

‘It Is An Art That Cannot Live By Looking Back’: *Dont Look Back*, Performance, and the Revision of Direct Cinema

KEITH BEATTIE

Alexandre Astruc, in his brief manifesto ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Grade: The Camera Stylo’, emphasized the development of the portable 16mm camera as the essential element of his formulation of the ‘camera as pen’ and the emergent individual filmmaking that he envisioned would blossom from this development.¹ Echoing Astruc’s emphasis on the mobile camera, portable camera and sound recording equipment occupy a privileged place in histories of direct cinema, the mode of observational filmmaking deployed in the US in the late 1950s. Interestingly, a crude technological determinism functions in many such histories, one that argues, in effect, that new portable camera technology created the new form of documentary. Notably in this relation Richard Leacock, one of the founding practitioners of direct cinema and an inventor of the portable camera technology used by many direct cinema practitioners, refused to reduce the development of the form to the new equipment. While he acknowledged that the new camera technology made possible a new mobility in filming, Leacock also recognised that ‘far more was involved [in the development of direct cinema] than the technology of portable equipment.’² In this relation, as the film theorist Stella Bruzzi has astutely suggested, ‘perhaps it is the groundbreaking performances in these films and not merely the arrival of

¹ Alexandre Astruc, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra Stylo*’, in P. Graham and G. Vincendeau (eds.), *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks* (BFI/Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2009), pp.31-38.

² ‘Richard Leacock Remembers the Origins of Direct Cinema’, in *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, K. Macdonald and M. Cousins (eds.) (Faber and Faber: London, rev. ed 2006), p.253.

lightweight cameras that revolutionised documentary.³ This paper is concerned with the relationship of performance and direct cinema, and the ways in which the foundational premises and extant styles of direct cinema are revised within and through performances within D.A. Pennebaker's landmark direct cinema work *Dont Look Back* (1967), a record of Bob Dylan's concert tour of England in May 1965. The analysis also makes reference to a number of works other than, though in varying ways associated with, *Dont Look Back*.

Significantly, handheld camerawork and varieties of performances align direct cinema and the New American Cinema, an alignment often overlooked within histories of both forms. However, Jonas Mekas, the chief polemicist of the burgeoning 1960s avant-gardist New American Cinema, noted on a number of occasions similarities between the styles and practices of direct cinema and the New American Cinema. Of the range of practices shared by the two cinemas Mekas emphasized the 'shakiness' of handheld cameras and, notably, for Mekas much of the utility of the handheld camera is its ability to effectively capture, if not provoke, improvised performances.⁴ The practical emphasis within the New American Cinema on improvised performance was also exploited within nonfictional direct cinema portraits produced during the 1960s. Exemplifying the intersections of direct cinema and the New American Cinema at the point of portraiture are two statements—one by direct cinema's Richard Leacock and one by a filmmaker whom Mekas included within the New American Cinema. In 1963 Leacock proposed a working definition for the kind of documentaries he wanted to make:

A film about a person who is interesting, who is involved in a situation he cares deeply about, which comes to a conclusion within a limited period of time, where we have access to what goes on.⁵

At nearly the exact moment that direct cinema portraits were appearing, another portraitist—Any Warhol—was engaged in a different approach,

³ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge: London, 2000), p.132.

⁴ Jonas Mekas, 'A Note on the Shaky Camera', *Film Culture*, issues 24-27, 1962, p.40.

⁵ Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2005), p.29.

though one informed by a similar purpose. In explaining his approach Warhol commented:

I only want to find great people and let them be themselves and talk about what they usually talked about and I'd film them for a certain length of time and that would be the movie.⁶

