



ART IN THE CINEMA

THE MID-CENTURY
ART DOCUMENTARY

Edited by Steven Jacobs,
Birgit Cleppe & Dimitrios Latsis

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Art documentaries, which most of us know through television, usually evoke tiresome didacticism and droll ponderousness. This has not always been the case, however. Before the breakthrough of television in most European countries, the art film was applauded as an avant-garde film genre. In the years immediately following the Second World War, art documentaries played an important part in an emerging cinephile culture favouring experimental shorts. The 1940s and 1950s can be considered as the Golden Age of the art documentary – not only because literally hundreds of art documentaries were produced but also because of the high quality and highly innovative or experimental nature of many of these films. With the exception of Alain Resnais's *Van Gogh* (1948), Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le Mystère Picasso* (1956) and a few others, most of the art films of the 1940s and 1950s fell into oblivion and they have received only meagre scholarly attention. This book aims to remedy this situation by discussing the most innovative, experimental and influential post-war art documentaries while also drawing attention to lesser-known productions.

In an extensive introduction to this volume, the art documentaries of the 1940s and 1950s are situated in the context of the post-war reconstruction and international cultural exchange, epitomized by international organizations such as FIFA – the International Federation of Films on Art. Discussing films by major figures such as Alain Resnais, Luciano Emmer, Henri Storck, Paul Haesaerts and Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, the introduction also chronicles the debates surrounding the status of films on art as 'art films' in their own right. In addition, the introduction draws attention to the particular formal and thematic concerns of documentaries on painting and sculpture while also focusing on the highly important subgenre of films showing artists at work.

Finally, the phenomenon of the art documentary is placed in a broader context of the dissemination and popularization of art enabled by the museum, the art book and the emerging medium of television.

Following this introductory chapter, nine chapters, each written by specialists in the field, deal with a specific theme or a key film. The first two chapters focus on the social, political and institutional context of mid-twentieth-century art documentaries. Birgit Cleppe demonstrates how the rise of the post-war art documentary is closely connected to new museological developments, while Dimitrios Latsis discusses two key American art documentaries in the light of Euro-American cultural and political relationships at the start of the Cold War. Subsequently, both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 deal with the ways art historians have used the medium of film as instruments of art historiography enabling new visual research methods. In their chapters on the films by Paul Haesaerts and Carlo Ragghianti, Steven Jacobs and Joséphine Vandekerckhove, and Emanuele Pellegrini respectively, show how these art historians went beyond the traditional role of advisory experts or authors of a voice-over text, taking full responsibility for the film's form and content. The following chapters focus on specific films: Angela Dalle Vacche discusses André Bazin's unrealized film project on the Romanesque churches of the Saintonge region in France, while Natasha Ritsma, John Wyver and Lucy Reynolds focus on Willard Van Dyke's *The Photographer* (1948), John Read's *A Sculptor's Landscape* (1957) and Dudley Shaw Ashton's *Figures in a Landscape* (1953) respectively. In the final chapter, Henning Engelke discusses the art documentaries made by visual artists, focusing on Ilya Bolotowsky's film experiments.

To a large extent, this book is the result of a research project (2014–18) sponsored by the FWO Research Fund Flanders that enabled Birgit Cleppe to complete her PhD thesis on post-war art documentaries under the supervision of Steven Jacobs at Ghent University. However, the foundations of this book go back to earlier initiatives such as the symposium and film programme *Art & Cinema: On the Aesthetics, History and Theory of the Art Documentary*, which took place at KASK Cinema in Ghent in December 2013 and included screenings of films by Charles Dekeukeleire, Paul Haesaerts, Glauco Pellegrini, Luciano Emmer, Umberto Barbaro and Roberto Longhi, Pierre Alechinsky,

Luc de Heusch, John Read, Bruce Conner and Hans Cürlis, introduced by Susan Felleman, Steven Jacobs, Brigitte Peucker, Paola Scremin, Angela Dalle Vacche and John Wyver, among others. This symposium and film programme was part of a research project on the interactions between film and the visual arts at the School of Arts (KASK), University College Ghent, which also resulted in the release of the DVD box and booklet on *Art & Cinema: Belgian Art Documentaries* by Cinematek in Brussels in 2013.

