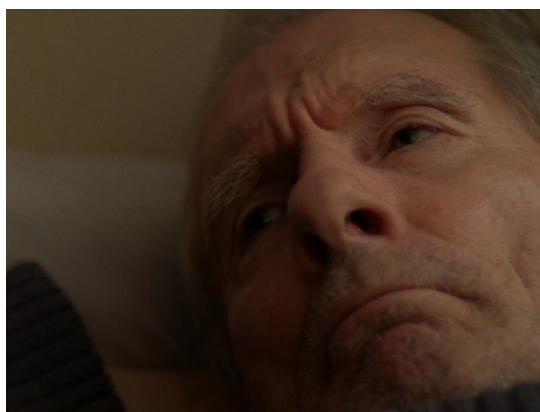


## A Captive Picture: Richard Billingham *Ray* (2016)

Kieran Cashell, *LSAD TUS: Midwest*



*What happens does not matter; the moment is all.*

Jean Vaublin<sup>1</sup>

### *Unaccustomed Viewpoint*

Richard Billingham started photographing his father Ray in the early 1990s. Ray was living alone in a high-rise council estate in the West Midlands town of Cradley Heath since his wife Elizabeth (the artist's mother) moved out. When Richard was a student at Bournville School of Art in Birmingham, in 1990, he was ostensibly living with Ray. But for the nineteen-year-old, cohabitation with his father was an arrangement of convenience. Interaction between them was impersonal, curt, and cursory. Working the night shift at the local Kwik Save discount store and, with college an hour's commute by train, Richard was out most of the time.

Yet he was gradually becoming aware of his father's presence: "there'd be periods when I'd be with him in the flat and I would see him" (Billingham in Evans 2016, 2). Unemployed for over a decade with no probability of reemployment, Ray Billingham (1931–2007) had become a hopeless (and increasingly solitary) alcoholic. "He always drank," the artist acknowledges, "But before then, only in the pub. Like everyone else" (Billingham 2013; Adams 2016). Now, with his wife gone, Ray withdrew permanently to his bedroom, where the serious drinking – that is to say, the persistent, solipsistic, and compulsive drinking – started.

Apart from an upstairs neighbour who provided him with strong homebrew and cashed his welfare cheque (using the money to "pay the bills") and his estranged wife (whose weekly visits were motivated by swindling him out of the remainder of his dole) he withdrew completely from the world. Watching his life slide out of view, Ray prepared for death.

He stayed in his room all of the time except when he wanted to go to the toilet; he never came out otherwise. He would drink to get to sleep and then wake up, have a drink. And drink until he got to sleep again. (Billingham in Evans 2016)

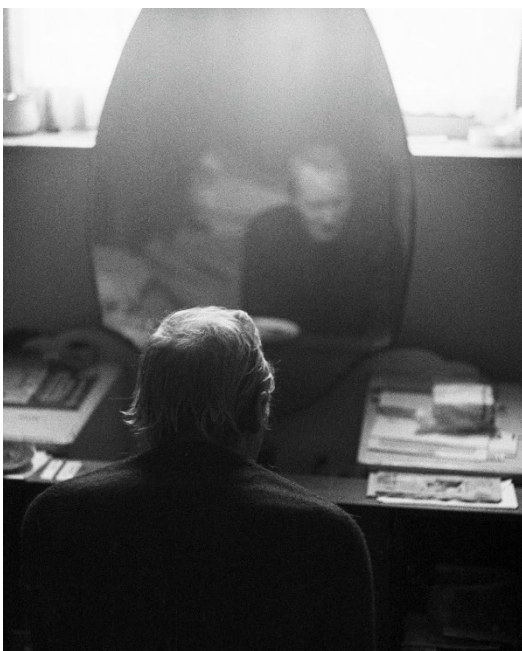
At some point his son started to take a pictorial interest in this situation. The strange experience of dwelling with his agoraphobic father led to a gradual change of perception for the art student.