One context in which Warhol applied his assessment of his film portraits was the so-called Screen Tests: three-minute, black and white, tightly-framed static shots of various subjects. According to one commentator Warhol's portrait films 'turn the performance [of the sitter] into the only event available for recording.' Further, according to this commentator, the Screen Tests 'show a nearly static subject looking at the camera... We have no choice but to look back and confront the performance for what it is—a pose'.⁷ *Dont Look Back* partakes of this 'look back', but in this case the viewer has a choice. In *Dont Look Back* we not only look back at a pose, we are also offered certain pleasures associated with watching and hearing a fascinating human subject. In effect, *Dont Look Back* makes available the fun (a word not routinely associated with documentary representation) associated with knowing that the sitter's pose confounds the emphasis on the authentic in theories of documentary performance. As Thomas Waugh points out, documentary film

implies in everyday common-sense parlance the absence of elements of performance, acting, staging, directing, and so forth, criteria that presumably distinguish the documentary form from the narrative fiction film.⁸

However, the documentary tradition from Grierson onwards includes a focus on real people—'social actors' as the film theorist Bill Nichols would have it⁹—who enact themselves and their social roles in front of the camera. This form of performance within documentary film has been summarised in the paradoxical phrase 'acting naturally', and the artificial

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vinicius Navarro, 'Nonfictional Performance from Portrait Films to the Internet', *Cinema Journal*, no. 3, spring 2012, pp.137, 138.

⁸ Thomas Waugh, *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2011), p.75.

⁹ Nichols uses the term throughout his book *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1991).

code is elaborated in the phrase 'acting to play oneself'.¹⁰ Such a formulation—'acting to play oneself' or performing selfhood—is majorly recast within *Dont Look Back*, a film in which the central subject performatively projects a persona.

A persona has been described as a

public image which derives from the performances and utterances of [a particular] person and is constructed over time in specific ways. There may be only a tenuous connection between the person and the persona.¹¹

The tenuous and attenuated link between self and persona and the work involved in constructing a public image and social façade is underlined in the perception by Gilles Deleuze that

[i]ndividuals find a real name for themselves...only through the harshest exercise in depersonalisation, by opening themselves up to the multiplicities everywhere within them, to the intensities running through them.¹²

Pennebaker has said in this relation that Dylan in 1965 was interesting (a favoured word in his discussions of his filmmaking) precisely because of the mystery that attends his charisma.¹³ In conceiving his approach to filming his subject Pennebaker attempted to ground Dylan's mystery in a recognisable identity, specifically that of the poet Byron. 'I saw Dylan as a Byronesque pop figure, a guy who was inventing a whole new kind of mood in popular music', Pennebaker has recalled.

Here's this middle-class kid who goes out on the road, hangs out with people, and he becomes or he decides to become a kind of hobo-type character, and with all the romance that

¹⁰ The phrase 'acting to play oneself' is used as a heading to Chapter Four of Waugh, op. cit.

¹¹ Janet Thumim, 'Miss Hepburn is Humanized': The Star Persona of Katherine Hepburn', *Feminist Review*, no. 24, October 1986, p.71.

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. M. Joughin, (Columbia University Press: New York, 1995), p.6.

¹³ Quoted in Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (revised and updated by E. Thomson and P. Humphries, Backbeat Books: Milwaukie, 2011), p.208.

carries...and once he's made it, he looks out at everybody and says, 'Fuck you!'.¹⁴

The disruptive and expressive persona evoked here is one that prominently incorporates the emergent Dylan of rock music. *Dont Look Back* captures Dylan on the cusp of change, at a moment of reinvention when he was leaving folk to adopt rock—the self-styled ‘musical expeditionary’ moving from one genre to another.¹⁵ Dylan further invested the public image informing his new persona with a composure that was demonstrably hip. Pennebaker called the young Dylan ‘very hip, very hip’¹⁶, and the singer Marianne Faithfull, who appears briefly in *Dont Look Back*, has referred to Dylan at the time of his appearance in the film as the ‘hippest person on earth.’¹⁷ Throughout the film Dylan invests his expression of hip with wit and wile, features that are aligned with a projection of ‘cool’ exhibited in the form of a supercilious nonchalance. By assembling and mixing these and other components of his public image Dylan constructed a shifting changeable persona. The unstable connection between the person and the various guises of the persona is underlined by Pennebaker in his description of *Dont Look Back* as a film about Dylan, ‘whoever that is.’¹⁸ The suggestion here that the persona is rehearsed, as opposed to a revelation of a natural or authentic selfhood, is reinforced in the fact that the action in the film’s prologue in which Dylan performatively projects the persona was staged three times. One version was filmed on the Thames Embankment behind the Savoy Hotel that Dylan used as his base during the 1965 tour and another version was shot the same day on the roof of the Savoy. The selected version was filmed in a cul-de-sac between the Savoy—which appears in the background and to the left of the frame, where it is partially obscured by scaffolding—and the Queen’s Chapel of the Savoy, the brick wall of which appears on the right side of the frame.

