American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
ences, which encouraged them to engage directly with the films. Next, Peterson discusses the travelogue as an industrial phenomenon with broad commercial appeal that emerged out of a wider category of nonfiction (i.e. educational) film genres. In Chapter 3, Peterson more fully considers the central role of the travelogue in the film industry’s campaign to re-brand motion pictures not as a ‘cheap amusement’ but as a tool of social/cultural ‘uplift.’

Turning to the aesthetic dimensions of scenics, Peterson wrestles with how the travelogue visualized dominant colonial/imperial ideologies through the new technology of film. Nevertheless, she demonstrates that global audiences and film subjects interacted with these representations in ways unintended by the producers (i.e. read ‘against the grain’). Building on this visual analysis, Chapter 5 deals with scenic films within the tradition and meaning of the picturesque in landscape art and literature, which by the early twentieth century denoted a commercialized or ‘middlebrow’ aesthetic. The following chapter is the most speculative in the book, in which Peterson theorizes the disruptive potential of travel films for spectators. According to Peterson, travelogues likely appealed to filmgoers because they encouraged a sense of wonder that contained oppositional potential. The author acknowledges that the lack of empirical evidence on how audiences actually experienced these films means that she had to rely on conjecture. Nevertheless, employing Deleuze and Guattari’s characteristics of a ‘minor literature,’ Peterson presents a convincing argument that travelogues opened up different worlds for spectators. Finally, Peterson explores travel films depicting the American West that promoted the region as simultaneously wild and modern. This chapter, a revised version of an essay that appeared in Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel, ed. Jeffrey Ruoff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), is more valuable as a stand-alone article, and seems somewhat tangential to her overall theoretical framework. Moreover, a consideration of film and depictions of wilderness, Native peoples, and modern tourist infrastructures north of the 49th parallel would complicate the undercurrent of American exceptionalism.

Regardless, Education in the School of Dreams is a welcome contribution to the growing scholarship on ‘useful cinema’ or ‘educational cinema,’ as opposed to the study of theatrical feature films. In this interdisciplinary approach to the study of travelogues, Peterson combines rich analytical insights on audience subjectivity with archival research. The writing style is engaging, sophisticated, and free of jargon, which makes the book accessible to scholars in film studies and history, as well as to a wider audience.

Memorial University

AMERICAN ETHNOGRAPHIC CINEMA
AND PERSONAL DOCUMENTARY:
THE CAMBRIDGE TURN

By Scott Macdonald.
REVIEWED BY MATTHEW RYAN SMITH

Scott MacDonald’s new book American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn examines ethnographic and personal documentary filmmakers who have been closely engaged with Cambridge, Massachusetts during their career. In particular, many of the filmmakers addressed in the book have, at some time, been connected to the area’s educational institutions in some capacity. To this end, MacDonald argues that the MIT Film Section, Peabody Museum’s Film Study Centre, and the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University have been instrumental in developing ethnographic film in the United States, which he defines as “the use of film to document information about preindustrial cultures, particularly cultures on the verge of collapse or transformation,” though he acknowledges its broadening definition in recent years (3). On the other hand, MacDonald locates the genre of personal documentary as one where the filmmaker explicitly interacts with their family or personal life in some way. The Cambridge Turn is intended to invite readers to explore ethnographic and personal documentary filmmaking from Cambridge-area filmmakers rather than offer a sustained historical analysis or theoretical examination.

MacDonald does however preface his book by situating Cambridge-area ethnographic and personal documentary within the critical framework of Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey’s notions of Pragmatism, the belief that truth and knowledge are generated from careful observation of lived experience. Although doing so helps to explicate how higher meaning can be produced from documentary discourses, academic advances in affect and trauma theory in recent years have also forged meaningful relationships with many of the structural and systemic issues explored by filmmakers mentioned in the book—namely, issues concerning suffering, cultural genocide, and loss—and may represent a more useful analytical schema. Furthermore, the book does little to explain the social, economic, cultural, and political motivations behind why Cambridge and the Boston area produced some of the most recognizable (and radical) ethnographic and personal documentary films; thus, it remains difficult to locate and define the larger context and meaning behind the “Turn.”
The book is organized into nine chapters that provide a broad overview of some of the leading Cambridge-area ethnographic and personal documentary filmmakers. The first three chapters—“Lorna and John Marshall,” “Robert Gardner,” and “Timothy Asch”—draw focus to ethnographic documentary. MacDonald’s chapter on Lorna and John Marshall’s ethnographic approach is particularly compelling. Here McDonald briefly outlines the historical background of the Marshall family’s sponsored expeditions and how they came to film the !Kung / Ju/’hoansi people of the Kalahari from 1950 to 1961. The sections within this chapter, as with the other chapters, offer formal analyses of select films, usually those that are considered seminal, including John Marshall’s *The Hunters* (1957). This is one of the strongest aspects of MacDonald’s book—indeed, not only does the author employ a rigorous and often fascinating observation of the films he discusses in terms of its larger cultural context and epistemology, but he also uses his own experiences of films as a meaningful dialogue for criticism. For the reader, this approach may be particularly useful for the reason that many of the films discussed in the book are unavailable to screen because of distribution issues. In the chapters that focus predominantly on ethnographic documentary, the reader will also become aware that MacDonald deconstructs the categories of ethnographic and personal documentary filmmaking to argue that certain films regularly crossover between their selected genres. In particular, he finds that in making anthropological or ethnographic films, the filmmaker becomes involved to a degree that the film itself reflects the group as much as it does the filmmaker itself—in this way ethnographic and personal documentary represent the “inverse of each other” (124). For instance, MacDonald sees Miriam Weinstein’s films such as *The Family Album* (1986) or Amie Siegel’s *DDR/DDR* (2008) as those which achieve the crossover between ethnographic and personal, which raises an important question: does ethnographic film categorically fail when it becomes “personal,” and vice versa?