Ray's spartan living space, Billingham explains, began to "take on an outward expression of his inner life. And I had a strong urge to make paintings about the situation." His first sketches of his father were made in preparation for a planned series of figure-in-room studies, an iconological connexion catalysed by his growing interest in controversial Camden Town post-impressionist Walter Sickert. "I first started painting my father ... drinking, looking in the mirror, looking out of the window. Alone in his room" (in Evans 2016, 2).

His room was meagrely furnished with few traces of [my Mam] Liz but to me at the time, the sparse objects still remaining seemed to take on a symbolic significance – the glow of the electric fire, an old key, his beer-stained glass, two litre homebrew bottles, a nub end, the oval dressing-table mirror, or a teenage photo of Liz on the windowsill. (Billingham 2013)

Dissatisfied with his initial studies – and attributing them to the unexpected perplexities of painting from life – he turned, but more as process, a means rather than an end, to the camera.

I thought [it] would help in making a painting that was more detailed / finished and not just a sketch from life. Ray would pose for say 15 minutes and would want to move after that. With the photos I thought I could copy a bit from one and a bit from another and compose the entire painting from different part. (Billingham 2018)



*Figure 1. Untitled (Richard Billingham, 1990)*

Intended as a convenient exploratory way of gathering visual research, in time, the photographs would assume an aesthetic integrity of their own,

gradually eclipsing the original motivation. So, in 1990, with his camera, a Russian-made Zenit 35mm manual-focus SLR acquired on credit (by persuading the shop assistant he was a librarian) Billingham entered his father's bedroom and looked through the lens at the figure within (see *Figure 1*).

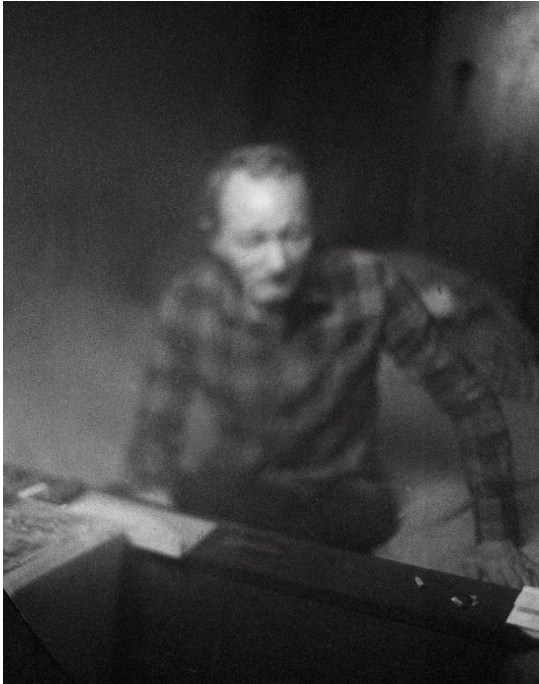
### *Figure in a Room*

When Billingham returned in the evenings his father was already paralytic. "Every time I came back from college, he was lying in bed, drunk ... I saw a lot of that. And it stuck in my mind" (in Lingwood 1998, 58). Sometimes, when he came home, his father was in a heap on the floor, where he had collapsed, hours before. On the train, Richard would often wonder if his father was already dead. He would imagine opening the door to a cold corpse (Billingham 2013; Chesshyre 2001). He often entered Ray's room just to make certain he was still breathing, his body still warm. In the mornings, before he departed, he'd leave slices of bread on his dresser.

But to act, to intervene, he adds, "would be a fulltime job. Wouldn't it? I'd be his carer" (in Chesshyre 2001).

The 1990–1991 photographs document this situation. Some were published in the groundbreaking photobook *Ray's a Laugh* in 1996 and yet remain formally distinct from the majority of images in that publication. Many, like the three paradigmatic images comprising the *Triptych of Ray* (1990) are black and white, and, if not, almost monochrome in their grim, drear, colouring. Grainy, indistinct, sometimes completely unfocused, these photo sketches capture a haunted, wraithlike entity, diminishing to shadow before our eyes. Of *Untitled* (1990) (see *Figure 2*) a picture of his father's reflection in the dressing-table mirror, the artist comments:

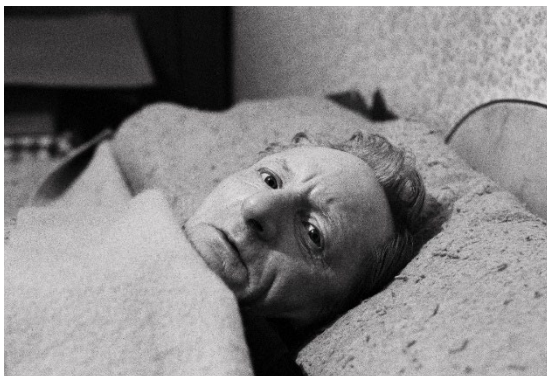
It's like he's fading away because of the drink or something and it makes you realise that everything is very fragile ... I didn't know the picture would look like that. It wasn't my intention to have it blurred, but for some reason it was out of focus; I think it's better because it makes it look like he's withering away more graphically. (Lingwood 1998)



*Figure 2. Ray's A Laugh #53  
(Richard Billingham, 1996)*

Today, Billingham is sceptical of these images, however, criticising them as “unresolved”. They “don’t tell Ray’s story” (see *Figure 3*).

The idea for the film began simply as a “way to give form to ideas and narratives hinted at in the photographs” (Billingham 2015). With this, the theme of *Ray* is identified and its motivation clarified: to reconstitute his father’s acedia and in the process provide some coherence and narrative closure.



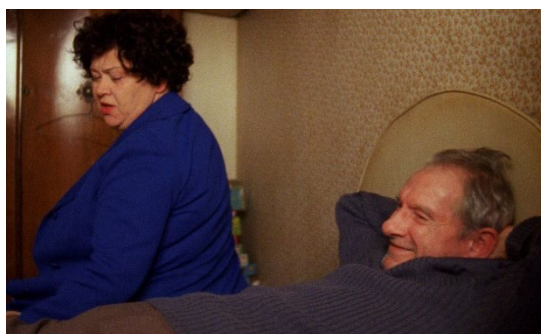
*Figure 3. Untitled (Richard Billingham, 1990)*

### *Ray (2016)*

With the short film *Ray*, Billingham revisits the autobiographic theme that secured his place in late twentieth-century art. Yet the circumstantial *verité* synonymous with his intuitive and lumpen documentary style is here radically reorientated. Yet, what audiences familiar with Billingham’s severe realism found most challenging, arguably, was the casting of actors to play his family.

In *Ray* Patrick Romer plays the eponymous character (aged 59). While the role of Billingham’s mother (age 40) is interpreted in a surprisingly

convincing performance by Deirdre Kelly (“White Dee” from Channel 4’s controversial documentary series *Benefits Street* as well as reality TV show *Celebrity Big Brother*) (see *Figures 4 and 5*).



*Figures 4 and 5. Liz Visits. Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)*

Obviously, the actors were auditioned in the first instance for their striking resemblance to Billingham’s parents. This is especially true of Romer and Kelly whose physical complementarity with Ray and Liz contributes a stunning level of verisimilitude to Billingham’s film. Indeed, watching *Ray* through the afterimages of Billingham’s mid-1990s era photos is a slightly unsettling, even weird experience. Due to the extensive photographic (and videographic) documentation of Billingham’s mother, in particular, gives Kelly’s performance of Liz an uncanny (and I mean properly *unheimlich*) effect. Yet it is not primarily her Doppelgänger physique and physiognomy that’s key here, but rather how White Dee reanimates Liz somatically – through *gesture* and through *vocalisation*. From Winson Green in West Birmingham – the location of James Turner (“Benefits”) Street – Dee ventriloquises the mother through her own Black Country accent. Every chopped-off staccato sentence sounds like an aggressively rhetorical question.