¹⁴ Quoted in David Hajdu, *Positively 4th Street: The Life and Times of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Mimi Baez Fariña and Richard Fariña* (Bloomsbury: London, 2002), p.249.

¹⁵ Dylan in Martin Scorsese’s televisual biography of Dylan, *No Direction Home* (2005).

¹⁶ Quoted in Daniel Mark Epstein, *The Ballad of Bob Dylan: A Portrait* (Harper Collins Publishers: New York, 2011), p.142.

¹⁷ Marianne Faithfull, with David Dalton, *Faithfull: An Autobiography* (Cooper Square Press: New York, 1994), p.40.

¹⁸ In the voiceover commentary to his film *65 Revisited*, which was issued on DVD together with *Dont Look Back* as part of the ‘65 Tour Deluxe Edition’ box set released by Sony/BMG in 2006.

The French photographer Tony Frank, who was on assignment for the journal *Salut les Copains*, took a number of shots that day of the location and the action while lying on the ground in front of Dylan during the filming of the sequence. (It is partial measure of Dylan's insouciance that he is able to ignore Frank's presence during filming).



In the sequence Dylan flips through pieces of white cardboard on which are written single words from the lyrics of his song 'Subterranean Homesick Blues', which accompanies the scene. According to many commentators, the mixture of staged action and musical accompaniment in the cue-card sequence constitutes the first music 'clip'. However, the form was not without precedent. The intersection of popular music and visual imagery within tableau-like segments can be traced to the short films that accompanied songs on Scopitones. Dylan had such works firmly in mind when he considered the action that forms the so-called cue-card sequence.¹⁹ Invented in France in the late 1950s, Scopitone jukeboxes permitted a user to watch and hear one of up to thirty-six 16mm short musical films. The films depicted singers or bands performing their latest release, and often

¹⁹ Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2008), p.150.

while doing so male musicians were surrounded by bikini-clad female dancers. The tacky attempt at titillation of many Scopitone films led Susan Sontag to include them within the canon of works that she identified in her 1964 essay 'Notes on Camp'.²⁰ One Scopitone film of this type was that produced to support the song 'I Cried for You', as sung in 1959 by Sonny King, a crooner associated with the Sinatra-led Rat Pack. In the brief Technicolor film made by Harman-ee Productions of Los Angeles, King sings of the women he now rejects and as he does so they 'strip to reveal the song's lyrics stencilled on their bodies.'²¹ The (strip) teasing revelation of the lyrics to King's song can be compared to the teasing, piecemeal disclosure of the lyrics to Dylan's song, and the 'materialisation of language'²² in the Scopitone film functions as a precursor of the manifestation of the lyrics in the prologue to *Dont Look Back*.

Further, in its ironic commentary on the scopic and tonal associations of Scopitone films the prologue rewrites and resists the packaging of identity associated with the form. Dylan is not a pawn in the music industry's game, and his performance in the cue-card segment and throughout *Dont Look Back* outstrips any expectations by the industry that he would continue to replicate the folk music that constituted the original basis of his success. Accordingly, the prologue depicts Dylan unleashing a refashioned identity accompanying his rock music before famously unveiling them for a live audience later in 1965 at the Newport Folk Festival. The result is a portrait of a complex persona that submerges and subsumes subjectivity.

