Margulies’s book is a vivid and wide-ranging account of this type of re-enactment, offering insight with implications that stretch across documentary and cinema history as a whole. An associate professor in film and media at Hunter College, author of a book on Chantal Akerman (Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday [Duke University Press, 1996]), and editor of Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema (Duke University Press, 2003), Margulies’s scholarship has long been invested in documentary, French cinema, and the presence of the body on screen. The present volume seems a culmination of her long engagement with these subjects.

Deftly argued and intricately constructed, In Person comprises seven chapters that track, in roughly chronological order, the appearances of in-person re-enactment in nonfiction cinema from WWII to the present—from Orson Welles’s 1942 short film Four Men in a Raft (from his aborted, post-Ambersons omnibus project It’s All True) to Rithy Panh’s 2003 film S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine and Andrea Tonacci’s 2006 film Hills of Disorder. Along the way, Margulies constructs a fascinating canon of what she terms “in-person re-enactment” from familiar and unfamiliar films alike. Appraisals of major movements such as Italian neorealism, cinéma vérité, and Rouchian ethnofiction, are complemented by forays through more rarefied corners of film history and even a few bastard genres, like “celebrity re-enactments” which cast notable figures in their own biopics.

These latter examples make for some of the book’s most entertaining reading. Margulies’s extensive consideration of these relatively underexplored examples—such as The Jackie Robinson Story (1950) and The Greatest (1977), featuring Muhammad Ali—amplifies the peculiarity of re-enactment’s gesture, in which recognizable figures rehearse iconic
No doubt one could make a lengthy list of films and filmmakers working in this mode, which Margulies addresses only in passing or omits entirely. In Person is compendious, not comprehensive, and to some the selection of films might feel arbitrary and idiosyncratic. For this reader, though, this balance of orthodox and off-piste choices is a large part of the book’s appeal. Joshua Oppenheimer's The Act of Killing, which has already been wildly overpraised by documentary scholars, needs no more attention. By contrast, Tonacci’s immensely rich and comparatively little-seen Hils of Disorder—which retraces the steps of an indigenous man from a small Amazon tribe, who may be the lone survivor of a massacre in the 1970s—is ripe for greater consideration and Margulies’s detailed analysis ought rightly to encourage more viewers to seek it out.

The sustained appraisal of Panh’s and Tonacci’s work in the final two chapters raises another minor quibble: the book’s lack of a more comprehensive theory of contemporary re-enactment and its forms across audiovisual media, beyond the cinema. This, of course, could (and should) be a book all its own, and that it’s missing here is likely due to Margulies’s more retrospective gaze, and perhaps a means to avoid dating a book that already offers a rich assessment of re-enactment’s historical iterations.

Nevertheless, one is at very least curious to know the author’s thoughts on the matter, and given the proliferation and mutation of re-enactment and documentary more generally in the cinema and beyond—in contemporary art especially—there remains a great deal more to explore. In Person more than amply lays the groundwork for such an investigation, establishing the vocabulary and the stakes of a practice that is, itself, always in a cycle of eternal return.—Leo Goldsmith

Out of Sight would now be more likely to get a minimal theatrical release and find the vast majority of their audience—and, probably, production funds—via Netflix or Amazon. But if widespread respect for Twin Peaks, which was immediately regarded as genuine art, benefited from David Lynch’s background in cinema, The Sopranos seemed to come out of nowhere. According to Brett Martin’s book Difficult Men, its creator David Chase felt that he was slumming in television, since his reference points came from Fifties and Sixties European cinema.

Nevertheless, the show’s originality stemmed from the way it domesticated the gangster. Given their lengthy running times and multigenerational narratives, The Godfather trilogy blew the gangster film up to an epic scale. But Tony Soprano was a murderer who was also a suburban dad. Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall describe the pilot as “a hybrid slapstick comedy, domestic sitcom, and crime thriller, with dabs of ’70s American New Wave grit. It mixes disreputable spectacle with flourishes from postmodern novels, dialectical theater and mid-century European art-house cinema.”

If there was anything divisive about The Sopranos, it lay in the not-so-subtle suggestion that the show’s world was an exaggerated version of the compromises and hypocrisies of ordinary middle-class American life. The fact that it was TV, not cinema, enhanced this; its audience sat down in their living rooms instead of going out to a movie theater to watch it. Seitz and Sepinwall also write that “the series is sometimes as much about the relationships between art and its audience as it is about the world the artist depicts.” It was also acutely aware of its place as part of a legacy of narrative about gangsters. Although the show seemed self-conscious about this only a few times, it now seems like the end of the line.

The Sopranos Sessions

by Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall.

It’s now a critical commonplace, indeed a cliché, that American television is artistically superior to mainstream American cinema. If Scott Tobias’s response that TV suffers because it has no avant-garde is still true with a few exceptions, shows like Mad Men, Breaking Bad, and The Sopranos were a closer equivalent to the best work of Sidney Lumet, Martin Scorsese, and Francis Ford Coppola than the Hollywood films being produced at the same time. New Hollywood found its inheritors on the small screen rather than cinema. That’s only adventurous in the context of a film culture that embraced sequels and reboots aimed at teenagers. Still, such TV shows found an appreciative audience and network support while even mid-budget Nineties genre films like Jackie Brown and