*Figure 6. Liz Visits (2). Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)*



*Figure 7. Liz Visits. Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)*

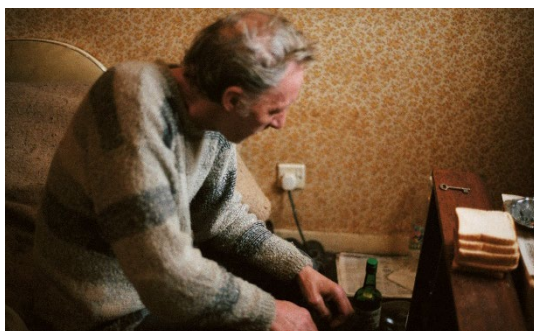


*Figure 8. Artist Richard Billingham and Deirdre Kelly (White Dee) on location. Cradley Heath (2015). Cradley Heath (2015)*

Filming took place on location in the enclosed bedroom space of the seventh-floor flat of Addenbrooke Court, the exact council estate in Cradley Heath where the family lived until Billingham's younger brother Jason was taken into care in 1988 (at age 11) and his mother subsequently vacated in 1990 (taking all her stuff with her). The hermetic, flyblown environment in which the artist's father hibernated during his worsening alcoholic isolation is recreated with forensic exactitude. "We used the photographs to reconstruct the wallpaper and the furniture" the artist reveals. "I wanted to go back to that, where every detail in the room is telling a story" (in Adams 2016). Three images (see *Figures 9, 10, and 11*) published in Billingham's 1996 photobook *Ray's a Laugh* provide specific points of departure for the film's opening scenes (see *Figures 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16*).



*Figure 9. Ray's A Laugh #33  
(Richard Billingham, 1996)*



*Figure 10. Ray's A Laugh #16  
(Richard Billingham, 1996).*



*Figure 11. Ray's A Laugh #17  
(Richard Billingham, 1996)*



*Figure 12. Ray in Bed. Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016).*



Figure 13. *Ray in Mirror. Ray* (Richard Billingham, 2016)



Figure 14. *Ray Drinks. Ray* (Richard Billingham, 2016)



Figure 15. *Ray Drinks (2). Ray* (Richard Billingham, 2016)



Figure 16. *Ray Drinks (3). Ray* (Richard Billingham, 2016)

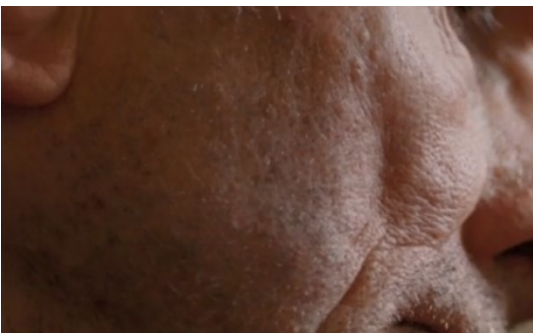


Figure 17. *Close Up. Ray* (Richard Billingham, 2016)

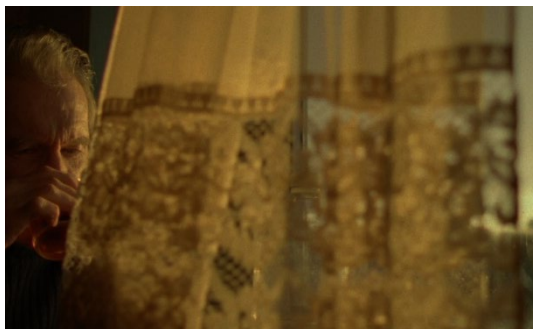


Figure 18. *Ray Drinks at Window.*  
Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)

Time passes. Ray is back in his customary position, sitting on the edge of the bed facing the mirror. He flicks the dregs from his glass into the corner and pours himself a drink, taking care to fill the glass to the very brim. He drinks, audibly swallows ... and drinks again. And again. His drinking is autonomic, repetitive, compulsive. Once the drained glass is back with a soft knock on the dresser, it's immediately refilled. This demoralizingly repetitive (but weirdly hypnotic) activity is hyphenated by a series of extreme cutaway close-ups where the generally unobtrusive camera suddenly twitches into rude life and begins its own independent analysis of the figure in the space. Detaching itself from the primary process of reportage, the camera shifts, almost audibly, to the haptic level. And it moves in close ... very close. Scrutinising the grainy creases and porous folds of Ray's bristly skin. So close, in fact, that it seems to touch the trembly, juddering wattle of the neck, close enough, indeed, to anatomise the minute cellular events that comprise a throat convulsing in a swallow.

