
Introduction

Jean-Luc Godard has always treated categorical definitions of the documentary with scepticism: 'All great fiction films tend towards documentary, just as all great documentaries tend toward fiction.'¹ The filmmakers discussed in this book are unlikely to refute such a statement. Encompassing an enquiry into the fictive and phenomenological nature of the documentary image, their films are never simply illustrative of a script or complicit in the pretence of coherence: theirs is an associative and fragmentary film language, a language that subverts the conventions of documentary realism, and contradicts commonplace assumptions about reality and its representation.

Nowadays, an extensive body of critical literature on the relations between cinema and the visual arts tends to concentrate on three areas of enquiry: comparative conceptual or historical issues; questions of representation and *mise en scène* in narrative-commercial cinema; and convergences between the avant-garde and wider film culture. Sometimes, these areas will overlap, especially in debates around the role of new media technologies and how they blur the boundaries between film, video, photography, and installation art. However, even when studying formally inventive documentaries that engage explicitly with the other visual arts, the prevailing critical methodology, especially within the Anglo-American tradition, prefers the cinema of cultural studies to a cultural studies of the cinema, so to speak.² While *Regarding the Real: Cinema, Documentary, and the Visual Arts* also considers how some documentaries depict modern artists, artworks, and histories of art, it is more interested in addressing a different question: how are documentary filmmaking styles shaped by ideas, materials,

and expressive techniques derived from the modern visual arts?

Taking its bearings from forms of writing that encourage a creative symbiosis between criticism and art, the book's style is essayistic, shaped as much by intuition as by erudition. Covering a period that extends from the 1930s to 1980s, it frames a particular coincidence of preoccupations, concepts, affinities, and serendipities. This time-frame is loose but not arbitrary: ranging from the institutionalisation of synchronous sound to the advent of video production, it delineates an epoch of sorts, or *episteme*. After all, this period also extends from the rise of fascism to the final throes of the Cold War. As such, it encompasses an intellectual and social landscape associated with so-called 'late modernism', and the films discussed often involve major cities of modernism at historically eventful junctures (London, New York, Amsterdam, Paris, Tokyo, or Barcelona), rendering them as mosaics of shapes, spaces, and incidental gestures rather than monumental and pristine metropolises of high modernity. These films also tend to be products of an artisanal rather than a commercial imperative, frequently incorporating found footage, and fragments from alternative image systems, into their documentary *mise en scène*. In many cases, they may even be more familiar to students of animation, assemblage and collage, photography, or post-war film modernism, than to students of the documentary.

As figures who can relate to cinema through other arts, the filmmakers discussed in *Regarding the Real* convey an ambitious, experimental sense of what the documentary can achieve artistically, and what it can offer its audiences as a visual art form in its own right. This is filmmaking as a question of framing, cutting, and assembling, as an exercise in the imaginative arrangement of images and sounds, and not filmmaking as an afterthought, or lightweight vehicle for the transportation of stories.

The opening chapter looks at Len Lye's career with the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit during the 1930s. It situates his work at this time within a broader contemporary visual culture, and attempts to clarify the nature and extent of his

contribution to the British documentary tradition. In particular, it examines how his filmmaking incorporated promotional advertising and commercial art techniques while remaining amenable to avant-garde abstraction and kinaesthetic experimentation. Lye's GPO films – like those of Norman McLaren, Lotte Reiniger, and Humphrey Jennings – complicate assumptions about the Documentary Movement of the inter-war era, and its relations to film and modernism in Britain. John Grierson's tendency to overemphasise the instrumentalist and realist achievements of the documentary at this time was both politically pragmatic and culturally myopic: '[Grierson] adapted film's radical potential to far less radical ends'.³ There was an anarchic and restless quality to Lye's career, and while he was by no means the only modernist associated with the GPO Film Unit, the extent of his ability to innovate – in spite of meagre production budgets – with colour processes, musical compositions, stencils, and found footage is remarkable. In a comment to Roger Horrocks, Alberto Cavalcanti – who produced some of Lye's films, and had himself been active in European avant-garde film culture in the 1920s – encapsulated how Lye was both an asset and an affront to Grierson's project: 'Len Lye could be described in the history of British cinema by one word – experiment.'⁴