A similar film programme and symposium entitled *The Cinematic Museum: The Post-war Art Documentary* took place at the same venue in December 2017, including films by Henri Alekan, Dudley Shaw Ashton, René Huyghe, Mark Lewis, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Alain Resnais and Robert Hessens, and lectures by Birgit Cleppe, Steven Jacobs, Dimitrios Latsis, Mark Lewis, Emanuele Pellegrini and Lucy Reynolds, among others. We would like to thank all universities, museums, archives and individuals who made possible these events and offered us the opportunity to watch some amazing films and discuss these with several experts of the field: KASK Cinema, Cinea Brussels, the Brussels Cinematek, the BOF Research Fund of Ghent University, Laura Bonne, Lisa Colpaert, Bert Lesaffer, Elisa De Schepper, Bart Versteirt, Joséphine Vandekerckhove and Leen Vanderschueren.

Both film programmes brought several contributors to this volume together and this was also the case with a panel on the post-war art documentary at the 2015 SCMS conference in Atlanta, where Birgit Cleppe, Henning Engelke, Steven Jacobs and Natasha Ritsma gave papers that were the basis for their chapters in this volume. We would like to thank all participants, chairs and audience members for their contributions and valuable comments. We would additionally like to acknowledge Hilde D'haeyere, Leon Duyck, Joni Kinsey, Patricia Oman, Sara Kosiba, Roger Hallas, Jennifer Wild and the staffs of the Archives of American Art, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for their advice, research help and invitations to share this work. Last but not least, we also owe thanks to Madeleine Hamey-Thomas at I.B. Tauris and Claire Constable, Anna Coatman and Rebecca Richards at Bloomsbury.

Introduction: the mid-century celluloid museum

STEVEN JACOBS AND DIMITRIOS LATSIS

In a 1991 survey of art documentaries, its authors state that many of the art films of the 1940s and 1950s ‘seem dated and too “arty” today’.¹ The aim of this book is to contradict this statement, advocating that mid-twentieth-century art documentaries are often highly personal, poetic, reflexive and experimental films that, still today, offer a thrilling cinematic experience in contrast with many of the didactic art documentaries produced during the following decades. Furthermore, the 1940s and 1950s can be considered ‘the Golden Age’ of the art documentary as illustrated by the sheer quantity of such films produced in that era. Several surveys commissioned and published by international organizations such as UNESCO include listings of literally hundreds of art documentaries made in many countries.² This vast quantity went hand in hand with the exceptional quality of many innovative landmark documentaries such as *Le Monde de Paul Delvaux* (Henri Storck, 1946), *La Leggenda di S. Orsola* (Luciano Emmer, 1948), *Van Gogh* (Alain Resnais and Robert Hessens, 1948), *Rubens* (Henri Storck and Paul Haesaerts, 1948), *Thorvaldsen* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1949), *Jackson Pollock 51* (Paul Falkenberg and Hans Namuth, 1951), *Les Statues meurent aussi* (Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, 1953), *Le Mystère Picasso* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1956), *A Sculptor’s Landscape* (John Read,

1957) and *L'Enfer de Rodin* (Henri Alekan, 1959). An impressive list of leading and famous filmmakers contributed to these films, some of which won Academy Awards and other important film prizes in those years.³ In addition, art documentaries were discussed extensively at international conferences, in publications of professional associations, in leading film and art journals and by prominent critics and film theorists such as André Bazin, Pierre Francastel, Henri Lemaître, Siegfried Kracauer and Rudolf Arnheim, among others.⁴ Leading universities started collecting, studying and disseminating these films, albeit in the context of the overall genre of educational films.⁵

Pre-war developments

The flourishing of highly innovative art documentaries in the wake of the Second World War would not have been possible without pre-war experiments. Films on art go back to the 1910s when scenics and travelogues documented sights and monuments of historical cities. Architecture and monumental sculpture were the pre-eminent subjects of early films on art, owing to the fact that they could be filmed in natural light.⁶ Moreover, these public sculptures could be viewed from different or even shifting viewpoints, mobilizing the static artwork – a goal that many later art documentaries also attempted to reach.

