

Doug Cummings

## Book Review: Scott MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn*

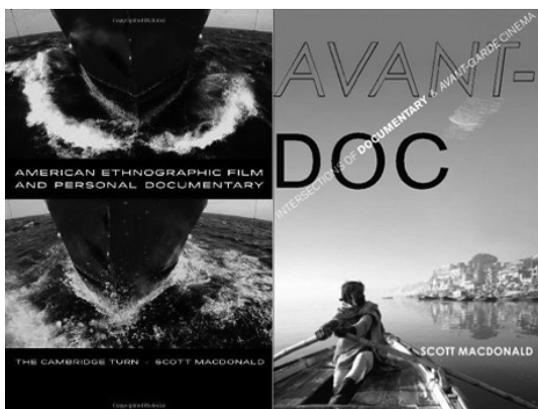
University of California Press, 2013.

\$85.00 (hardcover), \$39.95 (paperback or e-book) ISBN: 978-0520275621

## Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary & Avant-Garde Cinema*

Oxford University Press, 2015.

\$105.00 (hardcover), \$36.95 (paperback),  
\$24.99 (e-book) ISBN: 978-0199388714



One of the foremost authorities on American avant-garde film, Scott MacDonald has recently turned his attention to the cross-pollination of experimental film and documentary, a subject of growing interest that merges two modes of cinema often characterized by opposing aspirations. Yet the subjective and abstract goals of the avant-garde have sometimes combined with the objectivity and social analysis of non-fiction to produce fascinating works, and MacDonald's latest two books examine key filmmakers and titles.

In *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary*, MacDonald focuses on the Boston area, which has produced groundbreaking documentaries for more than half a century since the influential works of Robert Drew, D.A. Pennebaker and the Maysles in the 1960s. Ethnographic filmmaker Robert Gardner was the first director of what later became Harvard's Film Study Center, from 1957 to 1997, and documentarians Ed Pincus and Richard Leacock established MIT's film program

in 1967. Under their influence, as well as that of public media stalwart WGBH, other non-profit media organizations, and independent theaters, the region became fertile ground for filmmakers who blurred the lines between ethnographic and personal documentary.<sup>1</sup> MacDonald argues that a cinema arose around Cambridge that is more "interactive" than the traditional "intellectual" (objectifying, narrational) ethnographic films because it emphasizes the shared experiences of subject, filmmaker, and audience. He also suggests two formative influences: the observational *cinéma-vérité* movement and the philosophy of Pragmatism (developed by Cambridge philosophers Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey), which contends that the "firsthand experience of real events produces knowledge and the ground for reasoning itself."<sup>2</sup>

Yet MacDonald's book is less a theoretical project than a highly readable critical account of specific films and filmmakers, and the ways in

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which their careers have overlapped. Of particular value are his extended formal and aesthetic analyses of films which previously have been considered in more scientific terms. MacDonald expresses well-considered artistic valuations, atmospheric descriptions, and references to other films. Although he highlights pioneering ethnographic filmmakers such as Lorna and John Marshall, Gardner, and Timothy Asch, and the personal documentaries of Pincus, Alfred Guzzetti, and Ross McElwee, he also offers welcomed engagements with the work of lesser known filmmakers such as John Gianvito, Jeff Daniel Silva, and Amie Siegel.

The author's more recent *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary & Avant-Garde Cinema* revisits many of these same filmmakers. Largely, this book is a compilation of MacDonald's extended interviews, in which documentarians talk about their artistic influences, themes and intentions, and give firsthand accounts of their shoots in locations around the world. As in his previous book, MacDonald sketches a historical approach in the introduction. While he acknowledges that documentary and avant-garde have co-existed in cinema from the start (from Eadweard Muybridge's and Étienne-Jules Marey's protocinematic visual studies of animal motion to city symphonies to visual experimentations by Joris Ivens and many others), he champions the development of lightweight cameras and portable audio equipment in the 1950s as an opportunity for both *cinéma-vérité* innovation and the expansion of avant-garde movements.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing from his expertise in the latter field, MacDonald briefly sketches a history of experimental films that document life, such as Stan Brakhage's account of the birth of his first child, *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959); Peter Kubelka's critique of African big game hunting, *Unsere Afrikareise (Our Trip to Africa)*, 1965; Bruce Conner's repurposed footage of an atomic explosion in the Bikini atoll in *Crossroads* (1976); and James Benning's and Peter Hutton's landscape films. While many of these films are canonical avant-garde works, they are rarely grouped together for their documentary sensibilities, and in doing so, MacDonald provides an argument in support of avant-garde cinema's social importance.