Like Lye, Joseph Cornell was also a pioneer of found footage filmmaking, although his New York films of the 1950s were not produced within an established production unit, or commissioned by commercial companies. Cornell's documentaries are an extension of his collage and assemblage art – as well as his better known experiments from the 1930s (for example, *Rose Hobart* (1936, 19 min.)) – and their uncanny documentary forms flicker between realism and symbolism, materiality and mystery. Just as Lye's work is related to London's broader artistic and literary environment during the inter-war period, so too Cornell's techniques are not unrelated to the work of the artists, writers, and composers associated with the New York School. In discussing Cornell's films in this context, the second chapter in this book emphasises several converging critical contexts: first, the visual – especially, photographic –

culture developing in New York in the 1950s, a culture that included Cornell, even if he did not, officially, belong to any of its coteries; second, the people he worked with on these films, especially his collaborations with Rudy Burckhardt and Stan Brakhage, and their respective connections to the New York School and the city's burgeoning avant-garde scene; third, how – in formal terms – Cornell's films from the 1950s relate to his other artwork, especially, the boxes, assemblages, the collage–montage films of the 1930s, and his artistic vision, more generally; and, finally, the relevance of these films to a broader discussion on documentary practice and its relation to the modern visual arts.

While these opening chapters focus on the relations between documentary forms and various – especially, surrealist-orientated – techniques and contexts, the next two chapters elaborate on the role of photography, exploring how it shaped the documentary filmmaking of Johan van der Keuken and William Klein. The montage structure of the chapter on Van der Keuken is itself based on a photo album, in which each of the films discussed is linked to the preceding film. Given that his film and photographic work is characterised by an array of influences – and that his visual style and sensibility was marked by a reticent attitude towards notions of coherence and finality – framing, in the broadest sense – such a structure seems appropriate in this case. This cross-section of Van der Keuken's film *œuvre* is treated chiefly in terms of how it develops, and subverts, conventional documentary frames of reference, and attempts to transcend the problem of rendering a reality that is always elusive, and a representation that is always inadequate. Furthermore, just as London and New York feature as more than a backdrop to the chapters on Lye and Cornell, so too this chapter emphasises the importance of Amsterdam's artistic communities and contemporary history to Van der Keuken's imagination. Despite his many travels around the world, there is always a sense in his films that Amsterdam – like Marco Polo's Venice in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities/Le città invisibili* (1972) – is everywhere, and everywhere, sooner or later, becomes Amsterdam.

As in the case of Van der Keuken, it is interesting to consider William Klein's filmmaking in relation to his photography, and how he too uses different documentary forms to investigate the relations between time and movement, image and montage. In a career now spanning over sixty years (at the time of writing), Klein's work also testifies to a remarkable range of influences: Dada and surrealism, kinetic sculpture, pop art, Beat poetry, *haute couture*, comics, billboards, and French television. In examining the various aesthetic and cultural issues provoked by Klein's filmmaking, this chapter also suggests a correspondence between his work and Roland Barthes's intellectual project, a project that shares many of Klein's preoccupations, and even directly refers to his work when comparing photography to painted portraits.⁵ How Klein has negotiated his identity as an American in Paris is also relevant to some of the book's broader contexts. Born into a downwardly mobile middle-class Jewish family in New York City, in 1928, Klein grew up on 108th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, near the Harlem end of Central Park. After the Second World War and a stint in the army, he availed himself of an ex-serviceman's educational grant and went to Paris to study art at the Sorbonne; and the city has remained his home ever since. Despite embracing this self-imposed exile, Klein has continued to film and photograph America, especially New York. Some of his most iconic street photographs were taken in the 1950s, in the streets of his childhood, and – as the chapter elucidates – much of his documentary filmmaking has involved expeditions into US culture in the second half of the twentieth century.

