



SENIORS FREE ARCHIVE MATINEE

# Blue Black Permanent

**Margaret Tait: Film Maker**

Director: Margaret Williams  
UK 1983  
34 mins

**Blue Black Permanent**

Directed by: Margaret Tait  
©: British Film Institute

Production Company: Viz Permanent  
Presented by: Channel Four Television Company, British Film Institute Production  
In association with: Scottish Film Production Fund, Orkney Islands Council, City of Edinburgh District Council, Grampian Television  
With the participation of: British Screen Finance

Executive Producers: Ben Gibson, Rod Stoneman, Kate Swan

Producer: Barbara Grigor  
Co-producer: Kate Swan

Associate Producer: Christine Maclean  
Executive in Charge of Production (BFI): Angela Topping

Production Co-ordination: Avril Watt  
Production Accountant: Louise Coulter  
Accounts Assistant: Susan Freeman  
Location Managers: Sara Barr, Andrea Calderwood

Production Runner: Tony Sheridan  
Assistant Director: Gus Maclean  
2nd Assistant Director: Alison Goring  
Director's Assistant: Melissa Wishart  
Script Supervisor: Pat Rambaut

Casting Director: Susie Bruffin  
Original Screenplay by: Margaret Tait  
Director of Photography: Alex Scott  
Rostrum: Stop-Frame

Focus Puller: Mike Cuthbert  
Clapper/Loader: Chris Burns  
Gaffer: Andy Stewart

Electrician: Donny Campbell  
Stills Photographer: Ken Mellin  
Editor: John MacDonnell

Assistant Editor: Ian Adams  
Designer: Andrew Semple  
Art Department Assistant: Tracey Gallacher

Art Department Runner: Mike Gunn  
Production Buyer: Robina Nicholson  
Standby Props: Scott Keery

Set Construction: Fantastic Fabrications  
Costume Designer: Lynn Aitken  
Wardrobe Assistant: Helen Keenan

Make-up/Hair: Irene Napier  
Titles: Paperdart

Laboratory: Technicolor  
Original Music: John Gray  
Pibroch/Vocals: Allan Macdonald  
Music Director: David McNiven  
Music Mixer: Brian Young

Music Recording: Edinburgh Cava  
Music Consultant: Bob Last  
Sound Recordist: Colin Nicolson

Boom Operator: Tony Cook  
Dubbing Mixers: Aad Wirtz, Adrian Rhodes  
Sound Post-production: Ladbroke Film Dubbing

Dubbing Editor: Neil Castell

Trainee Assistant Director: Mo Colvin  
Trainee Camera Assistant: Alan Maxwell  
Trainee Assistant Editor: Alex McLaren  
Catering: L.G. McNeill's Catering Services

+ intro by BFI events programmer Aga Baranowska and filmmaker and curator Peter Todd

The contradictory or paradoxical thing is that in documentary the real things depicted are liable to lose their reality by being photographed and presented in that 'documentary' way, and there's no poetry in that. In poetry, something else happens. Hard to say what it is. Presence, let's say, soul or spirit, an empathy with whatever it is that's dwelt upon, feeling for it – to the point of identification.

Margaret Tait, 'A Few Notes about Film and Poetry', *Poem Film Film Poem*, Peter Todd (ed.), 1997

*Blue Black Permanent* was Margaret Tait's first and only feature production. Although her abstract animations and densely allusive film poems such as *Where I Am Is Here* (1964) or *On the Mountain* (1974) earned Tait a small but devoted following among the English and Continental avant-garde, she was still something of an unknown in her native Scotland.

The film's complex, 'Russian Doll' narrative spans three generations of an Orcadian family. Barbara's attempt to understand her past forms its outer shell. Flashbacks to her mother Greta and grandmother Mary form the second and third layers, as the action in both past and present switches between Orkney and Edinburgh. At its core is Tait's abiding interest in natural cycles, which in her films seem to dwarf all human concerns. The final five minutes of the film is a leanly edited sequence of shots from the Orkney coastline, juxtaposing grand sweeps of the seafront with details of shells, driftwood and shale.

By the time *Blue Black Permanent* was released, Tait was already 74, and it is in some respects an abstract autobiography; Greta and Barbara are representative of Tait's joint passions of poetry and film/photography, while Greta shares Tait's ecstatic sympathy with nature, her loyalties forever divided between Orkney and Edinburgh.

Tait was a fiercely independent and self-sufficient artist, and *Blue Black Permanent* showcases her wider influences as well as her remarkable singularity of vision. The use of static objects to cut between scenes suggests more than a passing familiarity with the work of Yasujiro Ozu, but the most profound influence on her work came from her studies at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome. Besides her contemporary Enrico Coccozza, she was the nearest Scotland had to a bona fide neo-realist, substituting the 'mean dialects' of Sardinia or Rome for the broad Orcadian cadences of the homecoming scenes.

The film does not so much flout conventions as create its own; flashbacks within flashbacks, several shifts of narrative voice, frequent use of ellipsis and occasionally abstract dialogue. Most audacious – and typical of Tait's lateral sensibilities – is the script's refusal to lend coherence to Barbara's search for her past. It remains unfinished business, like the poem left on Greta's sideboard or Barbara's outrage that her story could be neatly compressed into something as crude or indelicate as 'a beginning, a middle and an end.'