MacDonald's first interview in *Avant-Doc*, however, is not with a filmmaker but rather with

noted scholar Annette Michelson, who helps set the stage for the ensuing chapters by describing her life alongside the experimental film community and its growth in the second half of the twentieth century. Her recollections provide a personal and fascinating portrait of the era and the word-of-mouth manner in which avant-garde films were often promoted and discussed. Other interviews explore the inspirations and abiding concerns of filmmakers whose works MacDonald considered in his previous book. Robert Gardner, for example, talks about his late-night "Screening Room" TV series, which from 1971 to 1982 broadcasted major experimental works. Gardner, whose *Forest of Bliss* (1986) continues to set a standard for contemplative, non-narrated documentaries, also recalls how Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934) and *Night Mail* (1936) inspired his love of lyrical non-fiction films.<sup>4</sup>

Among MacDonald's recurring subjects in both books is the work of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab, which has recently energized the field through a string of successful features on the festival circuit and commercial runs courtesy of their U.S. distributor, Cinema Guild. The Lab combines research with "analog and digital media to explore the aesthetics and ontology of the natural and unnatural world"<sup>5</sup> rather than traditional written reports. Its director, Lucien Castaing-Taylor, has made an assortment of shorts, installations, and two features. *Sweetgrass* (co-directed by Ilisa Barbash, 2009) documents a final sheep drive up Montana's Absaroka-Beartooth mountains sans commentary or exposition; *Leviathan* (co-directed by Véréna Paravel, 2012), utilized a dozen GoPro cameras mounted on fishing vessels to capture voyages through deep Atlantic waters. MacDonald chats at length with Castaing-Taylor, Barbash, and Paravel in a conversation that will appeal to theorists and practitioners alike as it addresses the phenomenology of audiovisual representation as well as the technical challenges of recording of animal sounds or making video-to-film transfers.<sup>6</sup>

MacDonald's two books work best in conjunction with one another, the critical path he marks off in his first book combined with the detail and personal accounts in his following book. While neither publication emphasizes documentary theory (one would be better advised to consult Catherine Russell's 1999 *Experimental*

*Ethnography: The Work of Film in an Age of Video* or Arnd Schneider's and Caterina Pasqualino's 2014 *Experimental Film and Anthropology*), the questions they raise about the line between avant-garde and documentary, as well as ethnographic and personal filmmaking, are substantial.<sup>7</sup> While necessarily limited in scope, the strength of the books lie in MacDonald's critical expertise and

interviewing skills. They would be good resources for introductory courses or undergraduate surveys of the field. Working in concert, they not only trace an illuminating history of technical and aesthetic developments in documentary filmmaking, but also make an important move toward critically exploring a canon of hybrid cinema that is increasingly gaining scholarly attention.

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**Doug Cummings** is an M.A. student in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. He has worked as a film critic for more than 15 years and currently freelances with *L.A. Weekly*.

#### Notes

1 Scott MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 7.

2 MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film*, 7-9.

3 MacDonald, *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary & Avant-Garde Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4-6.

4 MacDonald, *Avant-Doc*, 54.

5 "Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab Homepage," accessed January 19, 2016, <http://www.sel.fas.harvard.edu>.

6 MacDonald, *Avant-Doc*, 114.

7 Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in an Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Arnd Schneider and Caterina Pasqualino, *Experimental Film and Anthropology* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).