Both the chapters on Van der Keuken and Klein inevitably consider the significance of the 1960s, and 1968 in particular, on the development of their political views, and how the complexities of that era influenced their approach to film. Chapter 5 focuses on the work of Godard during 1968, and examines his interest in the radical potential of a new alliance or cultural front involving cinema and other contemporary popular forms. Godard's cinema typically foregrounds the rhetorical, fictionalising operations at work in any documentary project, and

his broader preoccupations with the connections between film, photography, and the visual arts are reflected in his method: 'From the beginning', according to Peter Wollen, '[he] has shown a profound and yet paradoxical attachment to the traditions of European art, both as a heritage of great works and, at the same time, as an anarchic project which inevitably threatens every kind of tradition and norm'.⁶ In exploring his work throughout 1968, this chapter focuses on a period in his career when he was disassociating himself from the post-war *auteur* tradition – a period not especially conducive to canonicity – as the end-titles to *Week-end* had famously declared a year earlier: 'Fin de conte – Fin de cinéma – Fin'.

Despite his political activism in 1968, Godard continued working on his film projects – most notably: *One Plus One*; the *Ciné-tracts* (or *Film-tracts*) project; and his ill-fated collaboration with D. A. Pennebaker and Richard Leacock, *One AM* (*One American Movie*). These projects are characterised by a series of investigations into, and subversions of, the conventions of the documentary, especially in relation to television journalism and news coverage, where an increasingly stylised form of reportage-style realism doubly articulated the mass media's antagonism towards the cause of the students, strikers, and activists. Godard's work from this period is also characterised by a film language that incorporates forms derived from other visual art practices, especially painting, photography, graffiti and graphic art. Throughout the latter part of 1968, Godard dedicated time to the Dziga-Vertov Group (DVG), and – as he became further disillusioned with radical politics in France – he began to view the US as more fertile ground for revolution. Like Klein, Godard's imagination is always peculiarly alert to the complex historical and creative relations between France and the US, Europe and Hollywood.

The penultimate chapter in the book also picks up on this Euro-American theme in its discussion of two documentary treatments of the Central Park vigil for John Lennon, in December 1980: Jonas Mekas's *Happy Birthday to John* (1995, 16 mm, 18 min.), and Raymond Depardon's *Dix minutes de silence pour John Lennon/Ten Minutes Silence for John Lennon*

(1980, 16 mm, 10 min.). Mekas and Depardon might seem an unlikely pairing but as the chapter argues Lennon's death is not their only point of convergence: both their sensibilities have been shaped by migrant experiences, and much of their work, for all its formal differences, is preoccupied with exile and displacement, rootedness and the meaning of home; the country and the city (and in Mekas's case, the country in the city); both are Europeans who have developed an intimate social and creative relationship with New York City; both are concerned with the place of autobiography in their work, using captions, inter-titles, diary entries, still images, and first-person commentary to complicate relations between the imaginary and the documentary. What is also interesting is not simply differences in why and how these filmmakers witness the apotheosis of Lennon as cultural martyr (and naturalised New Yorker) but also how the phenomenon of public mourning displaces its ostensible subject: associatively, in the case of Mekas; incidentally, in the case of Depardon; and intentionally, in the case of the mass media.

Regarding the Real concludes with a discussion of Hiroshi Teshigahara's documentaries, especially his 1984 film, *Antonio Gaudí* (JP, 72 min.), examining how that film elucidates instances of convergence between documentary and architecture, as well as the more particular, and sometimes surprising, aesthetic correspondence between Teshigahara's visual style and that of Gaudí, Japanese *ikebana* (floral art) and Catalan *modernisme*. Cultural differences between New York and Paris or Amsterdam and London might pale into insignificance by comparison with those between Barcelona and Tokyo – especially, as there is no history of any meaningful economic relationship between Catalonia and Japan. There can, however, be little doubt that the Art Nouveau movement, and *Japonisme* in particular, influenced the arts in Catalonia. For example, Japan participated in both of the Barcelona Universal Expositions or 'Expos' in 1888 and 1929, and *Japonisme* influenced everything from the city's textile industry to its production of erotic art, and the orientalism of pioneer filmmaker, Segundo de Chomón.⁷ Meanwhile, Gaudí's work has long been

