there, and, in 1974, James went to Africa for the third time, now to Kenya and Uganda, to co-direct and take sound for *Kenya Boran*. David was soon to become the world’s most prolific ethnographic filmmaker and Director of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies. In 1998, Princeton University Press published his essays on *Transcultural Cinema*, in which he discusses James Blue in several places.

Their new style of observational cinema involved single shots of unusually long duration and invited the subjects being shot to participate in the making. It was standard practice at the time, especially in the use of African languages, to simply silence them or have an English-speaking narrator translate or summarize any dialogue. James Blue insisted that part of the meaning was in the linguistic performance, and thus he recorded all speakers exactly, and then included an English translation in the subtitles.

The *Kenya Boran* project actually included five films and was one of five such projects called *Faces of Change*, 25 films produced by the American University Field Staff under Project Director Norman Miller, and funded by the National Science Foundation. The other countries were Afghanistan, Bolivia, the Soko Islands off the Chinese coast, and Taiwan. Each series included a film on the political and religious organization, education, the role of women, technological modernization, and the rural economy. When Margaret Mead saw it at The Smithsonian Institution in 1977, she pronounced it the best ethnographic film she had ever seen.

Perhaps most interesting is the film’s portrayal of the young Peter Boru, a herder's son, as he engages in and comments upon the pursuit of his education. Another notable scene is the introduction of electric pumps to draw water for the cattle.
IV
THE COMPLEX DOCUMENTARY, HOUSTON/BUFFALO

WHO KILLED THE FOURTH WARD? (1978)
INVISIBLE CITY (1979)
UNEMPLOYMENT IN BUFFALO (n.d.)

The complex documentary began with a concern for and a commitment to changing a particular situation in an urban culture in which Blue himself lived. It was not to take a side but to explore all the facts in their complexity, and to research the problem in books and interviews and consultations with as many citizens from every strata involved in the issue, either as manager or victim. It also enabled him to utilize a fictional genre of television, such as that of the investigative detective (Columbo), as a narrative in which he himself, as the filmmaker, could perform the role of detective, so that the work became more of a story than an essay, and thus engaged a wider audience.

Who Killed the Fourth Ward? is a three-hour documentary. With Brian Huberman (camera) and Ed Hugetz (sound), Blue dramatized the City of Houston’s acquisition of an historic Afro-American church for commercial expansion on the edge of the business district. It was shot just before Blue came to Buffalo, and Hugetz came with him to earn his master’s degree by editing it.

During the summer vacation, Blue returned to Houston to make Invisible City with Adele Santos, an architect at Rice, whose students had researched the film. It was shot by Lynn Corcoran and Tom Sims. The problem was the decay of Houston’s housing stock, and it engaged real estate officers, builders, heads of city housing agencies, and the poverty-level renters of the properties.

In 1979-80, Blue engaged his class of students on unemployment in Buffalo. The first semester was spent on research and informal interviews with political leaders, workers, and heads of social agencies; in the second, a design for the film was sketched and shooting locations chosen; the third involved the shooting; the fourth semester would be given over to editing, securing all rights, and making arrangements for a public broadcast so that it could effect the life of the community.
James Blue’s training at IDHEC had involved scriptwriting for features and documentaries. He had written Les Oliviers de la Justice with Jean Pélégrin, awarded the Cannes Film Festival prize for best script by l’Association Française des Ecrivains du Cinéma. When Pier Paolo Pasolini was casting Oedipus Rex (1967), he asked James to play the lead role. Brian Huberman cast him as Sam Houston in his feature film made in the 1970s. The first film Blue directed, made in 8mm and shown on May 16, 1951-52, was Hamlet, advertised as “special version filmed and directed, on campus, by Jim Blue.” As his interviews with Fellini, Capra, Robbe-Grillet and others indicate, he had always avidly followed stylistic developments in the dramatic film.

In 1976, with the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, James Blue collaborated with his brother Richard and Gill Dennis on King’s Mountain and Its Heroes, a feature film for television. It was based on the split allegiance of an Anglican minister, and his debates and warfare with his neighbors, now revolutionaries in the Cape Fear region of Cumberland County in North Carolina.