Referred to as generative archival data for the figure-in-room sequences' *mise en scène* (as well as wardrobe decisions) analysis of this photographic material reveals that the nicotine-toned room – with its “diapered” wallpaper and semicircular leatherette headboard, military-grey mothballed blankets and pillows, newspaper-strewed floor, battered wardrobe, oval mirror, wood-framed electric fire, scallop ashtray with its tinder of smouldering cig butts – is an exact simulacrum of the space of his father's living internment. Every detail of the scene derives from this archive material. “In the reconstructed room,” the artist comments, “I was able to replicate with the 16mm [movie] camera these original positions or camera angles, from where I stood or crouched down. Like another hidden person watching him” (Billingham 2017).

Billingham's film is structured, perhaps uniquely in the history of the medium, by a process of “mnemonic intratextuality” (a multilayering, that is, of reflexive, if implicit, references to his own photographic archive).

A sense of the limits of the world in which the film takes place is established from the outset. As a consequence of his solitary drinking routine, Ray totally lost track of time: waking at three in the afternoon or three in the morning, taking up exactly where he left off, the cycle would begin again. The limits of his room became the limits of his world. In one scene, he spots Liz passing by outside, and shouts down to her from the

open window: “Oi! Up ere! What day is it?” “Tuesday! I’ll be up Thursday morning Ray!” (see *Figures 19 and 20*)



Figure 19. “Oi! Up Ere.” Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)



Figure 20. “I’ll be up Thursday Morning, Ray!” Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)

However unintentional (and notwithstanding Billingham’s disclaimers regarding the film’s political context) casting White Dee as Liz represents an implicit engagement with reality television culture, and specifically, the politics of the representation of social class (in popular media culture / culture industry).<sup>2</sup> *Ray & Liz* “ticks”, as Steve Rose observes, a lot of those “poverty porn boxes: drinking, smoking, obesity, neglect, tattoos, council estate squalor” (Rose 2019). In a review of *Ray* Tim Adams anticipates this connection by imagining future sociology dissertations on the subject of the “depiction of poverty in British culture and the ethics of intrusion”, delineating a trajectory from *Ray’s a Laugh* to *Benefits Street*. He concedes by acknowledging the complexities of the artist’s contribution to the reality-cult phenomenon, suggesting that although difficult to distinguish “some of the extremes of reality TV without first having had the more complex intimacies of Billingham’s art”. His most recent non-fiction cinema projects arguably accomplish a subtly intrusive form of post-reality photographic realism that reactivates his earlier family studies and somehow epitomises Samatha Lay’s forecast of a form of neorealism that makes social realism as “we have come to know it with all its predictable conventions look stilted and ‘unrealistic’” (Lay 2002). *Ray* might be a non-fictional film. But it is not documentary.

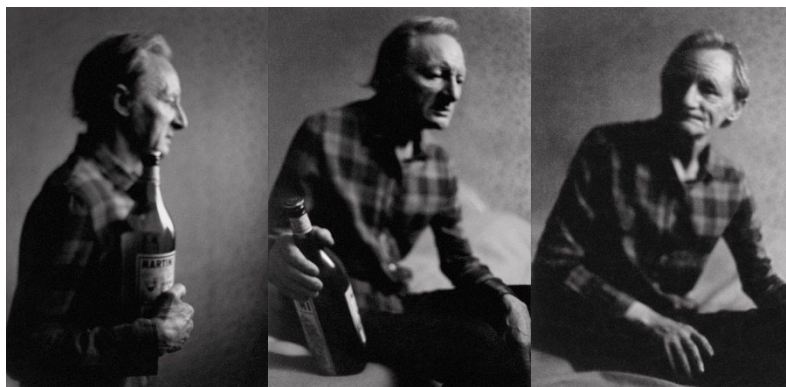
Yet the artist is aware of the problem; I believe it’s possible to glimpse the artist’s insecurity in the awkwardness of some of the scenes of *Ray* – especially the scenes involving Liz. Consider the compulsive focus on the actor’s mouth and lips as she smokes, for example, or the shots of her feet from under the bed, or, indeed, in the defensive reflection shots of Liz in the dresser mirror when she visits her estranged husband.