Another way to mobilize or ‘animate’ immobile works of art was to show the process of their creation. Already in 1915, Sacha Guitry made *Ceux de chez nous* (*Those of Our Land*) on leading French writers and artists including Degas, Monet, Renoir and Rodin.⁷ The film basically consists of a series of vignettes showing celebrities posing for the camera but some footage focuses on artists working in their studio – in many cases the sole cinematic record of the artists. Showing an artist at work would become one of the most successful formulas throughout the history of the art documentary. In the late 1930s, Elias Katz made the *Artists at Work* series, consisting of simple 10-minute glimpses of artists such as Lynd Ward, William Groper and George Grosz at work.⁸ Similarly, many American educational films on decorative art of the 1920s and 1930s show us, for instance, how to weave baskets, how to make pottery, how native Americans made their blankets and so forth.⁹

The most impressive early film project dealing with artists at work, however, originated in the Berlin *Institut für Kulturforschung*, which was founded in 1919. Under the direction of art historian Hans Cürlis, this 'Institute for Cultural Education' was one of the first organizations that favoured film as a mediator for art appreciation and instruction.¹⁰ Together with cinematographer Walter C. Türck, Cürlis started the landmark film cycle *Schaffende Hände* (*Creating Hands*) in 1922 using 'over the shoulder' shots showing prominent artists such as Max Liebermann, Lovis Corinth, Käthe Kollwitz, Max Pechstein, Wassily Kandinsky, Otto Dix and George Grosz at work.¹¹ Several of these films document the creation of a work of art in the length of a single take, dwelling on the artist's gestures, movements and hesitations. As we will demonstrate in one of the following paragraphs, the theme of the artist at work proved highly important for mid-twentieth-century art documentaries, particularly those on artists using styles marked by gestural brushwork and physical movements such as Abstract Expressionism and lyrical abstraction.

Apart from Cürlis's institute, several small studios as well as UFA, Germany's major studio, produced films on visual arts during the interwar period. UFA even included a unit that produced popular educational shorts for both theatrical and non-theatrical release and listed art subjects in its catalogues as early as 1922. An often noted UFA Kulturfilm was *Die steinernen Wunder von Naumburg* (*Stone Wonders of Naumburg*, 1935) by Rudolph Bamberger and Curt Oertel, in which the camera explores the architecture and the sculpted Gothic figures of Naumburg cathedral. Described by Arthur Knight as the first film 'that suggested the possibility of granting an art experience through the medium of motion picture', the film has its verbal information restricted to a minimum and it first and foremost delivers its message visually.¹² Oertel went on to make art documentaries, including the landmark *Michelangelo: Das Leben eines Titanen* (1940), a feature-length film telling the story of Michelangelo's dramatic life, which is evoked not with reliance on re-enactments, but by the spectacular visualization of his art.

By means of location shots, vivid montages, light- and sound effects, (subjective) camera movements and point-of-view shots, Oertel carries us along through intrigues, conspiracies and civil wars in Renaissance Florence and Rome. Gliding over Michelangelo's paintings and sculptures, Oertel's



Figure 0.1 Michelangelo: Das Leben eines Titanen (Curt Oertel, 1938). Lobby card.

camera evokes the dramatic tension of Michelangelo's works, which are beautifully captured through chiaroscuro lighting. The creation and history of the statue of David (1501–4), for instance, is evoked through a succession of striking images. First, we see the statue's face luring from behind bars, as if it is still in Michelangelo's studio, but further shots suggest that the statue is travelling through Florence. Later, an attack on Florence is evoked as we see a missile falling and shattering the arm of the statue, followed by dramatic close-ups of David's face and shattered marble pieces. Turning the contemplation of art into a thrilling cinematic experience, Oertel's film was re-edited in 1950 by Richard Lyford under the supervision of Robert Flaherty and Robert Snyder. Distributed as *The Titan: The Story of Michelangelo*, the film won an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

Other internationally acclaimed art documentaries released shortly before the Second World War were produced in Belgium – the magazine *Design Review* later noted that 'Belgium's contribution to the art film was out of all proportion to its limited geographical surface area.'¹³ *Thèmes d'inspiration* (*Themes of Inspiration*, 1938) by Charles Dekeukeleire 'animates' static artworks by showing painted images that are interwoven with footage of the world that inspired Flemish painters. A highly lyrical film, *Thèmes d'inspiration* juxtaposes details of paintings of Old and Modern Masters with footage of real landscapes,

faces and objects, evoking the world that inspired the artists. Marked both by the impressionist avant-garde (to which Dekeukeleire had contributed earlier) and by the new documentary trends of the 1930s, *Thèmes d'inspiration* focuses on the telluric alignment of characters in paintings by Pieter Bruegel, Joachim Patinir, Jacob Jordaens and Constant Permeke. Dekeukeleire's film focused not only on artworks but additionally explored the phenomena that inspired them, pioneering a format appropriated by many films to come.