Later chapters of the book, including those on “Ed Pincus and the Emergence of Personal Documentary,” “Alfred Guzzetti and Personal Cinema,” “Ross McElwee,” “Robb Moss,” and “Panorama: Other Approaches to Personal Documentary,” diligently engage the history of personal documentary filmmaking from Cambridge area-filmmakers. The chapter on Brooklyn, New York-born filmmaker Ed Pincus is one of the book’s most developed and insightful. Here MacDonald makes clear that the genre of personal documentary is indebted to family dynamics, so much so that the filmmaker’s interactions with family are its base source of meaning. In this regard, Pincus emerged as one of the greatest personal documentarians to emerge from Cambridge, most notably for his ground-breaking *Diaries* (1971-76) (1980). MacDonald delves into the familial nuances and intimate details of Pincus’s life in order to reanimate and contextualize the film and its relationship to film history. Elsewhere, in chapters that examine McElwee or Moss’s unique body of work, the autobiographical frameworks and visual devices in their films are formally analyzed, quite often with fascinating results. However, considering the growing body of academic literature on biography, autobiography, and memoir, it might have been beneficial for MacDonald to look to literary theory or art history to flesh out deeper meanings between autobiographical or personal documentary films.

To this end, MacDonald tends to conflate the terms “autobiographical filmmaking,” “personal documentary,” “personal filmmaking,” “observational documentary,” “cinema vérité,” and “personal cinema,” which serves to misrepresent the films and their genres. Finally, readers may note an interesting connection in the personal documentary films MacDonald describes and photography, in particular, the tendency for personal filmmakers to employ photography as a visual device; however this overlap is not discussed in length. It would seem that photography’s long and complex history with family photography, particularly the family snapshot, could have been a powerful source of meaning in MacDonald’s discussion of Alfred Guzzetti’s engagement with his father’s photographic practice in *Time Exposure* (2012) or Ross McElwee’s self-reflexive exploration of his relationship with his son in *Photographic Memory* (2011).

Chapter nine, “Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Sensory Ethnography” is the final chapter in the book. Here MacDonald examines the films of Harvard University’s Sensory Ethnology Lab (SEL), a programme dedicated to media-based relationships between ethnography and aesthetics that explore human and social experience. MacDonald sees the films emerging from the SEL, including Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor’s *Sweetgrass* (2009) and Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s *Leviathan* (2012), as emblematic of work that “can offer its audiences a sensory experience that reflects and reflects on the actual experience of others (including the filmmaker’s themselves) as they occurred in a specific place during a specific time.” While this attempt at identification is problematic, specifically because it corroborates that a different individual’s experience of affect is knowable, it does however indicate one of MacDonald’s central concerns in the chapter—SEL’s dedication to experimental sound technologies that have re-conceptualized ethnographic documentary filmmaking. For MacDonald this is an important concern because it explains the difference between traditional ethnographic documentary and those more recent films that push the medium through innovative aesthetic devices. For MacDonald, the films of the SEL draw a trajectory from John Marshall, Robert Gardner, and Timothy Asch to mark the future of ethnographic filmmaking in the United States and the Cambridge area in particular.

In the past decade, several books have been published on ethnographic documentary and autobiographical documentary, including *Ethnographic Film* (2006) by Karl G. Heider and *The Autobiographical Documentary in American* (2002) by Jim Lane, as well as numerous academic articles and exhibition
catalogues on the subject. That being said, MacDonald’s *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn* represents part of the growing and evolving literature on the history of ethnography and personal documentary in the United States, but is particularly important as an introductory text for scholars, critics, and filmmakers who hold a special interest in the work of Cambridge-area filmmakers engaged in these genres.

