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Current and Upcoming Biographies on Film Tackle a Wide Range of Subjects

Whether doing their own research, using the perspective of those close to their subjects, relying on existing print biographies, or combining elements of all three, biographical filmmakers can take a variety of tacks as they craft cinematic portraits of a person's life. Their biggest decision, of course, is whether to go the documentary route or create a biopic, with the potential interest in the subject—and available funding—influencing the choice. While the Hollywood treatment of a subject's life can mean huge box office sales and perhaps a trip down the red carpet at the Academy Awards—think last year's *Hidden Figures*—the increasing number of streaming video outlets and their demand for content has opened up new outlets for biographical films.

TBC's annual—but far from exhaustive—look at biography on film shows that both cable networks and the streaming giants have recently or will offer soon a number of documentaries. In addition, documentaries will appear on the big screen, along with the more high-profile biopics. Here are some of the biographical offerings of the past few months, ones slated for release soon, and films that are still being shot or are in the planning stages.

Feeling Stuck?

Whatever state your biography's in—vague idea, proposal, well underway—BIO's experienced biographers can help. For a limited time, we are offering a **one-hour phone and email mentoring session for \$60**. (The cost of any additional sessions can be worked out with your mentor.) [Email BIO President Will Swift](#) with a brief statement about the nature of your project and your goals for the one-hour session, and you will be matched with a mentor who can help you get unstuck.

From the Editor

Summer's here, and along with beach reads, barbecues, and road trips, that means it's time for our annual look at some of the biographical documentaries and biopics that have been recently released, will be out shortly, or are in the planning stages. We're especially glad to have a contribution from member Billy Tooma, an active documentary filmmaker. In an



Hans Renders is the Professor of History and Theory of Biography and Director of the Biography Institute at the University of Groningen.

Board Member Interview

Six Questions with Hans Renders

What is your current project and at what stage is it?

I'm working on my third biography (in collaboration with Sjoerd van Faassen) on Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), who was friends for a time with Mondrian and second only to him as a painter. Van Doesburg was a Dutch artist who practiced painting and writing on subjects such as constructivism, Dada, and pacifism. He published poetry under different names and was also a theorist on architecture.

He is best known as the founder of the journal *De Stijl* (1917–31). His work was presented at an exhibition of the gallery linked to *The Little Review* in New York, in the 1920s.

Van Doesburg lived in Amsterdam, Paris, Weimar (where he wanted to become a teacher at the Bauhaus) and other places; his archives are spread over at least six countries. And, his afterlife is quite interesting, especially because of his third wife, Nelly van Doesburg. Thanks to her contacts with Peggy Guggenheim, Van Doesburg had posthumous success in the United States.

Who is your favorite biographer or what is your favorite biography?

It's difficult to make a choice. Reiner Stach's *Kafka*. Although there are more excellent biographies of Kafka (Ernst Pawel and Peter Alt), this one is really the best. Incredible but true, only recently Stach found new documents about the Kafka family in Israel. Because Kafka's life remained always a little bit in the mist of the past, this is a surprising biography. How much context can a biography bear? A lot, if one is able to write so elegantly as Stach. Donald Sturrock's *Storyteller: The Life of Roald Dahl* (2010) is also a favorite.

What has been your most satisfying moment as a biographer?

That must have been the moment I found an unknown letter of Nabokov concerning *Lolita*. Almost all his letters are in fact written by his wife Véra, but this one was really from his own hand. Satisfying as such, but even more because I found this letter in an attic by logical deductive reasoning after reading a volume of his collected letters.

What has been your most frustrating moment?

That must have been in Cornwall. Through thorough research I thought I had found an illegitimate son of Jan Hanlo, the Dutch poet and subject of my first biography. He was homosexual but I discovered he had had a



Biographer's Diary

By Cathy Curtis

When a Key Document Is Missing

The artist and writer Elaine de Kooning (1918–1989) kept a journal throughout her adult life, filling about 200 small notebooks with her distinctive handwriting. Family members who read snatches of these pages during Elaine's lifetime have told me that they contain frank remarks about New York art world luminaries.

Elaine (as I call her, partly to avoid confusion with her husband, Willem de Kooning) also told many people that she was writing an autobiography, which reportedly was under contract with Knopf. (Staff at the publisher were not able to confirm this.) Her progress with this manuscript at the time of her death, in 1989, is unknown, but her late-life remarks to interviewers suggest that she was still in the throes of deciding what to include.

Nearly three decades after her death, the notebooks have not surfaced. (They had been kept in a storage facility by a relative; after his death, they were reported missing by a mysterious

relationship with a British girl before World War II. It was a stormy evening, rain and wind blew me to a remote hamlet, I rang the doorbell of a parsonage. A small hatch in the gate door opened and a man who looked strikingly like Jan Hanlo stuck out his head. He even had a red beard like Hanlo. It turned out, nevertheless, that this man had not even been born when Hanlo was in England for the last time.

Any research/marketing/attitudinal tips to share?

- Use footnotes for your sources, don't put them in the main text.
- Consider biography as nonfiction, and keep in mind that good writing is not the privilege of authors who invent their stories.
- Visit someone always twice if you interview him or her. After your visit to every interviewee, you will have *l'esprit d'escalier*. Reminiscences might have been brought up by your questions, but the real story comes after you have left the house.
- Start writing soon. Writing is thinking. During the writing process, you'll discover what you missed in your documentation. Question-driven research leads to better stories than the attempt for completeness.
- Become friends with archivists.

If you weren't a biographer, what dream profession would you be in and why?

Luckily enough, I can pursue all my dream activities. Besides writing biographies, I'm fond of reading and reviewing them. In the Netherlands, the book market is simply too small to earn a living as a biographer. As an academic, I experience pleasure in thinking about the theoretical framework of what a biography should be. [Being a full professor in the history and theory of biography](#), I can use this knowledge in supervising PhD students. Up till now, I managed to help 15 talented biographers in writing their wonderful biographies, all published as dissertations and by trade publishers at the same time.

Hans Renders wrote his first biography on the Dutch poet Jan Hanlo (1912–1969) and his second on the symbol of Dutch resistance during World War II, journalist and writer Jan Campert (1902–1943). He also co-edited the volume The Biographical Turn: Lives in History (Routledge), which was published earlier this year.

interested party whose identity I think I've deduced . . . but she has since died.) Similarly, no drafts of the autobiography have turned up.

People I've spoken to have various theories about who might have wound up with these materials. Some of these individuals are no longer living; others are maintaining a close-lipped silence on the subject. Even if I discovered the whereabouts of the journals, their current owner might not allow me to read or quote from them. It is also possible that they have been destroyed.

Because the existence of the journals is well known to people in the field, a "peer reader" of my proposal for a biography of Elaine cautioned that I'd be wasting my time if I couldn't find them. This made no sense to me, because plenty of other sources are available, including her published writings, her published and unpublished interviews, reviews of her work, correspondence in various archives, and my own interviews with her peers, as well as the thoroughly documented life of her famous husband and the social history of the period.

There is also the issue of . . . let's call it "biographical temperament." Some biographers are driven to spend years hunting for an elusive document that might potentially upend everything we think we know about a subject. There is also the biographical approach that aims for a "definitive" life, so unimpeachably authoritative that decades would pass before other authors dared attempt a rival