Another script being developed earlier by the Blue/Dennis team had the working title of Watch for the Razor Act (1968), which referred to a magical performance which had actually been done by Blue’s uncle. It featured the kaleidoscopic panorama of the century-long movement of a family across the American continent from the Southeast to Oklahoma and Oregon, and it was based on Blue’s trips across the country in a camper to interview all the surviving members of the Blue family and their relatives, on whom he gathered a massive amount of photographs, slides, super-8 movie footage, letters, and documents of all kinds, including the vast audiocassette collection of all the interviews. It was supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship, but the project, which extended over many years, was tragically left unfinished.
James Blue received the first grant ever given to a filmmaker by The Ford Foundation (1964). His proposal was to interview the international directors who were beginning to use non-actors in their works, as he himself had done in *Les Oliviers de la Justice*. These included Roberto Rossellini and Federico Fellini in Italy, Jean-Luc Godard and others in France, Milos Forman and Ivan Passer in Czechoslovakia, and Satyajit Ray in India. He also took account of the makers using the recently discovered “cinema verité” or “direct cinema” or “uncontrolled cinema” in the United States, Canada, France and Japan, and included Richard Leacock, Albert and David Maysles, Shirley Clarke, Jean Rouch, Gilles Groulx, Pierre Perrault, and Susami Hani.

Later yet, he extended this series of interviews, now often done on videotape, to the makers of the American documentary classics of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Willard Van Dyke and Leo Hurwitz, and to the new ethnographic documentarians like Robert Gardner, John Marshall and David Hancock. Those on cinema verité published by Gordon Hitchens, the Editor of *Film Comment* (New York) became the most quoted sources for the various academic histories of that style. One appeared in *Objectif* (Montreal), another in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Paris), another in *Sight and Sound* (London), and several in *Media Study/Buffalo*. Those with Godard, Rossellini, Renoir and Leacock have been republished in books.

In all, Blue did more than 75 interviews, many more than two hours long, later including Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Frank Capra, King Vidor and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Many were done in French and Italian, and the cost for transcribing and translating them was prohibitive. For that reason, I am now exploring the possibility of transferring the entire collection of interviews to digital audio and making every minute available to all listeners, world-wide, on internet, thus giving access to one of the most important film history projects of the second half of the 20th century.
James Blue was deeply committed to the inclusiveness of the works of American and Canadian independent film and video makers on television when they had no access to that medium. In Houston (1975), he teamed up with Ed Hugetz to induce KUHT-TV, Channel 8, the PBS affiliate of the University of Houston, to transmit *The Territory*, programs by independent filmmakers in the Southwest. He told me that he had taken the name from the musical, *Oklahoma*:

Territory folks should stick together,
Territory folks should be pals,
Cowboys, dance with farmers’ daughters!
Farmers, dance with ranchers’ gals!

In Buffalo (1979), he accepted the invitation of J. Michael Collins, the General Manager of WNED-Channel 17 and myself to be the Executive Producer of *The Frontier*, and collaborated with video maker Lynn Corcoran of Media Study/Buffalo to produce a first season of 16 weekly programs featuring 27 makers from Western New York and Southern Ontario, the range of the station’s broadcast signal. At that time, when over 200 public stations existed, only six -those in New York, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Houston and Buffalo- provided access to the independents. The Media Study/Buffalo project was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and The Canada Council.

During the week Blue was dying, there took place a series of screenings on “The Advantages of Diversity” at the Tenth Public Television and Independent Film Seminar at Arden House in New York. He had coordinated it and was to moderate for 100 makers and PBS managers, the theme being the exposure to work by Afro-American, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, Native American and Ethnic Minorities. It was the first time that a group of Native Americans had brought their work and philosophy to the Seminar and, on its last day, Larry Littlebird recorded on cassette a “Song for the Journey” (from *The Sweathouse*), and that gift was in the mail when James’ journey began.
James Blue was the only feature and documentary director for film and television that I ever knew who was intimately engaged in film pedagogy at all age levels, and loved to be. At his death, Willard Van Dyke, then Director of the Film Department at The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Chair of the Media Panel at the National Endowment for the Arts, said that Blue was the best teacher of film that he had ever met and David MacDougall once remembered that he had thought it impossible to teach filmmaking until he saw James Blue do it so well.

