

# Ten Minutes For John Lennon

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• Des O’Rawe

C’est impensable d’imaginer ce film monté plan par plan.<sup>1</sup>

1. Raymond Depardon’s *10 minutes de silence pour John Lennon* (1980) is not what it claims to be: the film’s running time is closer to nine minutes than ten, and the soundtrack is not silent. Duration and silence are relative concepts, imaginary mechanisms that punctuate our lives; in this film the absence of time and the presence of noise are not imperfections. Even the certainty of death can become a mystery in need of a wager: *Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie* (Pascal).

2. Shortly before 11.00pm on December 8, 1980, John Lennon and Yoko Ono parked their limousine outside the Dakota Building on the corner of 72nd Street, Manhattan. They were returning home from ‘The Record Plant’ where Ono was recording a new song, ‘Walking on Thin Ice’. As they made their way to the entrance of the building, Mark David Chapman confronted Lennon and shot him repeatedly with a .38 calibre handgun. Lennon was rushed to the Roosevelt Memorial Hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival. Later, Ono was taken back to their apartment where groups of mourners had now gathered to light candles, place flowers, sing, and play music. In the early hours of the morning, she sent a message to the growing crowd below instructing them to leave and reassemble the following Sunday at 2.00pm in Central Park for ‘ten minutes of silent prayer’.

When arrested, Chapman claimed that he had heard voices telling him to kill John Lennon. Ono had liked to describe her artwork as ‘dealing with the music of the mind’.

3. *San Clemente* – Depardon’s second feature length documentary – was released in France in 1980. The film observes the lives of patients in a psychiatric hospital situated on a Venetian island. For Depardon, the subject matter of this film was probably only a departure of sorts. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, his photojournalism chronicled violence, injustice, and deprivation in the developing world. After working as a reluctant military photographer during the Algerian war, he collaborated closely with Gilles Caron in Chad (where they were imprisoned), Biafra, Cambodia, and Vietnam (where Caron disappeared). The loss of his friend – and the co-founder of the Gamma agency – upset Depardon deeply, and he took a break from photographic work that lasted two years.<sup>2</sup>

The images of bewilderment in *San Clemente* – the strange shuffles and utterances of its casualties and refugees – are reminiscent of those far-off theatres of war, famine, and revolution: places where the music of the mind has broken into a demented cacophony of voices.

Chapman pleaded guilty and was sentenced to ‘twenty years to life’; he has been denied parole on four occasions since 2000. Yoko Ono has consistently opposed clemency stating that the release of her husband’s killer would ‘bring back the nightmare, the chaos and the confusion once again’.

4. At the beginning of her artistic career, Ono wrote an ‘instructional poem’ entitled, ‘Painting for Burial’ (1961): ‘On the night of the full moon, place a canvas in the garden from 1:00 AM till dawn. When the canvas is dyed

thoroughly in rose with the morning light, dismember or fold it and bury.'

At this time she was living in Greenwich Village and was about to become involved with the Fluxus collective. She met Lennon (a former art student) in 1967 and introduced him to the New York conceptual art scene where they befriended the American avant-garde composer, John Cage. On Lennon and Ono's 1971 album, *Unfinished Music No.2: Life with Lions*, the track 'Two Minutes Silence' commemorates Ono's miscarried baby by paying homage to Cage's 1952 silent composition, *4'33"*. Another track on the later *Mind Games* album (1973) is entitled, 'Nutopian International Anthem (3 Seconds of Silence)'.

The conceptual art movement in North America 'encouraged artists to ask fundamental questions about both art and the art world, about the politics and sociology of art', and its rise coincided with an era of unusually 'intense political militancy'.<sup>3</sup> Famously, Robert Morris closed down his 'Styrofoam Exhibition' in protest against US war crimes in Cambodia, while Lee Lozano made her protest against women, politics, 'art and the art world' by withdrawing completely 'to pursue investigation of total personal and public revolution', as stated in her artwork, 'General Strike, 1969'. Lennon and Ono wrote some songs of love and peace, held 'bed-ins', and hallucinated sometimes.

The ways of burial:

1. Bury it in the garden and place a marker with a number on it.
2. Sell it to the rag man.
3. Throw it in the garbage.<sup>4</sup>

**5.** In January 1969 (while the Beatles' song 'Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da' was top of the British hit parade), Depardon was in Czechoslovakia covering the repression of the Prague Spring movement by the occupying Soviet army. On 16 January, Jan Pallach, a student (of Aesthetics), attempted to commit public suicide by immolation (by fire) in Wenceslas Square. He died three days later and on 20 January 800,000 people participated in a minute-long silent vigil to commemorate his terrible sacrifice. In his short

film, *Jan Pallach*, Depardon moves the camera across the procession of mute faces, carefully gathering their looks – their gaze – into the frame: eyewitnesses before a witnessing eye. In Prague, similar suicides and suicide attempts followed but soon the world was elsewhere (life goes on).

**6.** *10 minutes de silence pour John Lennon* is comprised primarily of a repeated circular panning shot taken from a 'fixed' position somewhere in the midst of the 100,000 people who gathered in Central Park to pay silent homage to John Lennon. Depardon's camera is never just there; as framing patterns take shape, so too does an uncertainty about the difference between what we can see happening and what we are happening to see.

