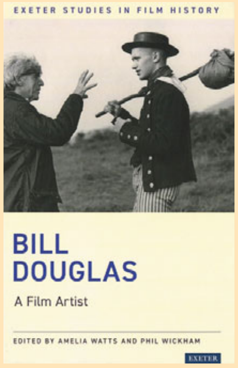


# BILL DOUGLAS: A FILM ARTIST

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| EDITORS | AMELIA WATTS AND PHIL WICKHAM |
| PUBLISHER | UNIVERSITY OF EXETER PRESS |
| PAGES | 250 |
| ISBN | 9781804130247 |

REVIEWED BY RASTKO NOVAKOVIĆ

This is the first book about Bill Douglas for 30 years. Its editors Phil Wickham – the curator of the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum in Exeter – and Amelia Watts, have brought together a variety of voices and approaches in one accessible volume. The ten essays do a wonderful job of introducing Douglas to a new generation, while expanding our understanding of this multifaceted artist and the often precarious personal and production contexts in which he worked.

Douglas is arguably one of our greatest filmmakers, mainly remembered for four films before his death at 57 in 1991. His Scottish autobiographical trilogy (*My Childhood*, 1972; *My Ain Folk*, 1973; and *My Way Home*, 1978) is stark and lyrical, while *Comrades* (1986) is a panoramic ode to the Tolpuddle trade union martyrs. This book also reveals him as a collector, film historian, teacher and cinephile. He was such an avid gatherer of film ephemera (such as sheet music or Chaplin and Monroe memorabilia) and early optical media (gadgets like the praxinoscope) that these are now held in the museum named after him. The museum also preserves his working papers, which contain unrealised scripts, such as *Justified Sinner*, based on the 1824 novel by the Scottish writer James Hogg. What a punch that would have packed: a gothic tale centred on code-switching between classes, for which Douglas intended to use "a framing device of a contemporary film crew to bring its eighteenth-century story to the screen".

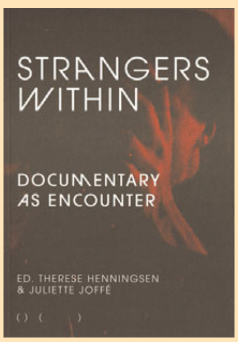
The book also revisits Douglas's films. In a close reading of the trilogy, Jamie Chambers reveals the elegance, consistency and daring of its design, while Andrew Gordon offers accounts of the challenges and growing confidence of these films. We learn more about Douglas's favourite film *Il mare* (1962) – a queer, existentialist genre-bender – that came to inspire his graduation film, the gay classic *Come Dancing* (1970). Throughout the book, we're shown how the breadth of influences and engagement with different cinemas, technologies and traditions shaped Douglas's approach to music, situation and narrative, and stopped him being hemmed in by solely British traditions.

There are even unseen films to look forward to. Thanks to restoration work by Andy Kimpton-Nye and Hopscotch Films and their upcoming documentary, we will be able to explore the 20 freewheeling 8mm films Douglas made between 1966-69. One of them is *Fever* (1967), which you can watch online – a surrealist piece laced with dread of a nuclear holocaust. Expressive and playful, with Douglas in the starring role, it shows a totally different side to him.

In this book Douglas emerges as a rounded figure, often full of joy and enthusiasm, constantly active and enjoying collaboration. It's a welcome reappraisal.

**Toni Morrison articulates the dark temptations inherent in drawing artistic inspiration from the lives of others**

STRANGERS WITHIN: DOCUMENTARY AS ENCOUNTER




# STRANGERS WITHIN: DOCUMENTARY AS ENCOUNTER

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| EDITORS | THERESE HENNINGSEN AND JULIETTE JOFFÉ |
| PUBLISHER | PROTOTYPE |
| PAGES | 280 |
| ISBN | 9781913513306 |

REVIEWED BY HANNAH MCGILL

Published by Prototype, a new press that seeks to accommodate "a creative vision not offered by mainstream literary publishers", this is less a rigorous academic enquiry into documentary ethics and more a cross-disciplinary amble around the subject. Autobiographical pieces by filmmakers share space with fiction, theory and art criticism; and older essays by the Nobel laureates Toni Morrison and Annie Ernaux sit alongside the very raw and recent.

The 1988 essay by Morrison that kicks off the collection articulates the dark temptations inherent in drawing artistic inspiration from the lives of others. She depicts herself meeting an elderly fisherwoman close to her home who is eccentrically dressed and fascinating. They talk, Morrison fantasises a friendship – and then they never run into each other again, leaving Morrison chastened. She aligns her own intellectual covetousness – "I immediately sentimentalised and appropriated her" – with dehumanising media images and language, alarmingly concluding: "Art gesturing toward representation has, in some exalted quarters, become literally beneath contempt."

If this primes the reader for a pitched argument about the morality of telling others' stories, the pieces that follow tend to be only tangentially linked to Morrison's provocation. Interest in *oneself* as the filmmaker or artist predominates, rather than concern over the subjectivity of one's subjects. The relevance of some of the selections can thus feel oblique, and others a little self-indulgent, but the unorthodox editorial approach does throw up some fascinating juxtapositions. For one contributor, the Danish documentarian Jon Bang Carlsen, "documentaries are no more 'real' than fiction films… There is no 'reality' that cannot be seen from a different angle and be revealed as a dream." This perspective meets direct challenge from the British artist filmmaker Andrew Kötting, who writes of the daily care he must provide for his disabled daughter and collaborator Eden – a situation that permits little space for interpretation. Eden "is real and not invented. She is needful every day of her life, from the minute she can't get herself up until the last thing at night when she can't put herself to bed." Her art, meanwhile, is neither fact nor fiction: "She just draws. Draws from life."

Mary Jiménez Freeman-Morris's essay about filming her 102-year-old father depicts an artist stripped of her power to define her subject, his situation or even herself. Her father calls her by his brother's name. She accepts this, since "I have no choice… I give hospitality to the other that I will become for him." The possibility of filmmakers abusing their power may be a modish worry, but these pieces remind us that happenstance, necessity and compromise can drive creation no less than plotting, decision-making or exploitation might.