

BOOKS

Documentary Across Disciplines

Documentary Across Disciplines is, in part, a product of the Berlin Documentary Forum, a biennial event held at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt between 2010 and 2014. Building on the forum's interdisciplinary exploration of documentary, the book brings together a series of recent essays and dialogues in order to, as the editors state, 'provide a capacious account of the irrepressible heterogeneity of this vital field of practice', as well as a 're-evaluation of historical works in light of the contemporary moment'. If, as Hito Steyerl (Interview AM375) remarks, the 'only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times, is that we always already doubt if it is true', Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg remind us that documentary 'has never ceased to be marked by multiple uncertainties'. Indeed, John Grierson, credited with coining the term in 1926, famously defined documentary as the 'creative treatment of actuality', consequently signalling an ambivalent tension between non-fiction and its shaping. This tension is embodied in Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1941, a key example of the desire for documentary to engage with social and political issues while simultaneously seeking to question, in an experimental and self-conscious manner, the adequacy of its photographic and textual modes of representation.

Digital technologies have had a marked effect on documentary, figuring, in Balsom and Peleg's phrase, as both 'threat and promise'. While the increased ease of manipulation has sharpened our anxiety about the authenticity of images, technological innovations have opened up new possibilities for recording actuality. Exemplary here is Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's film *Leviathan*, 2012, which utilises GoPro cameras strapped onto bodies or plunged into the ocean in order to capture the experiences (human and non-human) of the fishing industry. The book features an enlightening discussion between

the two filmmakers and Ben Rivers, which focuses on the aesthetics and ethics of the history of ethnographic filmmaking and the different strategies of collaboration at stake in making such works today. The strategy of the interview is explored in Sylvère Lotringer's two somewhat circuitous and anecdotal chronicles of his extensive use of this form across publishing, sound recording and film, while Ben Lerner's comparatively brief essay-poem poses the problem of documentary writing as the strategy of a 'negative formalism' which acknowledges the violence done to the object it apprehends.

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The question of authorial intervention is implicitly expressed in Harun Farocki's observational films, a prominent strand in his *oeuvre* that has received little critical attention. As Volker Patenburg notes, the ascetic style of these works is heightened by their lack of voice-over or textual commentary, which exhibits Farocki's fidelity to the history of Direct Cinema. Montage becomes a crucial technique for thinking about the way that documentaries construct narratives and arguments. This is considered as a curatorial method in Ariella Azoulay's revisiting of Edward Steichen's famous 1955 exhibition 'The Family of Man', which she construes as an archival construction for thinking about the 'the human condition' (Report AM382). Eyal Sivan discusses his two projects for the Documentary Forum, *Documentary Moments*, 2010, and *Montage Interdit*, 2012, as a type of live collective montage, staging encounters with films and thinkers in order to forge conceptual linkages. Stella Bruzzi examines this method of connecting through an examination of the recent spate of courtroom documentaries and the importance narrative plays, alongside devices such as re-enactment, for spinning the most convincing tale out of the evidence.


The three essays discussing data visualisation, biometric data, and image privacy rights give a sense of urgency to the collection; they examine the coercive aspects of documentary by broadening the book's focus to consider recent forms and technologies of documenting and documentation. However, the consequences for documentary practices – whether produced for art, activist or other contexts – as well as relating such developments to historical precursors, remained largely unexplored.

While the individual texts that make up *Documentary Across Disciplines* vary in the

degree to which they live up to the collection's title in thinking across disciplinary fields and media, the book as a whole certainly provokes the reader to do so. If contemporary art has become a key site for exploring what Evgenia Giannouri terms 'documentary in the expanded field', as Balsom and Peleg contend, documentary 'didn't need artists to teach it creativity and reflexivity'. Crisis, uncertainty and technological change has been historically constitutive of developments in documentary practices, redefining and expanding the techniques and methods with which they make, however qualified, their claims on truth. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* turns 75 this year but, as Balsom and Peleg point out, Evans and Agee's 'questions remain – or, at least, are once again – our own'. ■

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ALEX FLETCHER is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University.



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MAUREEN PALEY. 21 HERALD STREET, LONDON E2 6JT +44 (0)20 7729 4112 INFO@MAUREENPALEY.COM WWW.MAUREENPALEY.COM

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