Such a process is in line with the film's method, which does not seek in the manner of an exposé to 'get behind the mask' of the public image or to uncover essential truths, or truths about the essential selfhood of the 'real person'. *Dont Look Back* is, then, grounded in a form of portraiture that implicates both a subject's awareness of, and performance for, the camera. Within this approach the film evokes the pleasures of watching and listening to a fascinating persona. In this way, Dylan's changes—notably his move from folk to rock, and the performative presence through which the transformation in musical genres is actualised and expressed—demanded and resulted in significant changes to the codes and conventions

²⁰ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp' in *Against Interpretation* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1966).

²¹ David James, 'L.A.'s Hipster Cinema', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 1, Fall 2009, p.57.

²² *Ibid.*

of the form of representation known as direct cinema, a filmic practice that Pennebaker had helped to establish.

Among the revisions of direct cinema undertaken by Pennebaker in *Dont Look Back* was his abandonment of the 'crisis structure' that was prominent in the television programs produced by Robert Drew, with whom Pennebaker collaborated for a few years in the early 1960s. Implicit within the so-called crisis structure is the notion that a subject, when confronted with a pressing or critical situation will, due to the demands of the situation, fail to register the presence of a camera. As a result the camera is able to record what are, within the terms of such an assumption, a subject's 'real feelings' and 'true nature'. Attending this theory is the associated assumption that faced with a critical situation a subject has no time for pretence or performance. In this way, as the assumptions and arguments of the crisis structure would have it, a denial of performance is a central component of the revelation of a so-called true or essential self.

Notably, with the cessation of his collaboration with Drew Pennebaker abandoned the crisis structure—and with it the restraints of Drew's televisual, journalistic direct cinema. Nevertheless, in *Dont Look Back* Pennebaker maintained the practice of celebrity portraiture, a common focus of Drew's programs. Portraits of celebrities served a dual function: people in the media spotlight were able to negotiate the demands of being continually filmed, and a well-known subject such as Dylan held the potential to attract a sizeable audience to a work of documentary. However, Pennebaker's portraiture differed from Drew's practice, and the aims of documentary generally, in that Pennebaker did not seek in *Dont Look Back* to provide biographical information about Dylan. In this way Pennebaker shunned the label 'documentary' with its connotations of a tedious informationalism, and in this relation he has said of his work during his association with Drew that 'the idea of a documentary...was anathema.' According to Pennebaker,

[m]ost people look at [*Dont Look Back*] and say it's documentary. It is not documentary at all by my standards. It throws away almost all its information... I broke my neck trying not to be informational... [I was interested in] the mood...not the information.²³

²³ Quoted in Keith Beattie and Trent Griffiths (eds.) *D.A. Pennebaker: Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2014), p.33.

In place of a dry documentary informationalism Pennebaker, within a process that turned *Dont Look Back* into a richly entertaining spectacle, acknowledged and accepted that Dylan was performing for the camera. Notably, in this way *Dont Look Back* is not organised around, or intended to pursue putative revelations of the 'essence' of a person, as in the case of the programs produced by Drew. In place of a search for the authenticity of selfhood *Dont Look Back* presents a subject who is, according to Pennebaker, 'enacting his life as he wishes to enact it. Not necessarily as it is, and not necessarily as he wishes it were, but just as he wants to act it.'²⁴ The outcome of this approach, notes Pennebaker, is a film that is a 'kind of fiction, but its Dylan's fiction, not mine. He makes it up as he goes along.'²⁵

Among its other important functions the presence of such a performance within the form of portraiture undertaken in *Dont Look Back* recasts the role of observation as it was defined in Drew's direct cinema. For Drew and his team of direct cinema practitioners in the early 1960s 'observational' filmmaking involved the conceit that the practice of filming does not interfere with or intrude upon the scene being filmed. According to this assumption a cameraperson is, in effect, an all-seeing microscopic presence—a position summarised in the pervasive characterisation of the observational filmmaker as a 'fly-on-the-wall'. In turn, as the theory of unobtrusive observation has it, a result of this practice is (as with the implications of the crisis structure) that a subject does not recognise the presence of the camera that thereby records a subject's unfeigned, 'natural' action.

