

## **Last Breath: of myth and men.**

Sophie Nussle

**“There’s nothing to hide behind. That’s the moment you’re going. What sort of person are you?”**

This is the central question of the movie *Last Breath*. It’s asked during a philosophical interlude of the British documentary thriller, and filmmakers Alex Parkinson and Richard Da Costa explore it from various perspectives between the lines of this taut, intense film. How they answer it – or let the viewers answer it – leaves us out of breath in sympathy.

*Last Breath* tells the real story of saturation diver Chris Lemons, who became untethered from his lifeline cord, known as ‘the umbilical’, during a routine dive to carry out maintenance on a North Sea oil well. Neither the crew of the *Topaz*, his diving support ship, nor his teammates were able to come to his aid for over thirty minutes. His emergency air lasted less than ten minutes. The result is edge-of-the seat tension. The ship crew and the other divers race against time to reach him, not knowing if their efforts to rescue him will succeed, or if they’ll be recovering his body.

We do not find out until nearly the end of the film whether Chris survives or dies. This was one of the bravest choices that the filmmakers made. It works, because the story of Chris Lemons was not widely known outside the small world of saturation divers. Even keen and professional air divers knew nothing of the episode, which happened in September 2012, some 127 nautical miles off the East coast of Scotland. The boldness pays off. As we watch the movie, it gradually becomes less of a standard documentary and more like a thriller, even though it uses many classic documentary features – interviews, hand-held camera shots and ample use of archive footage. But Parkinson and Da Costa also borrow from the fiction suspense film genre to ratchet up the anxiety.

### ***Alien environment***

The opening sequence in the cold grey-green waters of the North Sea intentionally blinds and disorients us. There is nothing to see but a few bubbles. Then a loud gas pocket explodes. A voice comes over a radio: “Hang on in there, buddy”, and “we’re losing one of

my divers here.” In the tradition of *Alien*, the movie has plunged us straight into the heart of the crisis. Who is the diver? Why are they losing him? Who is speaking? What’s going on?

Critics have already compared *Last Breath* to the 1993 mountaineering survival documentary *Touching the Void*, based on Joe Simpson’s book of the same name. In a Questions & Answers session Parkinson and Da Costa gave after the first London screening of *Last Breath*, Alex Parkinson explains how they considered several points of view and many ways of telling the story of Chris. Though Parkinson pays explicit homage to *Touching the Void*, he adds that foreknowledge of Joe Simpson’s fate was inevitable given the popularity of his book. It was also necessary to the telling of the mountaineer’s story. Freed from such restraints in *Last Breath*, Da Costa and Parkinson were able to travel the frontier between suspense fiction and pure documentary, while never straying one iota from the facts.

They achieve this effect through a seamless merging of archive footage, reconstruction, dream-sequences, interviews, and the home videos that Chris and his fiancée Morag made for each other during his long absences at sea. Although a handful of actors worked in the film, most of its participants were Chris’ actual teammates and fiancée. Parkinson and Da Costa drew on the hand-held camera method perfected by Peter Greengrass, the 1990’s broadcast journalist turned director who himself straddled documentary and fiction thriller genres (after a career in documentaries, he directed three films in the *Bourne* franchise).

### **The old suspense tricks are the best**

How else did they turn the documentary into a thriller? They don’t mention Alfred Hitchcock in their Q & A, but his long shadow is visible throughout the movie. The disorientating camera and sound techniques, the use of light and blinding flashes, the taut scripting – the film is a terse 82 minutes – and the relentless squeeze of tension: all remind us of the master. Da Costa and Parkinson bewilder the viewer by filming sequences of Chris’ team reflected on the door of the pressurized tanks and the sides of bells. The hand-held effect, unusual in thrillers, acts as further disorientation, as does tight editing, which ensures that whatever else we see or hear, we are constantly pulled back into the central drama in the ocean. The filmmakers also draw from contemporary thrillers in their use of text and a digital clock. When tragedy strikes, we know what is at stake and why.