The most influential pre-war Belgian art film was André Cauvin's *L'Agneau mystique* (*The Mystic Lamb*, 1939), which deals with the famous fifteenth-century altarpiece by Jan and Hubert Van Eyck.¹⁴ In an 8-minute film, the voice-over is confined to a minimum in favour of a visual exploration of the painting. Scanning the altar's panels, the camera moves slowly so there is time to contemplate the many details rendered in close-up. For the first time, an art film drew attention to the aesthetic coherence of a single (though multi-panelled) piece of art enabling the viewer to make a formal analysis. Together with Cauvin's similar film, *Memling* (1939), *The Mystic Lamb* was commissioned by the Belgian government for its pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair where it made a lasting impression. Arthur Knight described *The Mystic Lamb* as 'probably the first of the new art films on an adult level to be seen by any considerable audience in America.'¹⁵ Writing in 1952, Iris Barry stated that *The Mystic Lamb* 'has not even now, after so many other cinematic studies of paintings, been surpassed.'¹⁶

Post-war reconstruction and cultural organizations

Films released in the late 1930s such as Dekeukeleire's *Themes of Inspiration*, Cauvin's *The Mystic Lamb* and Oertel's *The Titan* marked the start of a boom for art films that was only slowed down by the advent of the Second World War. In the decade following the War, literally hundreds of art documentaries were released in several countries. This post-war 'renaissance' of art documentaries can, no doubt, be linked to the conditions of a society recovering from the traumas of the War. After the barbarism of Nazism and

the devastation of war, film, in its capacity as a mass medium, was called upon for the accomplishment of a humanist ideal of cultural emancipation through education. Art came to be seen as a necessary and even a fundamental part of education for all. These changing attitudes about the place of the visual arts in education, culture and society were unmistakably beneficial to the production and exhibition of films on art.¹⁷ Considered to be an efficient device for the proliferation, democratization and popularization of high culture, the art documentary developed in tandem with an expanding participation of the middle and lower classes to the sphere of art and culture, as evidenced by growing museum attendance and cultural tourism. This ideal of social and cultural emancipation also inspired the foundation of UNESCO, the United Nations' scientific and cultural agency, in 1945. International cultural organizations such as UNESCO and the Fédération internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF) played an important role in the support of the production, distribution and critical contextualization of art documentaries, which were presented as devices for cultural and educational progress. This was also the aim of more specialized organizations such as IAFF (International Art Film Federation), CIDALC (Comité Internationale pour la Diffusion des Arts et des Lettres par le Cinéma) and IIFA (International Institute of Films on Art).

Last but not least, leading artists such as Fernand Léger, filmmakers such as Luciano Emmer, Henri Storck and Alain Resnais, museum officials such as René Huyghe (Louvre), James Johnson Sweeney (Guggenheim Museum, New York) and Paul Fierens (Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels), and film archivists such as Henri Langlois (Cinémathèque française) and Iris Barry (MoMA Film Library, New York) were involved in the development of FIFA (Fédération Internationale du Film sur l'Art).¹⁸ Founded in 1948, FIFA organized three International Art Film Congresses, which took place at the Louvre in Paris in 1949, at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1950 and at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1951. Throughout the 1950s, FIFA would become an important platform for the debates on art films, facilitating their international distribution.¹⁹

Although, in many cases, nationalist agendas, economical protectionism or just a pride of a local cultural heritage made the production of such films possible, most if not all of the mid-twentieth-century art documentaries were



Figure 0.2 Films on Art books published by UNESCO in 1949, 1951 and 1953.

first and foremost inspired by this belief in the possibilities of cultural exchange and international understanding through culture and education.

This dialectic between internationalism and nationalism also marks the production and distribution of American art documentaries of the Cold-War era, such as the landmark film *The Photographer* (Willard Van Dyke, 1948), discussed extensively by Natasha Ritsma in Chapter 6. While rivalries between the US and the Soviet Union in science, including the ‘Space Race’, are widely known to historians of the period as well as the general public, scholars like Lisa Davenport and Michael Krenn have shown that dispute in the cultural and intellectual sphere was at least as intense.²⁰ With abstract expressionism, jazz and creative writing at the forefront, the United States actively sought to demonstrate its artistic supremacy over the socialist realism of the Soviet Union by promoting individualism and the market as the avatars of a ‘national aesthetic’. The USIA (United States Information Agency) and private production companies made and distributed films on Jackson Pollock, Alexander Calder and Isamu Noguchi, which actively departed from the regionalist-representational bent of the New Deal sponsored art of the 1930s. In addition to exhibitions, publishing and the explosion of the art market, it was films like these that can be credited with the ascendance in public perception of New York as the new art capital of the world.²¹

