The Documentary Dukes and Duchesses of Cambridge

American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn
by Scott MacDonald
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More than a contemporary history of what, to many, appears as an obscure filmmaking arena, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn* takes us on a literate and often literary examination of several undervalued pioneers of the documentary form. The fact that this often riveting story places Cambridge, Massachusetts, as its geographical epicenter is a testament to the impact that institutions such as the Film Study Center, the Carpenter Center and the Visual and Environmental Studies Department at Harvard and the MIT Film Section had on certain individuals who were nurtured there, as well as on a new generation of filmmakers who continue to be productive today.

Several years ago, author Scott MacDonald contacted me and made some vague references to a book he was writing about documentary film in Cambridge. At the time, I was the president of Documentary Educational Resources, which was founded in Cambridge and which is arguably the largest known distributor of what has been referred to as "ethnographic" film. It seemed logical that MacDonald would have contacted us, given the stated focus of his research. Normally I am supportive of researchers' investigative work and when MacDonald asked me for review copies (DVDs) of all of the films of John Marshall, I complied, despite the fact that the author's request represented a significant number of films over Marshall's 50-year career. When MacDonald asked if he could also view *First Film*(1951), a film by Marshall's mother, Lorna, that had never been actively distributed, I began to worry about how far MacDonald would go and how much more he might demand in terms of time, attention and actual films.

When he next requested all the edited films of Timothy Asch and Robert Gardner, I acquiesced on the Asch material, but then sent him to Gardner's own creative endeavor, Studio 7 Arts. In the interim, I have encountered the author at a number of conferences and was impressed by his breadth of knowledge not only about documentary film, but also about culture in general and the avant-garde in particular.

The years and the tenacity that MacDonald invested in researching has now come to fruition. This book goes a long way in proving the case that "during the last 50 years, the Boston area has been the fountainhead of American documentary filmmaking." The author addresses what seems to be a conundrum, that "ethnographic film and personal documentary appear to be the antithesis of each other: One has traditionally involved the travels of anthropologists to far-flung locations to observe people very different from themselves; the other, the self-conscious investigations by filmmakers of their personal lives." He goes on to say that these two forms are actually "the two sides of the same cinematic coin, the inverse of each other," and then quotes Gardner: "Going to distant cultures leads to self-examination, which in turn refines sensibilities for detecting meaning in the lives of others."

The book covers material that has rarely, if ever, been written about in the literature of documentary film. Such is the case with the aforementioned work by Lorna Marshall. MacDonald analyses *First Film* with such sensitivity, insight and depth that I was at first bewildered. After all, this was a film that even her own son, John, told me "was just something my mother put together for a lecture." He did not even consider it a "film" worthy of distribution. MacDonald makes it quite clear that *First Film* is indeed worthy of our attention.

A case is made for each filmmaker MacDonald elects to include.Individual chapters focus on the Marshalls, Asch, Gardner, Ed Pincus, Miriam Weinstein, Alfred Guzzetti (a filmmaker virtually unknown outside a small, largely academic circle), Ross McElwee, Robb Moss, Nina Davenport, Steven Ascher and Jeanne Jordan, Michel Negroponte, John Gianvito, Amie Siegel, Ilisa Barbash, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and the recent graduates of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab. The author tells us that he was committed to bringing "attention to under-recognized and/or less understood filmmakers and films." He was also looking for a kind of intimacy and personal revelations reflected in the works, as well as subtle relationships and the ways that each of these artists was connected.

Cambridge-based Errol Morris was not included in the book, primarily because he "does not lack for attention from reviewers," and MacDonald's opinion about fellow Cambridgian Frederick Wiseman—also excluded—is summed up in this wry interview excerpt:

> MacDonald: Fred, was there something in the Boston area, or in Cambridge in particular, that helped you move in the direction of documentary filmmaking, or that helped you become the kind of filmmaker that you've become?
>
> Wiseman: Nothing that I can think of.

The first three chapters are dedicated to the Marshalls, Asch and Gardner, all figures who have traditionally been discussed within the context of that ghetto we call ethnographic film, although Gardner's work most frequently has crossed the line, in part because of his regard for aesthetic experience above all else. The next two chapters focus on the personal documentary explorations of Pincus and Guzzetti. Guzzetti completed *Family Portrait Sittings*, what MacDonald referred to as his "landmark personal documentary," in 1975, and we also learn that Guzzetti was a student in the first filmmaking class taught by Gardner in the Carpenter Center.

Transitioning from the 1960s and '70s into the '80s, the story shifts from Harvard to MIT, where both Ross McElwee and Robb Moss earned their MFA degrees in filmmaking. They also refer to each other as close friends, beyond the usual academic collegiality. MacDonald devoted separate chapters to these two important filmmakers, in spite of the similarities in their work and the fact that Moss said they look enough alike that they could be brothers.

In the final chapter, we seem to come full circle with the work of Castaing-Taylor and Barbash and Harvard's commitment to "Sensory Ethnography." Both filmmakers had studied visual anthropology at the University of Southern California with Asch. Their

2009 film *Sweetgrass* was shown to wide acclaim at international film festivals, and an image from Castaing-Taylor's and Veréna Parevel's overwhelmingly powerful film *Leviathan*(2012) appears on the cover of this book.

Intimacy is rarely a word connected to published academic work, and yet I can't think of a better word to distinguish MacDonald's thoroughly researched and rigorously annotated tome from all previous books I've reviewed on these pages. Just as Pincus does in *Diaries* (1971-1976) and McElwee in *Backyard* (1984), MacDonald's attention to personal detail and the subtle, yet complex, weaving of relationships are remarkably insightful.

In the epilogue, he states, "It is particularly clear, in many of the careers that have been nurtured in Cambridge, that each new adventure of perception and each successive filmmaking process has developed out of the previous one, as a result of the inevitable questioning—of their subjects, of themselves—that the filmmakers did during and after the production of their films in their determination to be honest and communicative about what they've come to understand from those they've filmed, and from their filming." The "shared process" was the thread that led MacDonald through his own research, and he leaves us with an invitation to experience the films and the careers of the filmmakers he has discussed.

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