



Last breath

A filmic artwork ▶▶

Marie Brett

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essay by

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SCREENING / DISCUSSION
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Sparks draft across a dense black background; dying embers slowly fade to focus on a mouth gasping for air. *Last Breath* by Marie Brett is a profoundly moving piece where breath becomes a symbol of ebbing life, and a journey into the unknown. Researched with Brett's characteristic attention to detail, this piece is underpinned by extensive research conducted within palliative and other healthcare contexts and is also informed by research into thanatology, ethics and folklore.

Brett responds to the challenge of mapping a last journey with a haze of images that flicker insistently; shadowy figures that emerge and process through inchoate landscapes in upheaval. Everything is in flux; everything swells and flows to the rhythm of breathing. Yet Brett doesn't shy away from the harsh realities of death; the most vivid and shocking sequence in this piece is scored by the aggressive, rasping tone of the ventilator, as the dying person heaves their final, harsh, painful breaths, enmeshed by the physical apparatus of the breathing tube. The use of juxtaposition; the gentle sequence of shadowy images and the grim machinery of the hospital ward acts not only as a *memento mori*, but as a reflection on how contemporary death itself has moved from the familiar territory of the home to the biomedical environment of the hospital.

Last Breath is a deep, reflective piece that captures the physical and emotional resonance of a life in transition. Influenced by poetic work on journeys through the underworld by Dante and William Blake, the film is suffused with visual metaphors for the final passage towards death. Some of these images are familiar from folklore (the opening of windows and covering of mirrors) or patient pathographies of near-death experiences (the out of body experience, the movement from darkness towards light), but these familiar tropes are transformed using a landscape of dissolving images and an exquisite soundscape of plaintive vocals performed by anthropological sound artist Michelle Collins. Together, image and music interweave to trace a poignant voyage from one world to another; the dying person is led by a keener, shadowed by the dead, their energy and essence flowing onwards. One of the most compelling images is that of the open mouth of the dying person. It's visceral and immediate, but also offers a visual link to the images of dark caves throughout the piece. Caves represent a Gothic space, a threshold, a crossing point; in *Last Breath* they become a potent symbol of a life in transition.

Brett's art practice is located in the expanding field of medical humanities. Her work is characterised by immersive, thoughtful collaborative projects that deal sensitively and respectfully with the difficult subject matter of mortality, loss, and memorialization. *Last Breath* is an exemplary dialogue between medicine and the arts. It illustrates how fine art can translate the medical discourse of illness, providing an accessible way to consider the ambiguous territory of illness and death that is usually mapped in mysterious medical and scientific discourse. This piece lingers long after viewing; its flickering, incandescent images represent the transition of life in a way that is both profoundly affecting and beautifully envisioned.