A man wearing an emerald beret, white scarf, and black gloves occupies the bottom right quarter of the frame. He is bearded and wears a pair of dark, round spectacles. He is still, and his looks and general appearance resemble that of Lennon. As the camera proceeds along its path, other figures come into view; some also bear a conscious or uncanny likeness to the dead man. A woman wearing a long, red overcoat also features in this opening frame, head down and hands clasped in prayer. Again, as the camera continues to pan left, it is noticeable that all of these images include the assertive presence of a red (coat, hat, scarf, badge, paper cup, etc.). At the close of the film, the title and the director's name will also appear in red lettering across a long shot (the second shot) of the dispersing crowd; the hollow sound of 'Imagine' can be heard over a P.A. system. There are no titles or music at the beginning of the film.

The random cinematography creates other coincidental patterns, repetitions, and motifs. Images of people in close and medium 'shot' are repeatedly displaced by an image of a group or groups before returning again at an individual face or figure. In the absence of any central attraction, the people look in various directions; some sway gently with the breeze, others appear motionless. For a few, Depardon's curious presence momentarily fills the void, his

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- Central Park, 14 December 1980

hand-held camera a convenient elsewhere to stare into but this is not Prague, and this is not January 1969.

**7.** 1980 was a bad year for the sixties generation: a month before Lennon's death, Ronald Reagan was sworn in as the new President of the US; in Britain, monetarism was the new order of the day; and Christmas would mark the first anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Unlike many 1960s cultural icons, Lennon seemed to have survived the onslaught of ridiculous self-parody, becoming instead a patient keeper of the anti-authoritarian flame. Maybe he had decided that songs and bed-ins, like poetry, make nothing happen. Maybe, this is the meaning of 'Imagine'.

**8.** Opposing the prevailing breeze, the camera veers left again. Two men dominate the foreground; one is looking upwards, the other wears a (midnight) cowboy hat and he seems to be saluting someone or something. Avoiding the look of the camera, a red-haired man in a sleeveless flack-jacket turns away and the camera tilts downwards, disappointed. Then the fallen leaves of New York's late autumn come into fuller view, and a Manhattan skyline gathers in the background. A man sits on the leave-covered ground, beside him is someone wearing a red bandana. Trees appear, with figures sitting and standing on their naked branches. A camera clicks somewhere out of the shot, and in the background someone fidgets with a paper bag.

These sounds do not suddenly end the silence rather they interrupt the constant drone of a helicopter hovering overhead (there is no such a thing as silence). Casually, the camera drifts slightly to the right before slowly making its way upwards, along the branches and across the metropolitan skyline into a patch of clear blue where the tiny helicopter momentarily comes into view and then vanishes, an eye in the sky above us.

**9.** In March 1969, Yoko and John married and went on their honeymoon to Amsterdam where they staged a bed-in for world peace.

Between 1960 and 1963 Johan van der Keuken randomly filmed a series of sequences of everyday life in Amsterdam. Towards the end of his urban tableau, the busy city slowly comes to a halt as a crowd congregates in a square for an act of silent commemoration. Van der Keuken keeps his distance from the crowd, avoiding the distraction of individuals and their various gestures and expressions. The Amsterdam commemoration is rendered simply (but poetically) as a collective event, a moment when the city paused before returning to its business.<sup>5</sup>

Like van der Keuken (who died in 2001), Depardon's film-making (experiments) are not a necessary product of his photography (assignments). Nevertheless, points of formal and social convergence do exist. In many of his films, for example, one is instantly confronted by a bureaucratic panopticon within which human-beings are being routinely processed by other human-beings (a police station, a mental hospital, newspaper office, the courts of law). In his other films, one encounters remote, desert places where the serenity of the environment contrasts with the turmoil of a displaced person or a vulnerable community. Depardon is not simply interested in producing images of institutions and landscapes. What captures his conscience catches his eye and this is the pain of disconnection and the trauma of not belonging. All his detours return him to this place.

**10.** *10 minutes de silence pour John Lennon* is a short and sensitive rendering of a real event. It makes no attempt to manipulate reality into

something else. Instead, it follows an improvisational aesthetic that has but three rules: avoid preparation, neglect technique, and repress the desire to communicate.

On a cold December day, 100,000 people gathered in New York to commemorate the death of a famous man. There, amidst the mystery of time and the strangeness of silence, Raymond Depardon filmed something of what happened and in that moment between death and burial, shock and pity, he again observed the world become a different place forever.

### Notes

- 1 Raymond Depardon, in 'Interview [with Bertrand Loutte]', *Court-Circuit*, March 2004. <http://www.arte-tv.com/fr/art-musique/Depardon/664284.html>.
- 2 The following are helpful introductions to Depardon's work and life: Fritz Gierstberg, *Raymond Depardon: Photographer and Filmmaker* (Rotterdam, Episode Publishers, 2005); Raymond Depardon, *Voyages* (F. Hazan, Paris, 1998); Jean-Claude Guilleband, *Return to Vietnam* (London, Verso Books, 1994); Frédéric Sabourand and Raymond Depardon, *Depardon Cinéma* (Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma, 1992); and Alain Bergala and Raymond Depardon, *New York* (Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma, 2006). Arte Video has recently released a DVD version of Depardon's auto-ethnographic documentary *Les Années Décliv* (1983) and most of his other films are now widely available on DVD.
- 3 Peter Wollen, 'Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art', in *Paris Manhattan: Writings on Art* (London, Verso Books, 2004), p. 30.
- 4 Yoko Ono: *Instructional Paintings* (New York, Weatherhill Inc. 1995), p. 12. Also at *aiu: a Yoko Ono Website*. <http://www.a-i-u.net/instructions.html>.
- 5 The film referred to here is entitled *Un Moment de Silence* and the DVD version is included in volume 1 of the recently released van der Keuken's box sets (Arte Video, 2006).