a source of fascination for Japanese intellectuals, especially among architects such as Kenji Imai, Hiroya Tanaka, Toshiaki Tange, and Tokutoshi Torii (who has written extensively on Gaudí), sculptors (for example, Etsuro Sotoo), or the photographer, Eikoh Hosoe, whose book, *Gaudí/Gaudí no uchu* was first published in 1984.⁸ Sōfū Teshigahara, the father of Hiroshi, was particularly enthralled by Barcelona. A master (*iemoto*) of *ikebana*, Sōfū was an important figure in post-war Japanese cultural life, having established the Sōgetsu School of Ikebana in 1929. His approach to *ikebana* was radical, and although it remained fundamentally faithful to many of the traditions associated with Japanese floral art, it was also influenced by his travels through Europe in the 1930s, and his interest in surrealism. After the Second World War, Sōfū developed a strong connection with Catalan art and culture, and he became friends with Joan Miró, Antoni Tàpies, and Salvador Dalí (who appears with him in sequences from Hiroshi's early documentary shorts, *Ikebana* (1956, JP, 32 min.), and *Gaudí, Catalunya, 1959* (2008 [1959], JP, 16 mm, 19 min.)).

Although Hiroshi Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes/Sunna no onna* (1964, b&w, JP, 164 min.) secured his international reputation as a major figure of the Japanese New Wave, filmmaking only constituted one facet of his artistic activities, and – true to the Sōgetsu tradition – he was also an accomplished sculptor, ceramist, calligrapher, and landscape designer. He constructed large-scale bamboo installations, some of which clearly evoke the distinctive undulations and unruly geometry of Gaudí's architectural style. In making a film devoted to Gaudí's work, Teshigahara was also making a documentary about his own work and sensibility, and the influence of his father, who had died in 1979. In this sense, *Antonio Gaudí* is, perhaps, best seen as a companion to *Ikebana*, and an account of a legacy that is simultaneously intimate and distant, obvious and enigmatic. In its cinematography, subtle editing, and subdued soundtrack (composed by Tōru Takemitsu), *Antonio Gaudí* draws the spectator into its images and the histories those images signify, rather than the stories they may, or may not, exemplify.

Notes

- 1 Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings*, eds Jean Narboni and Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), p. 132.
- 2 Peter Wollen, *Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 90–1.
- 3 For a comprehensive critical bibliography in this field, see Christine Sprengler’s ‘Cinema and the Visual Arts’, in *Oxford Bibliographies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), www.oxford-bibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0122.xml [accessed 17/09/2013]. Two recent examples of studies that explore the integration of cinematic and pictorial techniques within an art documentary context are: Steven Jacobs, *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 1–37; and Sally Shafto, ‘Artistic Encounters: Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, and Cézanne’, in *Film, Art, New Media: Museum without Walls?* ed., Angela Dalle Vacche (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 199–220. See also: *Framing Film: Cinema and the Visual Arts*, eds Steven Allen and Laura Hubner (Bristol: Intellect, 2012); Susan Felleman’s *Real Objects in Unreal Situations: Modern Art in Fiction Films* (Bristol: Intellect, 2014), and *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*, ed. Dudley Andrew (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).
- 4 Bill Nichols, ‘Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde’, *Critical Inquiry*, 27.4 (2001), p. 582.
- 5 Qtd. in Roger Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography* (Auckland: University of Auckland Press, 2002), p. 148.
- 6 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), pp. 28–30, 46–7.
- 7 Writings – and curatorial work – by contemporary Catalan art historians such as Fernando García Gutiérrez, Elena Barlés Báguena, V. David Almazán Tomás, and Richard Bru has shed much light on the influence of *Japonisme* on art in Catalonia. See Gutiérrez *et al.* eds, *Arte japonés y japonismo*. Ex. cat. (Bilbao: Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, 2014).
- 8 For example, in August 1939, the Tokyo-based journal, *Kentiku Sekai: Japanese Journal of Building and Living Culture* published Kenji Imai’s ‘Architecture of Barcelona: Sagrada Familia Cathedral’. Both volumes of Tokutoshi Torii’s *El mundo enigmático de Gaudí* were published in 1983 (Madrid: Instituto de España),

while Eikoh Hosoe's *Gaudí/Gaudí no uchu* (Tokyo: Shueisha) became the basis for subsequent international exhibitions and catalogues devoted to Hosoe's 'Gaudí photographs'. On the influence of modernist cinema on Teshigahara, see Felicy Gee's 'Surrealist Legacies: The Influence of Luis Buñuel's "Irrationality" on Hiroshi Teshigahara's Documentary-Fantasy', in *A Companion to Luis Buñuel*, eds Rob Stone and Julian Gutierrez-Albilla (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 572–89.