Overlaid on shots of tunnels, tubes, pressure tanks and levers on board the *Topaz*, concise text informs us that saturation divers work in two small teams at a time, isolated together

for 28 days or more. During that time, they live in conditions as extreme as astronauts in zero gravity. Once they lock themselves in their pressurized cabins, they are “in sat”. To simulate the pressure on the ocean floor, the ship’s pressure tank system pumps a mix of oxygen and helium known as heliox. The squeaky cartoon voices that helium gives to the divers “in sat” provides comic relief, while heightening the weird factor. The teams live in metal chambers called bells, which are equipped like tiny motorhomes. When divers are out in the ocean, the bells act like placenta to a foetus, providing the men with oxygen, warmth, and communications through a long thick cord of tubes known as ‘the umbilical’. Every 24 hours, two sat divers venture out onto the ocean floor and around the oil well structures for 6-hour dives. The third stays as support in the bell. A dive supervisor directs the teams remotely from a station on the ship, away from the isolated divers.

During a dive, the DSV (diving support vessel) locks into position over the job site, a computer-controlled process known as Dynamic Positioning or DP. DP is an integral part of saturation diving as it ensures that the ship does not drag the divers from their work by the umbilical.

These arcane facts could easily have meandered into saturation diving lessons, but the filmmakers keep them to a bare minimum and turn them into central parts of the action. Just as in fiction thrillers, red herrings abound. High waves and strong wind suggest a dangerous storm, but two of the interviewed crew members inform us that it was nothing special. Craig Frederick, the dive supervisor on that night, deadpans that they were “at the limit of diving, but it was not undiveable.” Michal Cichorski, the Dynamic Positioning officer, agrees. The weather was rough, but nothing special for the North Sea. The job was perfectly safe, if you can call saturation diving safe at all. An obvious irony that makes the young officer smirk: “come on, it’s not a safe job!” The filmmakers hinge much of the tension around Michal’s role, withholding its importance until catastrophe strikes.

## **Myth made real**

Chris Lemons is the central character of the movie. Through the recollections of his fiancée and teammates we get to know this smiling “amiable man” in his early thirties. He has not been sat diving for long. Of his two teammates, Duncan, the oldest, acts as his fond mentor, a father-figure, and a friend of the family. Dave, the other diver, has never worked with Chris before. We also meet Morag Martin, Chris’ fiancée, a primary (grade) school principal in the Highlands of Scotland. Her in-camera interviews and voice weave throughout the film, the sole female counterpoint to a mythical drama the men are about to experience. Morag is Penelope, the heroine of the Odyssey, keeping the kingdom together while her man, like

Odysseus, risks his life at sea and in the Underworld. She is beautiful, vibrant, and understanding - until the interview where she recalls the event. The camera, voyeuristic, shows her breaking down and turning away.

The film makes no bones about its traditional perspective. North Sea sat divers are all men and live dangerous, extraordinary lives. Their wives and partners stay behind, a haven that allows the men to go off and do their daring job. In the Q & A, we learn that Da Costa induced Morag's tears by showing her the archive footage of Chris lying on his side, twitching, unconscious. Manipulative? No doubt. But effective too. Who wouldn't cry when recalling such a scene?

Certainly, Duncan would. His kindly bearing reminds us of another Homeric figure, king Nestor, who mentored Odysseus at the outset of the Trojan War. During their voyage home, Nestor lost sight of the younger man's fleet as storms, ill-luck and a vengeful god flung it off course. Duncan retells his part in the story with an Englishman's reticence. When he reaches the moment that Chris's umbilical severs, he weeps, as only heroes are allowed to weep in myth. His feelings of having abandoned Chris and being powerless to save him are palpable. Again, the scene manipulates both interviewee and viewer. Again, it works. For all that it was larger-than-life, this was a drama that touched real lives. Its mythical dimension exists beyond the minds of the filmmakers.