Pennebaker's filmic practice in *Dont Look Back* is not that of a fly-on-the-wall. (Pennebaker has drawn attention to what is a pejorative assessment of a filmmaker's skill in his comment, 'I never wanted to be a fly on the wall, it's a kind of disgusting idea'.²⁶) In fact, the fly-on-the-wall is swatted in *Dont Look Back*. Dylan is, contrary to the theory of the invisible insect, fully aware of the camera. In this way observation is deployed as a style that suggests close physical proximity to subjects, though as Pennebaker's comments on Dylan's performance make clear any sense of intimacy that may accrue to proximity is deferred or rejected

²⁴ Ibid, p.103.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Quoted in Richard Phillips, 'Pennebaker and Hegedus: Seminal Figures in American Documentary Film', *World Socialist Website*, www.wsws.org

within and through a persona projected before the acknowledged presence of the camera. Differences between Pennebaker's practice and the theory of the fly are further indicated in the fact that conspiracy, collusion and collaboration, as opposed to an assumed observational non-interference, characterise the relationship of filmmaker and subject in *Dont Look Back*. In this relation Pennebaker has said that during his first meeting with Dylan and Bob Neuwirth (Dylan's sidekick at the time) 'I recognised instantly that they had the same sense about what they were up to as we did about what we were up to, which was a kind of conspiracy.'²⁷

Two specific moments, both of which occur within the context of 'hanging out', exemplify the variety of Dylan's collusively-endorsed performances in the film. 'Hanging out' encompasses everyday experiences on the tour, a process that finds its form in scenes of talking, relaxing, and waiting to perform on stage. As such, hanging out implicates minimal action; it is akin in certain ways to a slice of mid-1970s Altmanesque casual pacing. Interestingly in this regard, in her 1967 film *Portrait of Jason*, a film she interpreted as a reaction to the crisis structure of the Drew-era films of Pennebaker and Leacock, Shirley Clarke deliberately sought to include what she called the 'boring parts.'²⁸ Ironically, in terms of Clarke's critique, action in *Dont Look Back* is largely eschewed within a focus on hanging out. In certain ways hanging out is comparable to the operation of 'backstage' in Hollywood musicals, a space in which characters relax and interact away from the often fraught moments associated with stage performances. Frequently the narrative function of backstage exchanges and interactions is to reveal intimate insights into characters' experiences and emotions. Various music documentaries have adopted and adapted the conventions of 'backstage', in particular by replaying the notion that the space is one in which subjects, away from the spotlight of the stage, openly and unguardedly reflect on otherwise personal and private matters, thereby, in effect, revealing their essential selves.²⁹ This process, and the understandings that attend it, does not apply in *Dont Look Back*. Dylan's projection of persona is conducted both on- and off-stage.

²⁷ Quoted in William Rothman, *Documentary Film Classics* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1997), p.146.

²⁸ Quoted in Irene Gustafson, 'Putting Things to the Test: Reconsidering *Portrait of Jason*', *Camera Obscura*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2011, p.12.

²⁹ Interpretations of 'backstage' in music documentaries have relied heavily on Erving Goffman's interpretation of the concept. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Anchor Books: New York, 1959).

Hanging out between concerts in *Dont Look Back* is downtime, to be filled with various activities, among them a party. The drama of the party scene disrupts, to an extent, the minimal action of hanging out, though the action in the scene remains relatively low key. The party scene in Dylan's suite at the Savoy begins abruptly with Dylan demanding 'who threw the glass in the street?' Assembled guests, unaware that Dylan's question refers to glass shelves that have been thrown out of the bathroom window, are startled by Dylan's outburst. An older bearded man (Derroll Adams, a folksinger and an acquaintance of Jack Kerouac) looks especially anxious and is calmed by a tall, long-haired woman (Anthea Joseph, whom Dylan first met in 1963 at London's Troubadour folk club). Dylan accuses a drunken man of smashing the glass, a charge that leads to a heated argument with the man. Eventually Dylan defuses the argument by shaking hands with the drunk, saying as he does so, 'I didn't want the glass to hurt anybody.' The scene ends and the issue of the broken glass is forgotten as the camera shifts its attention to a conversation between Dylan and Derroll Adams. Finally the question 'who threw the glass?' is not as pertinent as questions regarding the impact on the so-called fight scene of the presence of the camera.