Mitchell Miller, BFI Screenonline, [screenonline.org.uk](http://screenonline.org.uk)

## A contemporary review

*Blue Black Permanent* works like a talking cure. Barbara is at a crossroads – one choice seems to be between greater or lesser commitment to lover Philip – and goes looking for clues in the past. In the present-day scenes very little 'happens': the lovers talk disjointedly, potter about the flat and go for walks. The flashbacks tell the film's most complete story, covering events leading up to the death of Barbara's mother. Yet the present is not used as a mere framing device, nor is the death exploited for its 'drama'. Rather, the beauty of Margaret Tait's construction is that it allows connections across the two periods to emerge as the film progresses, serving the real drama, which lies in Barbara's attempts to understand and to communicate.

These connections might be specific and fairly direct: Barbara and Philip seem to be at odds about having children, although neither's position is obvious, and yet one takes as germane Andrew's comments about having to choose between pleasing yourself and having a family life. Or they may be diffuse. Water, for instance, is everywhere: for Barbara's first swim; as refreshing storm rain; and, in repeated shots, as steely, cold threat. It is promise or delight or a killer, each sight recalling and foreshadowing others.

Unit Publicist: Liz Reddish  
Cast:  
Jack Shepherd (*Philip Lomax*)  
Celia Imrie (*Barbara Thorburn*)  
Gerda Stevenson (*Greta Thorburn*)  
James Fleet (*Jim Thorburn*)  
Sean Scanlan (*Andrew Cunningham*)  
Hilary Maclean (*Wendy*)  
Walter Leask (*Sam Kelday*)  
Sheana Marr (*Mrs Kemp*)  
Eoin Macdonald (*Dan of Fea*)  
Jimmy Moar (*Billy Spence*)  
Liz Robertson (*Mary Kelday*)  
Bobby Bews (*Grandfather Bews*)  
Keith Hutcheon (*Roger*)  
Mairi Wallace (*shoe salesgirl*)  
Pamela Kelly (*Mrs Brodie*)  
Joan Alcorn (*Mrs Kilgour*)  
Lisa Grindall (*Joan Kilgour*)  
Gowan Calder (*Eileen*)  
Katie Groat (*young Barbara*)  
James Holmes (*Fergus*)  
Sean Holmes (*Tom*)  
Elsa Davidson (*young Greta*)  
Thomas Pirie (*Donald*)  
Bill Jack (*newsreader*)  
Douglas Sutherland (*art critic*)  
Erland Tait, Peter Tait (*boatmen*)  
UK 1992©  
86 mins  
Digital

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More generally, words, faces, scenes suggest others, both to the characters within the film and to the viewer, so that everything and everyone seem to exist entirely to stimulate recollections of something or someone else. The network that Tait sets up might even be seen to reflect on the nature of creativity itself, establishing a lattice-work of points that is accessed by memory and imagination. Tait has made some 30 short films since the early 1950s and the structure of this, her first feature – in which thematic coherence counts for more than straight narrative – is of a sort more often found in shorts. In tone, it is very much of a piece: the colours are sombre and the music (scored for two cellos and clarinet by John Gray who, like Tait, is a native of the Orkney Islands) meditative.

Tait's direction is invariably apt. In the conversations between Barbara and Philip, the camera acts detached as if chancing upon fragments of conversation. In the flashbacks, objects are fixed or lingered over as if viewed by one of the film's 'artists' – Andrew, Greta and Barbara. When Greta prepares breakfast for her father and, in turn, the old stove, the bread and the eggs are pored over, Tait could be inviting us to feel their texture with much the same minute interrogation of detail as Terence Davies applied to the carpet in *The Long Day Closes*.

Almost between the lines, the small story of the present unfolds. The memories and their telling serve a purpose as Barbara realises she is not compelled to follow past family patterns; while Philip gains from sharing in her story and, by extension, in her. One could imagine a similar premise treated as a verbal roundelay, as a stagey TV drama where issues are talked into the ground. Tait's achievement is to suggest the processes that lie behind our ways of seeing, our declarations, and to find a style that enacts, or at least simulates, those very processes.

Robert Yates, *Sight and Sound*, April 1993

## Margaret Tait: Film Maker

A portrait of Margaret Tait featuring film extracts and interviews that details her film training in Italy and later return to Scotland.

**Peter Todd** works with film both as a maker and curator. His most recent film *pillow bowl rose tree* premiered at the Open City Documentary Festival in 2023.

His curating involves exploring the possibilities beyond a single film. Curated works include, *Refuge*, *Film Poems*, *Garden Pieces*, *Place of Work*, retrospectives of Margaret Tait for the Edinburgh International Film Festival and BFI Southbank and the international touring programme of her work *Subjects and Sequences* for LUX. His programme *Together* screens at Close-Up Film Centre London in April 2024.

He has contributed to the recent Temenos film restoration workshops organised by filmmaker Robert Beavers in Berlin.

**Aga Baranowska** is an Events Programmer at BFI Southbank. In addition to programming events that provide context and interpretation for BFI Southbank's seasons, she has also programmed BFI Southbank retrospectives of Agnès Varda, Barbara Stanwyck (co-programmed with Geoff Andrew), Shirley Clarke (co-programmed with Will Fowler), and Gene Tierney (upcoming in March and April 2024). She was also a Programme Advisor for BFI London Film Festival's Shorts Programme and a Pre-selector for Sheffield Doc/Fest.

## Further reading

Sarah Neely, *Between Categories The Films of Margaret Tait: Portraits, Poetry, Sound and Place* (Peter Lang, 2016)

Margaret Tait, *Poems, Stories, and Writings*, Sarah Neely (ed.), foreword by Ali Smith (Fyfield Books, 2012)

Margaret Tait, *Personae* (LUX, 2020)

Peter Todd and Benjamin Cook (eds.), *Subjects and Sequences: A Margaret Tait Reader* (LUX, 2005)