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# (UN)REAL: ZOOMING IN ON A DEHUMANIZING, HUMANIZING MOMENT

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I was being interviewed for a documentary film when something went terribly, wonderfully awry.

Hand-painted 35mm film fragment by Norman McLaren

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It all happened in my response to this question:

*What would keep men who abuse workout supplements from pursuing psychotherapy?*

## Take One: This is About *Them*

In accordance with my research findings, I said that many such men adopt a prototypical, culturally-laden stance about what a “man” should be, including a need to distance themselves from the idea that their difficulties may necessitate the help of another person. They may perceive the very nature of survival as being inextricably linked with the notion that they must hide themselves and others from the reality that they are in need of something they cannot provide to themselves. They may feel overwhelming shame in the face of an admission of their most basic dependency needs.

In short, I suggested that these men might have difficulty opening themselves to the vulnerability necessary to take in the care of another person.

This response kept coming up in my mind because there seemed to be something undigested in it. In chewing it over, I’ve begun to understand that my unsettledness has more to do with the way I spoke than the actual content of my response. My recollection is speaking as though I had a film over my eyes; a barrier of sorts that separated *me* from *them*. My point was perfectly valid and yet, by forcefully emphasizing the “they,” what I said would likely be sensed as an attack rather than as understanding.

## Take Two: This is About *Me*

I was anxious being on camera. I felt like I had to perform for the projected critical audience who would be watching me. In response, I unconsciously and subtly turned “them” into an entity to be critiqued and dissected while I clutched to the comfort of fantasized omniscience by way of scientific data. The lens of the camera became my microscope through which I sought to filter out the mess of what it is to be human in actuality (as opposed to in a vacuum). I had flushed out any private acknowledgement of my human vulnerability in the moment—my fears, the part of me that wanted the interviewer to tell me I was “okay” and didn’t need to prove anything to anyone, and the shame I have about said fears and longing.

What was left of me was more of an imitation of a human (in this case, a knowledgeable psychologist) than the real deal. Objectified enough to withstand the spotlight, I was ready for my close up.

This brings to mind a fascinating paradox of films. On the one hand, filmmaking is an inherently objectifying medium—literally placing a screen between the subject/viewer and the object/actor (the latter, often referred to as a “movie star” to denote their sparkling, far-from-human qualities that render them most suitable to gaze upon). On the other hand, as with any great art form, films facilitate an experience of almost supernatural connection with one’s own subjective experience by allowing for an identification with the object that, in turn, serves to humanize oneself beyond what we often experience in the mundane goings on of day-to-day life.

### Take Three: This is About *Us*

I was struck by the inverse equivalence of this paradoxical phenomenon when I found myself on the other side of the screen. In my role as the “actor,” I gained a deeper subjective understanding of the momentarily objectified audience to which I spoke. I hid behind my Ph.D. and intellect in a manner that is synonymous with the perceived need to hide fragile humanity underneath intricately sculpted, superhuman pectoral muscles. Without my protective barrier, I would have had to sit “naked,” staring into the reflective lens of a camera and thereby thrust into the recognition that I was scared and, on some level, in over my head.

In the moment in question, this was simply too much for me to bear so I became immersed in a subtly isolated and perfectionistic mindset as a means of self-protection. I needed this in order to get through the interview at that particular juncture. And, at the same time, I came to feel dehumanized and dehumanizing in the experience.

All of this was occurring in my unconscious in this very brief and, to many, inconsequential segment of the interview. But it is the most important part of the interview to me because, upon reflection, it has helped shed light on my own difficulty with feeling adequate in simply being; a critical, felt insight as to how the men I spoke about might get so immersed in behaviors that ultimately hurt them.

By seeing *me* in *them*, and vice versa, I was able to arrive at a more deeply experienced position of compassion than would have otherwise been possible. Out of the wreckage of slain subjectivity, the scientist/actor and

subject/audience experience the phenomenon of being held within one another.

## The Wrap

My realness is inextricably linked with an acknowledgement of my own human limitations, the disavowal of which leads to so many problematic and potentially destructive thought processes/behaviors in all of us. Thus, my experience of playing a fancy expert in a movie has served as an important reminder—the likes of which I get on a near daily basis—that my expertise as a psychological healer resides not in an any illusion of omniscient “knowing,” but in my ability to be honest enough with myself about my own internal experience so that the people who I work with can be freed to do the same.

When we are overwhelmed by fear, it is a natural human response to close ourselves off and resort to pulling a screen down between “*I*” and “*them/him/her/it*” in a bid for self-protection. But if we can then take the risk of transcending the screen—reaching into the separation and chewing on what we're both trying to spit out—a deepened experience of subjectivity and aliveness becomes possible for us all. What's more, we can come to experience the liberating truth that, even in our need to hide, we are never completely alone.