The fact that subjects recognised the camera's presence is exemplified in the case of the folk singer Tom Paxton who was in the room during the altercation. Paxton, wary of the ways in which a camera has the potential to distort events, refused to be filmed. Similarly, members of the Beatles also elected not to be filmed during their visits to Dylan's suite at the Savoy. Like Paxton and the Beatles, Dylan was clearly aware of the camera. Within this context—the ever-present camera, subjects who acknowledge its presence, and the potential of this situation to affect action—the question becomes: does the 'fight' scene depict Dylan losing his otherwise well-maintained cool, or does it reveal, yet again, a consummate performance by Dylan?

That Dylan, during a screening of a rough cut of the near-complete film, asked Pennebaker to remove the scene (a request he subsequently withdrew) might suggest that Dylan had lost his cool during the altercation with the drunk, and that the camera has at this moment captured the unguarded, 'real' Dylan, shorn of pretence, with his defences down. Alternatively, Dylan's request to cut the scene might have referred to his awareness that his performance here—raw and excessive as it is—is not as subtle as his performances in other scenes. Given the proliferation of

Dylan's performative projections of persona within *Dont Look Back* the question concerning the 'fight' scene brings into focus the matter of observation at the core of Pennebaker's filmmaking. Observation in *Dont Look Back* is not a neutral form of recording, but an active process in which subjects respond in varying ways to the presence of the camera—including absenting themselves from the frame, and performing for the camera.

Another scene that highlights issues of performance is one which Pennebaker interprets as an 'incredible scene' that is crucial to the film.³⁰ The scene takes place in the back seat of a cab that is taking Dylan to his final concert performance. Also in the cab is Fred Perry, who managed both Dylan's tour and a contemporaneous tour by the folk singer Donovan, with whom Dylan maintained a friendly rivalry at the time. Dylan asks how the Donovan tour is going and Perry answers, 'Not so good.' Perry mentions that an agent had asked him,

'What do you think if I book a theatre in Scarborough for a Sunday concert and put on just Donovan...? I said, well, you know, I can't see it for two hours... He said, do you think we should book one other act? I said, I think you should book about four other acts.'

Perry finishes his account by laughing snidely at this situation. After listening to these comments Dylan lights a cigarette, looks out the window and says nothing. According to an effusive Pennebaker this is

'one of the perfect scenes that you fall on... [G]oing in the cab to the Albert Hall, when Fred starts talking about his 'other' folksinger, Donovan,...and then Fred does the trashing of Donovan. And Dylan never cracks. He just looks out the window. Fantastic! It's just fantastic! Just one shot. You didn't have to edit anything; it told you everything.'³¹

William Rothman notes that

Pennebaker is quite shrewd, as usual, in judging this deceptively simple [scene] to be a fantastic triumph of

³⁰ Quoted in Beattie and Griffiths, p.84.

³¹ Ibid.

filmmaking. When Dylan looks out the window without 'cracking'...it does indeed tell us everything. But it tells us everything by telling us nothing. We do not know, cannot say, what this man is thinking or wondering or feeling. Absolutely nothing is being asserted about, or by, the world on film. But absolutely nothing is being denied. Everything is revealed.³²

The core of the scene for Pennebaker is Dylan's response to Perry's 'trashing' of Donovan. As Pennebaker comments, 'Dylan never cracks. He just looks out the window' and for Pennebaker this moment tells everything. By seemingly not reacting to the conversation about Donovan the persona remained in place. The scene may reveal or show all, though, as Rothman points out, questions remain about what Dylan is 'really' experiencing. If everything is revealed in this scene it is everything about Dylan's persona.

