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The film’s credits are revealed in a leisurely fashion over, initially, a long stretch of beach, with a solitary figure in the far distance throwing sticks for a dog. The lighting is strangely subdued – don’t think I mean to evoke one of Australia’s sunswept beaches with waves crashing from a vividly blue sea. This is a sombre seascape, probably wintry, and this effect is reinforced by a subdued, plangent musical score. The camera, mirroring the man’s apparent disability, tracks and wobbles with him as he walks up the dunes to a seaside shack. His solitariness is underscored as he goes about his routine domestic chores. He feeds the dog, sits at table to eat, does the

**MINIMALIST STORYTELLING IN BLIND COMPANY**

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dishes and fumbles in a draw for pills, the muffled sound of waves still heard on the soundtrack. Next morning, there are more dishes to do, then shower and shave. In other words, this is a quotidian round – and in an isolated place – just waiting for something to disrupt it.

A young woman, Hailey (Kate Rayment), arrives in a car with groceries. Is she the narrative tightening we've been waiting for? No, she's clearly just some sort of local help who drops in regularly and is gone in less than a minute of film time. Shortly after, though, there is an explosion of sound as another car pounds on a country road at night, its radio blaring with a raucous pop song, the recurring word in which is 'shit'. The driver's face is barely visible, and this is in keeping with the film's practice of dealing out information in the most parsimonious way.

Before the driver fetches up at the seaside house, there is an insert of Geoff (Colin Friels), the man we've been observing on the beach and in the shack, who is recording a confessional diary on tape. 'So the ship sails on,' he records. 'I miss you tonight. I really do. In a few days, as we know, I'll celebrate my fifty-sixth birthday, probably my last.' He is, he says, 'not really unhappy about that', and thanks the putative listener, his ex-wife it will transpire, for the 'inspired idea' of keeping this oral diary, adding, however, 'I never felt a total freedom when we talked, an intimacy born out of total freedom.' And, finally, 'I wonder if the memory goes blind too.' It could be that this is all a bit explicit, but equally it might be the memory goes blind too.' It could be that this is all a bit explicit, but equally it might be assessed as a useful expository device, a way of making us privy to the man's past via a dramatically acceptable strategy. By this point, some of the previous fragments of narrativee are beginning to fall into place.

'Why have you come, Josh?' Geoff asks his young Porsche-driving, drug-taking visitor (Nick Barkla), setting up a number of teasing hypotheses. The ensuing shots scarcely clarify much: Josh heads for the beach and stretches on the sand; Geoff comes to stand by him, and then walks away, leaving him asleep there. 'I've come to visit my sick uncle' he says and fails to clarify anything. It's not even a point, one applauds Tsilimidos' refusal to spell out everything, his avoidance of that sort of 'closure' so institutionalised by the concept of classical Hollywood narrative cinema. But this is a rather tricky balancing act and the director wobbles a little as he tries to perform it. It is one thing to withhold information early on and to embrace a minimalist style that seems like a corollate for Geoff's diminishing awareness of the physical world. It is another to provide viewers with enough gratification as they work on the pieces of the puzzle, even allowing for an ending with ambiguous possibilities.

And on the subject of endings, I hope never to see another film that finishes with a shot of birds flying in a limitless sky as if to imply some kind of liberation of the spirit – or something. Even a film as good as Rachel Ward's Beautiful Kate (2009) succumbed to this cliché, and here it is again, and much less appropriate than it was in Ward's film. I won't give away the very last moment of the film, but there is an unearnt lyricism at work.

