

# BLINK [1994]

by

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Emma Brody (Madeleine Stowe) was blinded as a child. During recovery from a corneal transplant, she suffers from distorted vision and selectively “retroactive vision,” where her mind doesn’t register what she has seen until considerably later. She witnesses a murder but has not yet “seen” the murderer. She approaches the unbelieving police, and reluctantly, detective John Hallstrom (Aidan Quinn) not only begins to believe her but falls in love with her. The killer stalks her and finally kidnaps her. Hallstrom attempts a rescue, but she kills the murderer herself.

*Blink* is frustrating. It parades a cornucopia of psychological and sociological riches yet never capitalizes on any of them. It could so easily have been a very good film; as it is, it is ordinary – or slightly less. And once again we see that a film which ignores depth psychology cannot make an effective connection with its audience.

Consider these possibilities: The central character is a feisty, independent, talented woman musician. Films featuring blind women pursued by murderers are so numerous that this motif may well qualify as a minor sub-genre of films intended to frighten the audience through identification with helpless (women) victims. They range from the chilling *Wait Until Dark* [1967], with a heart-pounding performance by Audrey Hepburn, to the recent *Jennifer 8* [1993]. *Blink*’s Emma Brody is no victim, she refuses to be victimized by her handicap and in this way the film updates the idea of handicap to include the late twentieth century concept of “mainstreaming,” that is, rather than being protected and sheltered, the handicapped should be integrated into society.

There are many ways of handicapping a person, with deafness (*Children of a Lesser God* [1986]), or disease (*My Left Foot* [1989]), so that they are at risk and appear sympathetic to the audience. But blindness is very different. Any film that uses blindness as a motif *must* be more than a straightforward story simply because of our cultural history regarding blindness. When Hollywood uses a minority – ethnic, religious, or handicapped – it is at least partially an appeal to that segment of the audience. We see this in the current crop of films that deal with African American or Hispanic issues. This, obviously, cannot be true of blindness. It is the one handicap the precludes film watching. Yet sighted audiences are attracted by films that feature the blind and not repelled as is sometimes the case with other handicaps. The number of films that use this handicap – as opposed to other possible handicaps – is striking; I have provided a partial list to accompany this article. I cannot believe that this many films could be supported by the simple idea that we want to identify with a helpless victim who overcomes immense

obstacles as an object lesson for ourselves. From this I can only conclude that our fascination with blindness has its roots in some universal psychological or metaphoric meaning.

Another reason to treat the film as a metaphor is its unbelievability. It is brimming with absurdities, but a single example will do. I cannot imagine a police detective getting drunk in a bar, taking off his clothes to impress the women, and dancing around in front of the band – without getting arrested for indecent exposure or getting fired for moral turpitude. So, the film is definitely a metaphor, but for what? Let's take a look at some of our cultural history surrounding blindness.

While blind men dominate mythology, both blind men and blind women appear in films. This alone should make the appearance of a blind woman in a film a notable experience. In mythology and literature, men are blinded for a reason: The King in *Lear* becomes physically blind because he is emotionally blinded to his various daughters' love (or lack thereof). Hera blinded Teiresias as punishment for saying that women experience ten times more satisfaction from sex than men, but Zeus gave him foresight in exchange. This tradition of "blindness for a reason" continues in most films. It works for both heroes and villains. In *Blind Fury* [1989], Rutger Hauer plays a blind Vietnam veteran turned master swordsman and avenger of evil who sees better than the sighted. In *The Name of the Rose* [1986], the villain is a blind librarian (an irony difficult to escape). In *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* [1989], deaf Gene Wilder is teamed with blind Richard Pryor as a pair of unjustly accused murderers trying to catch the real villains. Much to its credit, *Blink* adds a new twist to the blind victim stereotype.

Our heroine is not simply blind. The filmmakers have added a delicious twist to her handicap – she has visual distortions (which resemble the paintings of Francis Bacon) and delayed perception. Her eyes see something now, but her brain registers it later. This is, apparently, something like flashbacks, but with no cognizance of the original experience. What a wonderful metaphor for our personal failings of perception – how many times have we thought of the correct thing to do or say, but not until the next day? It is also a wonderful metaphor for living in a world so ugly that, to protect ourselves, we place barriers between our world and our perception of it and thereby lose not only its ugliness but also its beauty. Yet in *Blink*, this clever device is reduced to simply a means of delaying the identification of the villain.

It is inevitable that the detective and the witness he is protecting fall in love. And, like too many films today, the story comes to a screeching halt while they make monochromatically lit love. However, their relationship deserves exploration. They are both burned out, exhausted and seem to be numbly sleepwalking through the jungle/city. Emma's blindness and delayed perception become symbolic of life in the contemporary city, where psychic survival depends on the erection of barriers to the outside world and relying solely on an inner life which can, perhaps, be pierced by love. Yet how these two penetrate their mutual barriers to form a relationship, the nature of that relationship, and its possible futures, are never worked out.

