

In Person:

Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema

by Ivone Margulies. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 227 pp., illus. Paperback: \$29.95.

From Nanook's apocryphal seal hunt to the kitschy dramatizations of an *Unsolved Mysteries* episode, re-enactment has been a consistent formal gambit throughout documentary's history. Over the years, as well, the restaging of past events with nonprofessional actors has fallen in and out of fashion—sometimes considered standard practice, sometimes seen as documentary's *bête noire*. Indeed, it's something of an old film history chestnut that the great wave of *vérité* and direct-cinema films of the 1950s and 1960s used their observational mode to reject it outright, expunging the practice from nonfiction cinema in favor of their apparently more "immediate" style.

Nevertheless, re-enactment remains an oft-deployed strategy of nonfiction filmmaking—despite, or perhaps precisely because, it prompts queries about the authenticity of the image and of testimonial accounts, suggests linkages between documentary practice and psychotherapeutic exercises relating to trauma (e.g., "the talking cure"), and broaches the slightly muddy question of what might constitute the "performance" of documentary subjects. While some filmmakers—Peter Watkins, for instance—have made consistent use of the device in their filmmaking since before the days of Wiseman and the Maysles brothers, post-*vérité* re-enactment was probably most widely utilized, however dubiously, as a staple component of TV docudrama and a favorite activity of Civil War history enthusiasts. It was only recuperated as a "serious" documentary practice by filmmakers in the 1980s such as Jill Godmilow and Errol Morris, who took it up as a device for reflexively foregrounding the artificiality of nonfiction filmmaking that would otherwise (supposedly) go unnoticed. More recently, variations on re-enactment have taken on more opaque applications in hybrid fiction/nonfiction works, such as Pedro Costa's films and, in the art world, installation video by artists such as Jeremy Deller, Sharon Hayes, and Wu Tsang.

Re-enactment's multitude of forms and iterations would make for a rich, if overwhelming, topic of consideration for film criticism and scholarship. Surprisingly, while it's been by no means neglected in documentary studies, it's been the subject of very few book-length studies. This makes film scholar Ivone Margulies's new book, *In Person: Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema*, a crucial addition to the field. Here, Margulies focuses on instances in which filmic subjects re-enact moments from their own lives on camera. But this greater degree of specificity is far from a narrowing of scope:

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 reenactment" 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



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moments of their earlier lives. Frequently, as in the Ali example, these works feature multiple actors playing the subjects at different stages of their careers and frankenstein newly staged scenes with archival footage. This suturing of disparate styles and bodies points up the unique ways in which cinema throws time out of joint and reassembles it, constructing new diegetic orders while prompting the viewer to examine nuances and distinctions in the qualities of the image and the bodies of the actors.

Still more bizarre along these lines is the example of Mel Stuart's 1980 TV film *Sophia: Her Own Story*, in which Sophia Loren appears, first, as her own mother (opposite the younger Rizza Braun playing Sophia) and, afterward, as herself in her later years. This dizzying splitting and doubling of Loren's persona and body, compounded by the film's multiple revisitations of familiar scenes from earlier films, makes for a strangely postmodern gesture for a made-for-television vanity project. But crucially, for Margulies, it also "provokes us to think which logic—that of resemblance, genetics, social group, or age—authorizes reenactment's performance of the past."

These provocations are sustained and revisited throughout Margulies's comprehensive text through more well-known examples, as well. Indeed, one of the pleasures of the book is reading its masterful re-engagements with "classics" of documentary history and theory, each time with a fresh lens or deeper contextual interconnectivity. Thus, Rouch's late Fifties/early Sixties films, *Moi, un noir* (1958), *The Human Pyramid* (1961), and *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961, co-directed with Edgar Morin), and other less well-known films in the same constellation, are the subject of the book's fourth chapter, where Margulies offers not only vivid close readings of key sequences and research into their production, but also a rich exploration of the contexts in which Rouch was working: the widespread movement for independence in francophone Africa and the relations between Africans and the French, and the imbrication of psychotherapy, autocritique, and labor politics in the French left at the time.

Similarly, Carlos Velo's 1956 documentary *Torero!*, which follows the final bullfight of the famed Luis Procuna, serves as the occasion to revisit André Bazin's writings on cinema's distinctive relation to death and the preservation of time. Margulies notes, however, that Bazin's own review of *Torero!* seems to miss what is most Bazinian about the film and re-enactment in general. She registers, with wonder, the fact that "Bazin's fascination with the human body in the cinema, suspended in limbo between life and death, between mythical immortality, physical decay, and existential fragility, does not translate into a concurrent interest in the aporias of reenactment." Through a close reading of Bazin's texts, Margulies argues quite boldly that there is a significant lacuna in Bazin's writing around this film and about the temporal conundrums of re-enactment in general.

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 *Hills 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

The Sopranos Sessions

by Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall.
New York: Abrams Press, 2019. 480 pp. Hardcover: \$30.00.

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

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 subversive 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