Within and through its focus on the performative projection of persona *Dont Look Back* revises the tradition of direct cinema from which it emerged. Further, via such revisions the film connects with other works in which performance and the inflections of direct cinema and New American cinema intersect. One example of this connection is the films of Norman Mailer. His films—*Wild 90* (1968), *Beyond the Law* (1968), and *Maidstone* (1970)—were almost universally derided on their release. However, his films have since been reappraised, and recently the Harvard Film Archive, for example, referred to them as 'essential [components] of the canon of 1960s American independent cinema.'³³ Mailer was informed by the films of Warhol and John Cassavetes, the latter another director centrally associated by Jonas Mekas with the New American Cinema. Further, Mekas endorsed all of Mailer's films, thereby aligning them with the low-budget, independent cinema he championed. In addition the links between Mailer's films and direct cinema are profound, notably in the fact that Pennebaker shot each of Mailer's films, and in his essay 'A Course on Film-Making' Mailer explicitly equated his films to the aesthetics of direct cinema.³⁴ Working without a script, Mailer—in his most elaborate film, *Maidstone*—devised a scenario for the film's improvised action centred on

³² William Rothman, *Documentary Film Classics* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1997), pp.188-89.

³³ 'The Cinematic Life of Norman Mailer', The Harvard Film Archive, at <http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2007fall/mailer.html>.

³⁴ Norman Mailer, 'A Course in Film-Making', *New American Review*, no. 12, 1971, pp.200-241.

the character of Norman T. Kingsley (played by Mailer), a film director who is casting a film inspired by Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967). Kingsley is also considering whether to run for President, though he senses a threat of assassination.

Though unlikely, indeed implausible, the scenario reflects the political hysteria of 1968, in particular the assassinations of King and Kennedy. Appearing in almost every scene Mailer plays various characters or personae: Mailer as Kingsley, a thinly-disguised version of the blustering Mailer of public life, and Mailer as himself, in scenes in which he discusses the film with the assembled cast. Questions of reality implicated in each of these performances are underlined in the final scene during which, seemingly, the real interrupts the narrative fiction of the improvised plot. In this scene Rip Torn, playing Kingsley's half-brother, steps out of character and attacks Mailer with a hammer. Mailer referred to *Maidstone* as a 'commando raid on the nature of reality'³⁵ though the hammer scene, rather than demonstrating the aggressive force of reality, offers another context for Mailer—the well-known author, aspiring New York politician, television personality, film director—to perform.

In a different vein the films of Robert Kramer reconfigure connections apparent in *Dont Look Back* between the New American Cinema, direct cinema, portraiture, and performance. Often overlooked in analyses of US independent cinema, Kramer's films—notably *Ice* (1970) and *Milestones* (1975)—were identified and substantially analyzed in the early 1970s by French theorists and critics as works of the New American Cinema.³⁶ In another way, the actress and filmmaker Jackie Raynal made the point— one not widely appreciated—that Kramer was a link between French *cinéma vérité* and the New American Cinema, and Kramer's early films for the New Left Newsreel Collective were informed by a handheld, direct cinema aesthetic.³⁷ Informing these connections, a number of Kramer's later films combined direct cinema and New American Cinema

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See, for example, Pascal Bonitzer et al, 'Milestones et nous: table-ronde', *Cahiers du Cinema*, no. 258-9, July-August 1975. Reprinted in English in *Cahiers Du Cinema: Volume 4, 1973-1978*, D. Wilson (ed.) (Routledge/BFI: London, 2000).

³⁷ Pierre Léon, in collaboration with Fernando Ganzo, 'A Conversation with Jackie Raynal', *Cinema Comparative Cinema*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2013, p.32, at http://www.ocec.eu/cinematicomparativecinema/pdf/cc02_eng_interview_raynal.pdf

styles within works of self-portraiture. While his 1990 video work *Berlin 10/90*, for example, openly incorporates autobiographical reflections, it is in the documentary-based films *Doc's Kingdom* (1988), *Route 1 USA* (1989), and *Dear Doc* (1990) that Kramer fully deploys autobiography, aligning it with portraiture through the character of 'Doc'. In these films the figure of Doc is played by Kramer's Newsreel associate Paul McIsaac, though the figure of Doc combined, as McIsaac has explained, autobiographical elements drawn from the experiences of Kramer, McIsaac, and 'others of our generation.'³⁸ Doc, then, is the combination of various autobiographies—an idealistic figure that in a series of films personifies aspects of Kramer's past and the collective history of a generation—becoming in the process a complex persona expressive of the Left/liberal '60s' and its legacies.