Another example of an avenue not followed: Emma is blinded by her mother! At age eight, mother returns home to find the girl putting on her mother's make up. In her rage, mother smashes her daughter's face into a mirror, damaging her eyes. There are obvious references to the evil stepmother of *Snow White*, who is obsessed with her own beauty and has a magical mirror that helps her in her attempt to destroy her daughter, but in *Blink*, all this is never worked out. Furthermore, as her sight is returning, Emma looks into the mirror and sees the image of her mother. Again, a fascinating motif is left untreated.

Another fascinating aspect of *Blink* that is never pursued is that she is an organ transplant recipient. The other murdered women in the film are also organ recipients – all from the same donor. The murderer was in love with the donor and now rapes and murders the recipient/victims. He obviously believes that more than just a physical part of his love object has been transferred to the other women. This actually opens a new page in the book of questions and answers regarding the residence of the soul.

Yet there is much to enjoy in *Blink* aside from the adrenaline rush of a good detective film. Toward the end of the film, the hero makes his desperate rush to rescue the heroine from the murderous clutches of the villain. This is, of course, accompanied by the usual heart-pounding music and the appropriate editing, which jumps back and forth between the two scenes with ever increasing speed. In *Jennifer 8*, the hero doesn't get there in time and it is a sighted woman friend disguised as the blind victim who shoots the murderer. This is an interesting comment on the weakness of men and the power of women to take care of each other. In *Blink*, this is taken a step further – again the hero is a little late to complete his heroic rescue, but this time it is the heroine herself who shoots the attacker. Now, only a year after *Jennifer 8*, women can take care of themselves. This film is scary enough, but given all its possibilities, it should be more than that.

*Blink*. Directed by Michael Apted. Written by Dana Stevens. Distributed by New Line Cinema, 1994.

## BLINDNESS IN FILM - A SAMPLER

*Blind Alibi* [1939]. Tale of love letters, blackmail and feigned blindness with Ace the Wonder Dog.

*Blind Fury* [1989]. Rutger Hauer is captured by Vietnamese during the war and taught to use a sword. He returns to the US to fight crime.

*Cauldron of Blood* [1967]. Blind sculptor's (Boris Karloff) wife is trying to kill him. Practice efforts result in skeletons that wind up as sculptures.

*Dead Eyes of London* [1961]. German remake of *Dark Eyes of London*. Home for the blind is front for criminal activities.

*Eyewitness to Murder* [1993]. The blinding of a murder witness hinders an investigation conducted by two detectives.

*Frankenstein* [1931]. The Monster is sheltered and befriended by a naive blind man.

*How Awful About Allan* [1970]. Suspense story about a near-blind man who thinks someone wants to kill him.

*Human Monster* [1961]. Bela Lugosi as Dr. Orloff who works with indigent blind men in his spare time.

*Jennifer 8* [1992]. A blind witness (Uma Thurman) to a brutal murder is the key to catching a serial killer.

*Just for the Hell of It* [1968]. Roving teenage gangs terrorize everyone including infants and blind man.

*Last Temptation of Christ* [1988]. Jesus cures a blind man.

*M* [1931]. A child murderer (Peter Lorre) is identified by a blind man.

*Magnificent Obsession* [1935] A playboy (Robert Taylor) reforms after his drunken actions cause a man to die and a woman to lose her eyesight.

*Milky Way, The* [1970]. Luis Bunuel opus of religious pilgrimage. One of the pilgrim wanderers cures a blind man with spit and dust.

*Ministry of Fear* [1944]. Fake blind man is really a Nazi spy. Cake eating scene, where he is really looking for microfilm, is wonderful.

*Name of the Rose, The* [1986]. The murderous librarian of a 13th Century Italian abbey is blind.

*Proof* [1992]. Romantic triangle involving a blind photographer, his housekeeper, and a friendly dishwasher.

*Saboteur* [1942]. Hitchcock story of hero unjustly accused, visits a blind man, the only one who "knows" he is innocent.

*Scent of a Woman* [1993]. Suicidal blind Army colonel goes on a voyage of self-discovery with a young man.

*See No Evil, Hear No Evil* [1989]. Richard Pryor and Gene Hackman wasted on a comedy about a blind man and a deaf man unjustly accused of murder who look for the real criminals.

*See No Evil* [1971]. Blind girl discovers that her entire family has been killed and the murdered is now stalking her.

*Union Station* [1950]. Police manhunt, led by William Holden, for a kidnapper who is hold the blind daughter of a rich industrialist hostage.

*Wait Until Dark* [1967]. Blind Audrey Hepburn terrorized by psychotic Alan Arkin looking for heroine he thinks is stashed in her apartment.

*Woman on the Beach, The* [1947]. Moody love triangle involving a Coast Guardsman (Robert Ryan), a blind painter (Charles Bickford), and his wife (Joan Bennett)