### *A Devotional Image*

The hermetic interior recreated (twenty-seven years later) for *Ray* doubles, for the director, as an externalisation of his father’s existential predicament. “I think of the room,” Billingham says, “as a visual manifestation of Ray’s inner life. A bit like the cell of a prisoner or even the pen of a zoo animal” (Billingham 2017) (see *Figure 21*).

Sequences in *Ray* were defined by what the artist refers to as the “spatial dynamics” of the figure’s ascetic setting: “I had the idea,” he says, “that each shot would respond to the room’s special dynamics and out of that the film would emerge” (Billingham 2017). The 3:4 aspect ratio reemphasises the sense of agoraphobic retreat and enclosure. Indicating its affinity with the dimensions of a vintage glass TV screen, the director claims that he opted for Academy Ratio because it enables an optical concentration on “heads”, framed “objects in space”, “hands” (Dublin International Film Festival 2019).

Often referring in this context to Robert Bresson’s film *A Man Escaped* (*Un condamné à mort s’est échappé ou vent souffle où il veut*, 1956) which he stumbled across on TV as an adolescent, similar to the prison cell scenario, where the restricted interior determines available shots and camera-angles, the artist admits that the “intense rhythm”, and, especially, the optical parsimony of Bresson’s technique influenced the framing of the figure-in-room sequences of *Ray*.



*Figure 21.*  
Triptych of  
*Ray* (Richard  
Billingham,  
1991)

But, above all, as with the very early *Triptych of Ray* (1991), Beckett remains enormously relevant for Billingham’s début feature. Especially apropos here is the playwright’s stripped-back *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1959) with its “patho-comic” figure-in-room variant, the “wearish old man” in his darkened “den”, drinking whisky and listening to annual diary recordings on reel-to-reel cassettes. “I was probably just in my own way,” Billingham responds (after a lengthy pause) when this connection is proposed, “trying to objectify or make sense of a surreal situation” (Billingham 2013). Perhaps a less obvious precedent for *Ray* is Beckett’s short for television, *Eh Joe* (1967). The fixation on the expressionless face of Joe, sitting on the bed as he listens, paralysed, to his aural hallucinations, closely parallels Billingham’s lens practice (see *Fishtank* 1998). When Joe finally takes his place on the edge of the bed, satisfied that his checks are complete, the

“inquisitorial” camera takes the opportunity to shift into intentional mode, commencing a seemingly sentient examination of the figure on the bed, faceting his face into closer and closer fragments, as the intrusive voice grills, deeper and deeper.

I would, however, insist that Ray’s withdrawal and voluntary hermitage was motivated to shut out the external world more securely (*c.f.*, the key on the dresser). And that Billingham’s figure-in-room enclosure is carefully articulated to evoke agoraphobia and not claustrophobia as some critics have suggested. Less fly-on-wall, than fly-in-bottle, the character’s interiorized predicament holds us captive because we sense the expanding desert of the external world menacing the tiny region of reality Ray has shelled out for himself. What Ray fears, in other words, is (the) outside. Outside the cell is a huge and hostile expanding, soulless sphere, that bears down suffocatingly upon him, a bewilderment of chaos and noise (suggested by the ubiquitous “soft cacophony” (Dyer 1999) that murmurs and chitters and patters through the ambient funnels and seams of the film), “which is frightening” (Rose 1993, 18).