Writing in 1949, critic and curator Arthur Knight found films on art produced in the United States quite wanting in matters of aesthetics, labelling

them ‘invariably pedestrian’, ‘often crude’ and ‘oversimplified classroom demonstrations’ when compared to the more famous examples of the genre made in France, Belgium and Italy.²² Despite this qualitative deficit, the American Federation of Arts’ Guide to Art Films published in 1950 listed no fewer than 353 such titles, more than a hundred of which had been produced in the preceding year alone. By 1960, films on art were being nominated for Academy Awards on a regular basis (e.g. *Rembrandt: A Self-Portrait*, 1954 and *The Living Stone*, 1959), artists like Marie Menken and James and John Whitney made audacious experimental films still being taught today and specialized companies (like Pictura Films Corporation) and divisions of educational film producers (e.g. Encyclopaedia Britannica and Films Inc) had emerged to serve a wide market that included museums, schools and art appreciation programmes. As we will see in Chapter 2, this (brief) renaissance of the documentary on art in North America was part and parcel of the rise of the United States as a leading cultural power in the ‘free’ world of liberal democracies and was thus imbricated in the cultural rhetoric of the Cold War, with lines drawn on aesthetic as much as geopolitical grounds.

Major figures in Europe: Emmer, Storck, Resnais

The major figures of the European films on art in the 1940s and 1950s were Luciano Emmer, Henri Storck, Paul Haesaerts and Alain Resnais, working in Italy, Belgium and France – countries with a rich artistic (particularly pictorial) past.²³ In Italy, the production of innovative art documentaries started in the late 1930s and early 1940s when painter Luciano Emmer joined forces with Enrico Gras to produce a series of innovative and commercially successful short art documentaries such as *Racconto da un affresco* (1938), *Cantico delle creature* (1943), *Fratelli miracolosi* (1946), *Il Dramma di Cristo* (1948), *L’Invenzione della croce* (1948) and *La Leggenda di S. Orsola* (1948).²⁴ Emmer and Gras attempted to transpose the narrative aspects of paintings into film. Emmer was convinced that cinema had inherited the narrative functions that painting once exercised. Not coincidentally, most of Emmer’s films deal with the rich tradition of *trecento* and *quattrocento* painting by artists such as Giotto,

Piero della Francesca, Vittore Carpaccio and Fra Angelico among others, who replaced the iconic stasis of the medieval and Byzantine tradition with a more dynamic and an openly narrative character.

Rather than documentaries on art, Emmer created narrative films that use painted images instead of actors, sets, props and locations. *Il Dramma di Cristo* (1948) is therefore not so much about Giotto but rather about the life of Christ, told with the help of Giotto's frescoes of the story. In so doing, Emmer isolated details of the paintings in succession, almost evoking classical continuity. After a shot of a landscape, for instance, Emmer cuts into the picture with a medium shot on an isolated fragment of the picture, followed by a close-up reaction shot of a character, in its turn succeeded by close-ups of bystanders or significant objects. Using camera movements to point out details, creating rhythm through editing to impart action to the static actors, and working very closely with the musical score (often composed by Roman Vlad) and a minimal voice-over commentary, Emmer transformed static paintings into stories. Most of the shots of an Emmer film focus on narrative elements in the paintings – elements that painters had themselves used in order to create a narrative such as gestures or facial expressions of the characters. As in a feature film, however, Emmer uses inserts of details from the painting that have no specific narrative function – a bird on a tree, a vase on a window sill – but that help to create an atmosphere and a setting for the story. Frequently, Emmer introduces a kind of cinematic suspense, as when he first shows the feet of a person before showing their character in its entirety, contradicting the logic of the painting displaying all its details simultaneously. Although unmistakably based on the narrative organization of the paintings, Emmer's films present themselves as creative translations or transpositions rather than reproductions.

Another major mid-twentieth-century contribution to the development of the art film was made by Henri Storck, who had already directed *Regards sur la Belgique ancienne* in 1936. In the late 1940s he made landmark films on artists such as Delvaux and Rubens – the latter made in collaboration with Paul Haesaerts. In contrast with Cauvin's film on Van Eyck's Mystic Lamb and most of Emmer's films, Storck did not base his films on individual paintings but rather on a collage of details from various works. While Emmer wanted to tell