



Scott MacDonald, *Comprehending Cinema: Panoramic Audiovisioning*

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Grasping the World of Moving-Image Media with Scott MacDonald's *Comprehending Cinema: Panoramic Audiovisioning*

- ¹ *Comprehending Cinema: Panoramic Audiovisioning* is the final chapter of Scott MacDonald's "avant-doc trilogy" published by Oxford University Press. Like the previous volumes, *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinema* (2015) and *The Sublimity of Document: Cinema as Diorama* (2019), *Comprehending Cinema* is a living proof of MacDonald's lifelong commitment to independent filmmaking and his passion for educating future generations of cinephiles. A collection of fifteen in-depth interviews and three extended, panoramic essays called "entr'actes," *Comprehending Cinema* is one of MacDonald's most ambitious projects to date, offering a thorough, interdisciplinary coverage of lesser-known films, themes, approaches, traditions and moving image forms that deserve more attention from critics, curators and moviegoers. As always, MacDonald's goal is remarkably humble for an accomplished scholar, writer and educator with the career spanning over fifty years: to help readers "enjoy and use the combination of all forms of cinematic accomplishment, in collision and collaboration" and "gain a more comprehensive sense" of experimental cinema (5). *Comprehending Cinema* stems from MacDonald's interests in film history, the art of cinema and exploring new synergetic approaches to moving-image media and audiovisual

discourses informed by screen studies and the video essay format. The book is modelled on MacDonald's teaching and programming practice, reflecting his "experience of cine-comprehensiveness as of 2024" and ongoing mission to "provide a service to cinema studies, and to cinema-going within and beyond an academic context" (5). There are two underlying threads in *Comprehending Cinema* that bind MacDonald's conversations with filmmakers and his entr'actes together: the meta-cinematic tradition, facilitated by the endless possibilities of working with traditional and digital film archives, and a collaborative aspect of mediamaking. Guiding our reading of *Comprehending Cinema*, these trends bring our attention to what MacDonald calls "the panorama of mediamaking" (7), placing emphasis on the creative ways in which makers repurpose film and video work, collaborate with other artists and use different technologies that enhance storytelling and the cinematic experience.

- 2 *Comprehending Cinema* comprises fifteen interviews, covering individual films, aspects of the filmmakers' careers or their entire filmography. With the exception of Su Friedrich, Bill Morrison and Erin Espelie, most of the filmmakers had never been interviewed by MacDonald, but their work, sometimes discovered accidentally, seemed to be interesting and compelling enough to inspire him to discuss it in greater detail. *Comprehending Cinema* opens with the interview with Su Friedrich that MacDonald had interviewed in the second volume of his acclaimed book series, *A Critical Cinema 2* (1992). The conversation sheds light on the last thirty years of Friedrich's filmmaking practice (*The Odds of Recovery*, *Seeing Red*, *Gut Renovation*, *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel*) and her dedication to highlighting the work of women film editors, which resulted in the creation of the Edited By website and the feature *Edited By—The Companion Film* composed of clips from commercial films edited by women. The conversations with Bill Morrison and Erin Espelie – both interviewed for *The Sublimity of Document* – focus on their most recent endeavors. The interview with Bill Morrison explores his new films, *The Village Detective*, *Buried News*, and *Incident*, made of found, news, surveillance, security and police bodycam footage, which approach Soviet history, crime, racism and violence in the manner of investigative journalism. The conversation with Erin Espelie examines her RGB+K series, concerned with the materiality of the digital image and the effects of LED light, and her current activities and collaborations at the University of Colorado-Boulder where she is instrumental in developing NEST (Nature Environment Science Technology) Studio for the Arts. Other interviews reflect MacDonald's interests in meta-narratives. *The Green Fog* (2017), directed by Guy Maddin in collaboration with brothers Evan and Galen Johnson, is a fascinating experimental found footage feature, which pays tribute to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and the city of San Francisco. Irish filmmaker Tadhg O'Sullivan's short feature *To the Moon* (2020) is a stunningly beautiful ode to our planet's mysterious neighbor composed of found footage, moonlit cinematography and literary fragments. Dean Fleischer Camp's conceptual collage and meta-fiction thriller *Fraud* (2016) re-edits home movies posted on YouTube, transforming them into a fictional crime story of an American family of four compulsive shoppers. *LA92* (2017), co-directed by Oscar-winning documentarians Daniel Lindsay and TJ Martin, makes a sole use of rarely seen institutional and personal archival footage to speak of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, implicitly critiquing their coverage by commercial television that did not show the full scale and brutality of the event. Early in the book, one interview stands out: it was conducted when MacDonald was a visiting professor at Harvard. It is an edited version of Haden Guest's (director of the HFA) and MacDonald's introduction to two screenings held at the Harvard Film

Archive on May 2, 2009, one curated by the poet John Ashbery and the other one by MacDonald, and the follow-up conversation with Ashbery. As MacDonald's screening featured the work of three experimental filmmakers, Abigail Child, Nathaniel Dorsky and Phil Solomon, who cited Ashbery as a key influence on their work, the talk also includes Ashbery's views on mainstream and avant-garde cinema, reflecting on his involvement in the larger independent film scene and personal connections to poets and filmmakers.