Found in Kramer's typewriter at the time of his death in Paris was an unfinished letter to Bob Dylan in which Kramer proposed a joint film project:

Not a movie about you, not a documentary or a report, but the two of us, make a movie together over a period of time: pieces of this and that, scenes you imagine... To try to assemble something that is rich and varied. A movie that works like a dream or a vision.³⁹

Interestingly, the film Kramer proposed had in effect already been made in the form of *Eat the Document* (1972), the outcome of a collaboration between Dylan and Pennebaker, which was loosely based on Dylan's 1966 world concert tour. Like *Dont Look Back*, the film it echoes, *Eat the Document* is not, as Kramer proposed, a film about Dylan. Like *Dont Look Back*, *Eat the Document* concerns Dylan's persona, in a form that is not a documentary or a report—more a dream or a vision. Dylan further complicated the persona and his association with direct cinema in his film *Renaldo and Clara* (1978), an extension of *Eat the Document* based around Dylan's 1975 Rolling Thunder Review concert tour. Within the film masks, stand-ins, and enacted scenes are continually deployed to evoke questions of 'real' and constructed identities. The complexities of the resultant persona baffled Jonathan Cott during an interview with Dylan for *Rolling Stone* magazine soon after the film's completion. In response to the

³⁸ Paul McIsaac, 'Creating Doc', at http://www.windwalk.net/writing/rk_mci.htm

³⁹ Robert Kramer, 'Letter to Bob Dylan', *Rouge*, at http://www.rouge.com.au/4/letter_dylan.html

question put to Dylan by Cott, 'Who is Bob Dylan, who is Renaldo—and what is the relationship between them?' Dylan replies that

[t]here's Renaldo... There's a guy in whiteface singing on the stage and then there's Ronnie Hawkins playing Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan is listed in the credits as playing Renaldo, yet Ronnie Hawkins is listed as playing Bob Dylan.

When Cott adds that Bob Dylan made the film, Dylan responds, 'Bob Dylan didn't make it. I made it.'⁴⁰

Reference to the examples cited here is not intended to suggest the existence of a canon of films in this vein. Rather, as with Astruc's analysis of the camera-stylo, what is referred to here is a tendency. Specifically, an under-recognised and under-analysed tendency within nonfictional texts in which direct cinema, the New American Cinema, and performances coalesce in varying ways. Astruc aligned the emergent tendency he identified with the avant-garde, a force that, as he said, does not look back. In a similar way Bob Neuwirth, Dylan's friend, described *Dont Look Back* as 'avant garde filmmaking applied to avant garde music.'⁴¹ If we include within this description the performative presence of the film's subject, and the ramifications of that performance for documentary representation, we have informed, exceeded, and revised numerous assumptions concerning the practices of direct cinema, and (perhaps) nonfiction more generally.

Keith Beattie is an Associate Professor within the Faculty of Arts and Education of Deakin University, Melbourne. He is the author of several books on aspects of documentary film theory and national cinemas, including *D.A. Pennebaker* (2011), *Documentary Display* (2008), and *Documentary Screens* (2004).

⁴⁰ Jonathan Cott, 'Bob Dylan as Filmmaker: "I'm Sure of My Dream Self. I Live in My Dreams"', *Rolling Stone*, January 26, 1978, at <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/bob-dylan-as-filmmaker-im-sure-of-my-dream-self-i-live-in-my-dreams-19780126?page=4>

⁴¹ Voiceover commentary to the DVD version of *Dont Look Back* released in 2006 by Sony/BMG.