## **The Vulcan**

No myth develops solely through emotion. Switching from the Odyssey to the spaceship Enterprise, we meet Dave, whom his teammates call Vulcan for his detached nature. Early on, Dave explains that he is two people. David, a husband and father of three, in his 'normal' life. And Dave, the sat diver. Dave is an undersea Mr Spock, the Vulcan with whom he shares several physical and personality traits. That night, Chris and Dave are diving together. Tethered by his own umbilical, Dave is at first unable to get closer than two meters from his trapped dive mate. When he returns thirty-five minutes later, he says, "I wasn't thinking 'this is Chris Lemons. This is the guy who's building a house. This is the guy who's engaged to be married.' He's a thing that needs to be taken from one place to another." Dave does his job: no more, no less.

Dave's impassivity shocked many viewers. Another bold choice by the filmmakers, the paradox of his deadpan voice retelling gripping events ratchets up the intensity. This is a

tried and tested method of storytelling. Used alongside all the other narrative and cinematic tricks Da Costa and Parkinson rely on, it's amazingly successful.

### **Archive footage: the heart of *Last Breath***

Particularly powerful is all the archive footage they employ and around which they design the movie. Sat divers wear a helmet, called a hat, on which they attach a mini-camera, which the diving supervisor on board ship uses to direct the divers' progress and work. Footage from Dave and Chris's hat cameras wends throughout the film. When Chris is severed from the bell, cut off from oxygen, warmth, light, and communications, diving supervisor Craig sends out an ROV equipped with a camera and a spotlight. It's that footage that provides the most harrowing images in *Last Breath*: Chris Lemons on top of the structure, twitching on the brink of death. Twitching then going still.

Is he dead? Unconscious? If he's alive, was his brain damaged? We don't know at this point. The reveal comes later. I'll not spoil it for you.

### **How did the accident happen?**

When the crisis starts, it comes out of left field. Alarm lights turn on under the nose of Michal, the Dynamic Positioning officer. Three computers control the DP: a main working computer, a ghost computer that shadows every step of the DP process and the master computer. Not long after Dave and Chris begin their maintenance work on the oil well structure, all three computers fail. It's a classic disaster movie sequence as monitoring lights go from green to amber to red. Michal had never seen anything like it, nor has the old sat diving hand Craig, nor the captain of the *Topaz*. Without DP, the ship begins to drift and at winds of 35 knots, it takes thirty minutes and iron strength for the skipper and his lieutenants to steer the ship manually back to the right position above the structure. Using what the Norwegian crew call "the Swedish solution", Michal and his team manage to get the computers working again and lock down dynamic positioning. Only at that point, some twenty-five minutes after Chris's emergency heliox has run out, is Dave able to return to his dive mate.

### **Reconstruction and dreams**

The scenes onboard ship, on the bridge and in Craig's supervisor's station, are as tense as those underwater. These are all reconstruction footage, which Da Costa and Parkinson intersperse with interviews of Michal and Craig. After Dave returns with Chris, the filmmakers treat us to another bold choice: a series of broken dream sequences to

symbolise Chris' and Morag's hopes and dreams – all that they were losing as Chris lay dying.

Alex Parkinson and Richard Da Costa first showed *Last Breath* at the Glasgow Film Festival at the beginning of March 2019. It has since been released in movie theaters and distributed worldwide. Is it a faultless film? It's certainly a daring one. Most of the choices they make succeed, though at times they maneuver emotion. Some reviewers criticized the movie for lacking psychological depth. It's a valid point but the sacrifice is worthwhile. It gives us a tight, spare, well-structured thriller instead, which doesn't hesitate to touch upon the mythical dimension of the subject-matter.

For all the myth and tricks the filmmakers utilize, they leave the final word on the episode to Craig Frederick, the laid-back Canadian diving supervisor:

"Everyone did their job. You don't pat yourself on the back for that."

*Last Breath (2018) is showing in selected movie theaters, on BBC replay and on Netflix.*