- 3 Other interviews cover parts of the filmmakers' careers or their whole body of work, highlighting their bold experiments with structure, duration, multimedia format, spectatorship and controversial or unusual subjects. Los Angeles-based artist Jennifer West's *One Mile Film* (2012) is a staged public performance and postmodern city symphony, showcasing the collaborative effort of mediamaking, whereas her *Film Title Poem* (2016) is a hand-painted 35mm film shot from hundreds of movie title cards that West had seen since childhood. Independent filmmaker Penny Lane's acclaimed documentary features *For Our Nixon* (2013), *The Pain of Others* (2018), *Nuts!* (2018), *Hail Satan?* (2019) and *Listening to Kenny G* (2021) are known for their innovative use of humor, irony, found footage and a range of working methods and materials, including Super 8 home movies, YouTube videos and postings and visual-text videos. Two groundbreaking documentary features, *Caniba* (2017) and *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (2022), co-directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel from Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab, present a disturbing portrait of the notorious Japanese cannibal Issei Sagawa, reflecting on his cannibalistic desires, and contain graphic footage depicting surgeries and autopsies shot in hospitals around Paris. Some interviews turn into fascinating case studies of individual films. Jennifer Anderson and Vernon Lott's eleven-hour *#monalisa* (2020) is a meditative GoPro slow motion study of a modern crowd taking selfies with the Mona Lisa and a hilarious comment on the relationship between art, technology and the popularity of Leonardo's famous painting among Louvre's visitors in the pre-COVID-19 era. Paul Cronin's epic "talking head" documentary film *A Time to Stir* (2020), which exists in two seven-and-a-half-hour and fifteen-hour versions, commemorates the Columbia Revolt of 1968, revealing Cronin's fascination with history and editing archival material. The final two interviews shift away from cinema, turning to other collaborative forms of mediamaking: video essays and original musical accompaniments to silent films. Provocatively framing the video essay as a "a new cinematic avant-garde" that critiques "both commercial media and the logocentric literature of academic cinema-and-media scholarship" (470), MacDonald's conversation with French filmmaker and researcher Chloé Galibert-Lainé presents her work "as a way of creating new kinds of scholarship that draw thoughtful attention to particular films" (12). The book concludes with MacDonald's interview with Ken Winokur, Terry Donahue, and Roger Clark Miller, a trio of musicians "dedicated to invigorating the experience of the silent cinema" who in 1990 formed the Alloy Orchestra, scoring such timeless classics as *Nosferatu* (1922), *Metropolis* (1927), *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and *The General* (1926) (507).
- 4 The interviews are punctuated or "interrupted" by three essays, "Night Light: The Modern Cine-Nocturne," "Entr'acte 2: Sergei Loznitsa x 4," and "Recent Archival Engagements with the War to End All Wars." These entr'actes are intended by MacDonald to provide "a mini-panorama within the larger panorama of the interviews" and further explore some of the questions signaled earlier in the interviews. They are engaging and highly informative additions to the book that both complement and

extend beyond the conversations with filmmakers. “Night Light” discusses the role of the nocturne in modern cinema, focusing on the work of independent filmmakers, including Kenneth Anger (*Rabbit’s Moon*), Stan Brakhage (*Anticipation of the Night*), Marie Menken (*Moonplay*), Peggy Ahwesh (*Nocturne*), Barry Jenkins (*Moonlight*), Rebecca Meyers (*Glow in the Dark: January-June*), Mary Beth Reed (*Moon Streams*), Abbas Kiarostami (*Five (for Ozu)*), Peter Hutton (*In Titan’s Goblet*), Chick Strand (*Kristallnacht*), Phil Solomon (*The Textures of Darkness*), Laura Waddington (*Border*) and others. Drawing from the rich tradition of the nocturne as a musical form and a genre of painting and photography, MacDonald addresses the challenges in producing nocturnal imagery and moonlit scenes, attesting to cinema’s expanding technical possibilities and avant-garde makers’ persistent interest in creating entrancing cinematic experiences. In the following essay, MacDonald provides an overview of award-winning Ukrainian filmmaker Sergei Loznits’s prolific career, interspersed by Loznits’s comments on his own work, and discusses his unique aesthetics and observational approach to filmmaking informed by found footage, direct cinema, avant-doc and drama. The final essay, “Recent Archival Engagements,” explores several archival films made in the wake of the hundredth anniversary of World War I: Bill Morrison’s *Beyond Zero: 1914–1918* (2014), Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi’s World War I trilogy, *Prisoners of War* (*Prigionieri della guerra*, 1995), *On All Heights It’s Peace* (*Su tutte le vette è pace*, 1998), and *Oh! Man* (*Oh! Uomo*, 2004), and Peter Jackson’s *Shall Not Grow Old* (2018). MacDonald’s fascinating case studies on “the cine-history of representing World War I” reveal the diversity of perspectives and formal strategies, including photographs, war letters, diaries, 35mm nitrate footage and state-of-the-art digital technology, which provide “a panorama of the war itself and a mini-panorama of the possibilities for retrieving and rethinking archival materials” (402).