The issue of Geoff's bisexuality brings a new element into the enigmatic storyline. The nature of Geoff's illness is to some extent elucidated, and Josh confronts Geoff with questions of escalating hostility. The revelation of Geoff's sexual encounters with young men, some of them his students, and how he'd disguised these from Sally, leads to a final confrontation and self-confrontation when the last set of visitors arrives at the beach house. The woman is the mother of a boy who had hanged himself when he found he was HIV-positive, and she has brought her son's ashes for Geoff to scatter on the beach, as the son requested. She holds Geoff responsible for the boy's death and there is an ominous feeling that this visit will precipitate the film's climax. And so, in a sense, it does. This climax will involve Geoff and his relationship with Josh, via an elliptically filmed scene in which he seems to attack Josh and the placement of the pair in long shot by an open grave in a clearing in the bush.

Like so much of this teasing film, the last sequence leaves questions unanswered. Up to a point, one applauds Tsilimidos' refusal to spell out everything, his avoidance of that sort of 'closure' so institutionalised by the concept of classical Hollywood narrative cinema. But this is a rather tricky balancing act and the director wobbles a little as he tries to perform it. It is one thing to withhold information early on and to embrace a minimalist style that seems like a corollate for Geoff's diminishing awareness of the physical world. It is another to provide viewers with enough gratification as they work on the pieces of the puzzle, even allowing for an ending with ambiguous possibilities.
Along the way, the matter of *Hamlet* is raised. Though Geoff and Sally’s background has been but lightly sketched – not even sketched but merely caught in fleeting remarks – it seems that both have in some way been involved with plays and performance. Sally encourages Geoff when he shows interest in a local group’s production of *Hamlet*, and, on the basis that this is a play that speaks to all people at whatever age, he decides to audition. Not, however, as Polonius, as his age might have suggested, but as the Prince. Unsurprisingly, Richard, the director, played by TV favourite Samuel Johnson, isn’t persuaded of his suitability for the role, even when Geoff tries to argue that he’s making ‘a grave mistake’ in interpreting Hamlet as an idealised youthful lead – as distinct, say, from a 56-year-old who is by now so blind that he can’t see Richard’s outstretched hand or doesn’t face the camera because he doesn’t know where it is.

This mildly amusing, even idiosyncratic, interlude is important less for itself than for two other reasons. First and most obviously, it points up Geoff’s self-delusion; second, the choice of *Hamlet* (perhaps improbable for a small seaside town) is a shorthand way of reinforcing the film’s sense of tangled family relations. Here, instead of Shakespeare’s two brothers, vengeful son and erring wife, we have two brothers, the son of one locked in some kind of strange bond with his uncle, and a wife not so much erring in the way of Gertrude as superficially refusing to confront the facts of her difficult marriage and the current crisis in family matters. I wouldn’t want to overstate this connection, and the film doesn’t either, but it is part of the texture of Tsilimidos’ drama, and is factored in without undue emphasis.

The film’s crucial drama is in the collisions between Geoff and Josh, fuelled by almost murderous hatred but also by some other kinds of feeling that complicate the situation. The other participants in the film’s action have essentially catalytic functions: Hailey on whom Geoff relies for everyday needs, Sally to whom he can unburden himself of the guilt that eats at his memory, the play’s director who forces a moment of self-recognition, and the bitter mother of the dead boy who occasions more potent self-laceration. The film is structured around these visits and contacts but the real function of each is to make us aware of the ties that bind Josh inextricably to Geoff.

Tsilimidos’ 2004 film, *Tom White*, also starring Colin Friels, has in common with his latest work the notion of a man in middle age having to take stock of himself, in relation to his wife and others, to accommodate to sexual and other challenges. And as in the earlier film, the director is not interested in easy answers. Friels, in a detailed, small-scale performance here, once again explores the persona of a battered character descending towards the dark night of the soul. Like *Tom White*, *Blind Company* hints at the possibility of redemption, and perhaps one should admire a director who seems determined to be resolutely himself and to thumb his nose at the multiplexes.

Brian McFarlane is an adjunct associate professor at Monash University. His most recent book is *The British ‘B’ Movie*, co-authored with Steve Chibnall for Palgrave/Macmillan, London. The fourth edition of his Encyclopedia of British Film will be published later this year.