**THE FILMS OF MARTIN SCORSESE, 1979-99: AUTHORSHIP AND CONTEXT II**

*By Leighton Grist*


REVIEWED BY MICHAEL MENEGHETTI

Leighton Grist characterizes his latest work as a “follow-up,” a sequel of sorts, to his own *The Films of Martin Scorsese, 1963-77: Authorship and Context* (2000). In his first study, Grist deftly examined each of Scorsese’s films from the earliest, embryonic expressions of his student filmmaking at NYU in 1963 to the New Hollywood bluster and apparent “failure” of *New York, New York* in 1977. *Authorship and Context II* covers all of the director’s feature films released between 1978 and 1999, and with only a few exceptions engages with these works chronologically, one film per chapter. The result is a continuation of the earlier study’s approach, a series of thorough, “theoretically attuned textual analyses” grounded in a combination of familiar “formalist, psychoanalytic and ideological approaches.” Like its predecessor, moreover, *Authorship and Context II* self-consciously supplements its auteurism with rigorous theoretical and historical contextualization. It articulates its examination of Scorsese’s films not only in terms of a critical concept, “authorship,” but also in relation to a broad range of “informing contexts”—industrial, institutional, generic, historical and/or cultural—that reflect upon, and differently inflect, both Scorsese’s authorship and, implicitly, the potentiality of film authorship in general.” Balancing his recognition of the director’s distinction with a consideration of the works’ contextual determinations, Grist continually combines his admirably detailed analyses of film style and themes with an understanding of Scorsese’s shifting institutional position during the period in question.

Like a movie sequel, *Authorship and Context II* begins with a brief introductory reiteration of its predecessor’s key revelations. Grist once again explicitly aligns his auteurism with the insights of post-structuralism: authorship itself is repeatedly described as a “discourse,” or a “historically determined semiotic subset.” This alignment in turn allows Grist to address the films in terms of traditional auteurist criteria (stylistic and thematic consistency), while at the same time characterizing each text as the product of particular historical, material, and ideological circumstances. Having outlined its central theoretical commitments, the book’s introductory chapter concludes with a short analysis of what Grist considers an “exemplification” of the director’s auteur discourse: “Life Lessons,” Scorsese’s contribution to the omnibus film *New York Stories*. If “Life Lessons” provides a convenient distillation of—and introduction to—Scorsese’s auteur discourse in the form of a short film, the director’s feature films from the 1980s and 1990s allow Grist to further elaborate upon said discourse’s key attributes: the “provision of correlated objective and subjective perspectives” throughout Scorsese’s work; the psychoanalytically inflected concern with cultural determination, especially as it relates to the “tacit Oedipal structuration” of so many of these narratives; the pronounced engagement with “matters of politics and class,” particularly in Scorsese’s later work; and the increasing stability of the director’s institutional position by the end of the 1990s.

Grist’s first study ended with an extended consideration of Scorsese’s *New York, New York* as “(failed) blockbuster cinema.” The film’s commercial failure, Grist argued, was in large part the result of Hollywood’s new emphasis upon blockbuster filmmaking and the concomitant marginalization of New Hollywood Cinema at the end of the 1970s, while its cautious, and frequently negative, critical reception was perhaps prophetic: *auteur* filmmaking would be an increasingly embattled practice in Hollywood by the turn of the decade. Caught between competing institutional agendas, *New York, New York*’s self-conscious revision of genre appeared inaccessible and unprofitable; and as a consequence, directors like Scorsese would increasingly face the threat of “institutional obsolescence” by the mid-1980s.

Positing 1977 as a key moment of transition has been very common in accounts of New Hollywood Cinema, but as Grist correctly recognizes in *Authorship and Context II*, Scorsese’s immediate post-*New York* filmmaking nonetheless continued to belong to New Hollywood: “in its reflexivity, elliptical narrative construction and privileging of layered characterization over plot, *Raging Bull* belongs to New Hollywood cinema as much formally as ideologically.” Grist’s discussion of *The Last Waltz*, *Raging Bull*, and *The King of Comedy*—his look at the films’ emphasis upon modernist nostalgia, formal difficulty, and ideological combativeness—in many ways appears continuous with his earlier study of Scorsese and New Hollywood’s “interlocking institutional, cultural, ideological, and political” context. But as he fittingly notes during his lengthy consideration of *Raging Bull*, Scorsese’s work would soon come to seem out of place in 1980s America as both “authorship and context” began to change dramatically.