- 5 *Comprehending Cinema* shows MacDonald at his best. Although at first glance, some readers may be discouraged by the sheer volume of the collection, which contains almost six hundred pages, and sometimes an overwhelming number of ideas, facts, names and works discussed here, *Comprehending Cinema* turns out to be a fascinating read, offering a reader-friendly format and a clear, logical structure. To make the book both engaging and accessible to all readers, MacDonald begins each interview and essay with a concise introduction, which outlines the history of the examined concepts and the filmmakers’ careers, explaining the significance of their work and contributions to contemporary cinematic and media landscape, often overlooked in film criticism. MacDonald’s inclusion of personal remarks and digressions is another strategy that helps sustain our attention. In the introduction, he recaps his own career, reminiscing about his discovery of avant-garde cinema and struggle to teach film history at Utica College (now Utica University), a course that only began to be taught at the college level in the late 1960s. Readers are also given an overview of the subsequent developments in the American alternative film scene, fostered by such venues and curatorial initiatives as Cinema 16, the New York Film Festival, Mark McElhatten’s “Views from the Avant-Garde” or Harvard University’s Sensory Ethnography Lab, all essential to MacDonald’s evolution as a cineaste, teacher and writer. MacDonald also explains what led him to explore particular filmmakers, works and practices discussed at length in the book and comments on his personal connections to some of the interviewees, including Paul Cronin whom he came to know through their mutual interest in Amos Vogel’s hugely successful and influential Cinema 16. But perhaps more than anything else, with *Comprehending Cinema* MacDonald demonstrates that “the

history of cinema is more than the films that have been made and the writing they have engendered” (507). Showcasing the potential of nonfiction and montage filmmaking and new, productive forms of spectatorship, MacDonald expands the meaning of independent cinema to include what he calls audiovisual media. Situating his scholarship within the digital revolution of moving images, MacDonald draws our attention to the body of work and viewing experiences that often fall outside the traditional understanding of cinema: one example is the video essay seen as a new direction in film studies.

- 6 One of *Comprehending Cinema*'s greatest strengths is the immense diversity and interconnectedness of the works, narratives and stories it explores, including collage and found footage filmmaking, YouTube videos, desktop films and film scores. It becomes clear that the discussed films have not been selected randomly: besides finding the links between these works, MacDonald makes sure that they are always intriguing, relatable and thought-provoking, captivating the reader's imagination and stimulating their critical thinking. The collection not only serves as a platform to share MacDonald's broad interests and ever-growing experience as a moviegoer, but also articulates his deep understanding of how cinema works today: as “an ever-broadening panoramic mediascape that challenges us to find ways of integrating the myriad visual and audio inputs to our consciousness” (15). But while the volume puts often lesser-known works, figures, themes and practices in the spotlight, it rarely moves beyond the Anglophone world. Although MacDonald successfully extends his focus to new kinds of cinema, *Comprehending Cinema* still privileges the Anglo-American perspective and film scholarship, paying less attention to the work that originated outside of the Western hemisphere, filmmakers and artists from minority groups or less “popular” modes of filmmaking (at least for mainstream audiences), like animations and handmade films. Regardless, *Comprehending Cinema* makes an invaluable and highly original contribution to contemporary film criticism through dozens of engaging interviews and personal accounts that put the broadly defined independent cinema into dialog with history, literature, visual and performance arts, music and new media. The collection can serve as both an introduction to particular works, concepts or aesthetic trends and a comprehensive compendium, offering a wealth of information on the world of cinema and modern media culture. The book's broad appeal, accessible, jargon-free writing style, relatability and illuminating approach that successfully blends theory with practice make *Comprehending Cinema* an exciting intellectual adventure to both specialized and general audiences, from students, academics and moving image practitioners to laymen and movie buffs. With *Comprehending Cinema*, MacDonald—yet again—proves his unparalleled enthusiasm for independent filmmaking, fulfilling his service in helping to support alternative cinema, and shows us that film scholarship can be useful, insightful and absorbing in its attempt to destabilize the canon and challenge us to see things anew.

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