Stevan Lamer wrote: "James Blue was one fantastic teacher. He was highly articulate, taking pains to explain all the way down to the barest essentials what the aesthetic, practical, and emotional reasons would or should be to choose a particular approach to a given situation. His explanations were on a human level; he never insulted anyone's intelligence nor did he ever take a patronizing stance."

Blue had taught Francis Ford Coppola, Paul Schrader and Joan Churchill at UCLA; he had helped start the American Film Institute's Center for Advanced Film Studies with Frantisek Daniel, formerly Dean of the Prague Film and Television Academy, and taught at the National Film School of Great Britain, invited by its founder, Colin Young. When Daniel, with Forman and Passer, initiated a graduate feature film production program at Columbia University, Blue agreed to add this assignment to his duties at Buffalo. He established the documentary film curriculum at Rice University and at the Center for Media Study in Buffalo. These were known for their professional training, their openness to experiment, their foundation in the whole history of international documentary practice, and their commitment to social change. He had the admiration of all of his experimental artist colleagues at Buffalo: Tony Conrad, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Woody Vasulka, and Steina.

James Blue once showed me a Super-8 film by an Afro-American teenage girl from a small Texas town. She had interviewed her blind grandmother, sitting in her bedroom, about racial conditions in her youth. Blue pointed out that only that young girl, using that lightweight, user-friendly equipment, and having the trust of her subject, could give us access to that history. He designed programs to teach documentary film to high school students in small towns in Texas, in New York's inner-city for John Culkin's Center for Understanding Media, and for my own New York State Summer School for the Media Arts in Buffalo.
Postscript

The purpose of setting James Blue’s work beside the composition, construction and ceremonies of The Rothko Chapel is to suggest a parallel to his own lifework which was eight-sided and focused on a set of intense images which interrelated with each other in a quest for permanence. As completed compositions, his films have the characteristics of monuments but, simultaneously, each is centered in his great passion for performance. That the performances were by non-actors, by common people, by the whole herd of humans on all the continents, reflects the re-definition of religion as an interdenominational human experience.

What have I experienced in meditating on James Blue and his works for the last 25 years? Les Oliviers de la Justice is accepted as an enduring classic. The March is acclaimed as an essential record of American history. Blue’s 20 years of interviews are about to become a primary tool for film research. I tried to feel what it must have been like for him to live not only unheralded and unrewarded, but unacknowledged and unrecognized, for his achievements, and yet continue to work on one or another side of his octagon, the sign of this retrospective and rebirth.

Gerald O’Grady, Ph.D. was actively involved in the early years of electronic art, founding several departments of media studies, particularly at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The faculty at SUNY Buffalo included such eminent artists as the Vasulkas, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad, Peter Weibel and James Blue. Dr. O’Grady has taught at several U.S. universities, including New York, Columbia and the New School for Social Research. Most recently, he was a fellow of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research and a member of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University, where he conducted research on the films of the Civil Rights Movement. Now retired, Dr. O’Grady was recently the first guest professor (Gastwissenschaftler) invited by the Zentrum fur Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, Germany, where he gave a series of lectures on the work of Marshall McLuhan, on whom he is writing a book. In 2002, Dr. O’Grady was Researcher in Residence at the Daniel Langlois Foundation, Quebec, Canada.

Since 1979, Dr. O’Grady has edited, independently published and contributed essays to over 30 catalogues for film retrospectives or series including The Films of the Civil Rights; Remembering Malcom X; and Czech Filmmaking, 1963-1990 for Joseph Papp’s The Public Theater; on the Brazilian filmmaker Nelson Pereiros dos Santos for the Film Society of the Lincoln Center; on Theo Angelopoulos for the Museum of Modern Art in New York; on Dziga Vertov for the Collective for Living Cinema (NY); on Dusan Makavejev for the Cinematheque Ontario (Toronto); on David MacDougall for Media Study/ Buffalo; and Articulate Energy: The Emergence of the Abstract Film in America for Harvard University and Anthology Film Archives.