Figure 22. *The Key. Ray* (Richard Billingham, 2016)

No key is provided to the character’s inner experience. Unlike *Ray & Liz* where cinematic “aha!” interpolations project a kind of retrospective understanding of his father’s subjective condition, *Ray* doesn’t proffer any explanatory narrative to rationalise his behaviour and thereby satisfy the current predilection for reductive trauma-plot causality (see *Figure 22*). Cruelly perhaps, we’re given no privileged access to Ray’s interior life. His psychological state will, in this thin slice of reality, remain ultimately elusive. Opaque. And yet in this evasion of documentary transparency in favour of the mysterious we acknowledge an enactment of early Wittgenstein’s *ineffable* (*Unsagbare*). Wittgenstein, at the end of the *Tractatus*, draws on the distinction between “saying” and “showing” and thereby invokes the theme of the mystical. Explicitly identified, for him, with a sense of the world as a limited whole, and the feeling of safety elicited by this awareness, he insists that this sensation, although not uncommon, is impossible (and futile) to describe. Yet, Wittgenstein concludes, the mystical is manifest in the mundane precisely where clear communication, explanation, or documentation collapses and there is only the final acknowledgement of silence.

Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility. (Pinter 2009)

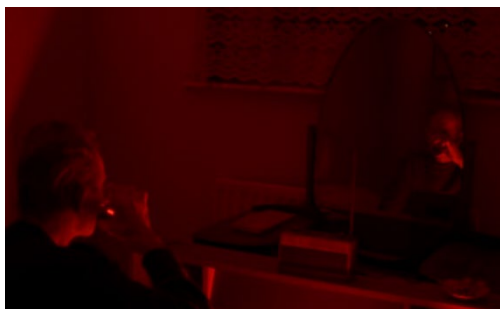


Figure 23. Red Room. Ray (Richard Billingham, 2016)

Time passes. And in Ray's cell, as the glow of the electric fire intensifies into a uterine, efflorescence, the lonely sensation is, I suggest, briefly and vanishingly, accomplished (see *Figures 23 and 24*). And a state impossible to describe or account for, a resigned man's ascetic denial of the world (similar to the withdrawal of Christian mystics as part of a "set" of ritual monastic practices) segues into ecstatic experience: the *Epektasis*, or psychosomatic straining towards divine release (Critchley 2024). In acknowledging – or respecting – the limitations of neutral documentary explanation, the Red Room scene, I believe, inscribes the inscrutable mystery of human solitude into the formal signifying structure of the film. Through the slow concatenation of extreme close ups, episodes of optical near-stillness and reflexive references to his earlier photos, in *Ray*, an unintentional devotional image is gradually revealed that, in acknowledging that his late father's nihilistic behaviour exceeds documentation, carries an inscription of presence which, in the dreadful purity of its *unending instant*,<sup>3</sup> approaches the mystical.

We witness a moment of transcendence actually occur in this Pentecostal scene, where the picture of a captive becomes a captive picture, and wherein, to use Simon Critchley's definition of the mystical, the mobius-strip of "woeful dereliction" exfoliates into a roseate ecstatic "transport" (2025, 255). Aided, of course, by the ambient radiophonic sound of Dusty Springfield's voice (to which Ray lip-syncs). Like Bresson's films, according to Zina Giannopoulos (2024), this deliquescent scene is characterised by an aesthetic de-creation associated with the director's "commitment to a deeply spiritual if not religious worldview". As we leave the character to dwell forever in the looped limits of his eternal stasis, the main theme is re-established and a lonely veil of perception is removed, with a palpable presence revealed, briefly, behind it. Transient, still and there.

We are left, at the end, with his profound longing for an intimacy he can never attain. (Cork 2003, 39)



Figure 24. *Red Room. Ray.* (Richard Billingham 2016)

Author's Note: All illustrations (*Triptych of Ray* [1991], *Ray's a Laugh* [1996] and *Ray* [2016]) used with permission of artist (copyright Richard Billingham). For which the author is profoundly grateful.

## NOTES

1. John Banville. 1993. *Ghosts*. London: Secker & Warburg.
2. While it remains important to acknowledge its complex relationship with “post-documentary” reality media, it is erroneous to identify Billingham’s video work as an effort to embrace the addiction to endlessly protracted footage of everyday life, or, more sinisterly, commercially-inspired Milgram-type social-experiment documentaries contrived to appear unscripted when in fact the strategic product of high-tech editing and “deposited manipulated narratives” (Engberg 2007).
3. This phrase is from John Banville *Ghosts* (Banville 1993).

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*Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou vent souffle où il veut* (Robert Bresson, 1956) France: Gaumont / Nouvelles Editions de Films.

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