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Theories of Documentary

7.5 hp

Module 3: Theories of Documentary, 7.5 hp

This module provides an introduction to the documentary and reportage genres of filmmaking. It will examine a range of perspectives on the conceptual foundations of this approach to presenting reality and actuality in moving-image productions. Questions of ethical responsibility, objectivity, and truth claims will be critically investigated and individual statements of intent developed in relation to production practice.

The approach taken in this module is based on analysis and discussion of examples of documentaries. The aim is, as before, to then extract from these examples, techniques, ideas, strategies, and practices that could be useful to you in producing your own work in the course.

As before, all material will be available via Canvas and Kau Play.

Class format: This module will run simultaneously with Module 4: Production of Documentary.

Tuesday: Module 3: Theories of Documentary

Thursday: Module 4: Production of Documentary

The following books are available as ebooks in the library:

Patricai Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*, OUP, 2007

Ib Bondebjerg, *Engaging with Reality: Documentary and Globalization*, Intellect, 2014

James Quinn (ed) *Adventures in the Lives of Others: Ethical Dilemmas in Factual Filmmaking*, I.B. Taurus, 2015

Class 1

Introduction: Observational documentary

We start this module with looking at a very naturalistic style of film that gives the impression of being an invisible observer who merely records 'real life'. It is like we are overhearing people in front of us, that we can observe unnoticed. The main technique in the field is to use long takes of specific moments in time and place. The dramatic element in this type of documentary comes from our involvement and identification with those being filmed. The filmmaker as well as the audience are led by the material not the other way around, if we are to trust the authenticity of the work.

Aims

- To establish some of the basic styles and principles of documentary filmmaking
- To begin to think about the ethical implications of the practice of documentary
- To appreciate the historical traditions of documentary filmmaking

Readings

Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*, OUP, 2007, section 1

Thomas Austin, 'Seeing, feeling, knowing: *Etre et avoir*' in *Watching the World: Screen Documentary and Audiences*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012.

Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, Routledge 2006, 'Être et avoir'

Nicolas Philibert interview, BFI, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/interviews/nicolas-philibert-interview>

Screening, *Être et avoir* (2002) Nicolas Philibert



The documentary's title translates as "to be and to have", the two auxiliary verbs in the French language. It is about a primary school in the commune of Saint-Étienne-sur-Usson, Puy-de-Dôme, France, the population of which is just over 200. The school has one small class of mixed ages (from four to twelve years), with a dedicated teacher, Mr Lopez, who shows patience and respect for the children as we follow their story through a single school year. Following the film's popularity in cinemas, Lopez, the principal personality in the documentary, made an unsuccessful attempt to sue the documentary's makers for a share of the €2million profit. One of his main claims was that the film-makers had exploited his image without authorisation. French film unions warned that if Lopez had been successful it would have spelt "the death of the documentary, undermining the crucial principle that subjects should not be paid to participate"

Class 2

Lecture: Place & Space

Last week we read in an interview with Nicolas Philibert where he states 'You can make a great film with a very tiny subject'. Today, through an examination of the work of a British documentary filmmaker, Marc Isaacs, we do just that. Globalization, migration, class, ageing, all these big social processes get translated into personal stories in small spaces. There are of course documentaries that look at the bigger picture and work very well. Isaacs excels at finding those places where people are squeezed through, on their way to somewhere else. He questions them and gets them to open up and what we get, therefore, are personal stories of real people.

Aims

- To determine some of the positives and some of the negatives of this type of documentary filmmaking
- To get a sense of how useful location and place is in documentary filmmaking
- To be aware of the relationship between filmmaker, subject and audience in this style of documentary.

Readings

Ib Bondebjerg, *Engaging with Reality: Documentary and Globalization*, Intellect, 2014, ch.1, ch.8

Laura Rascaroli, 'A Common European Home? Filming the Urban Thirdspace in Marc Isaacs's *Lift* (2001)', http://www.marcisaacsfilms.com/pdf/laura_article.pdf

Niall Martin (2016) The (Dis)Locative Effect of Noise: Globalisation, Disorientation and Noise in Marc Isaacs' *Lift*', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 57:1,

Marc Issacs, Interview, http://marcisaacsfilms.com/pdf/this_much_is_true.pdf

Graham Hobbs, DVD Booklet, *Lift/Travellers/Calais: The Last Border*

Screenings, Marc Isaacs, *Lift* (2001), *Travellers* (2003), *Calais: The Last Border* (2003) *Outsiders* (2014)



Class 3

Lecture: The documentary essay

At this point we shift towards more polemical approach to the documentary form. Taking a reflective attitude towards the idea of the truth-value of documentary, these films engage in a concerted process to persuade the viewer to question some of the accounts by the mainstream media. How does one accommodate an ethical position when working in such a way? What are obligations of the documentary filmmaker when consciously using artifice in the pursuit of truth? Should one maintain a critical distance to a situation that one is perhaps overwhelmingly sympathetic?

Aims

- To consider the importance of a documentary ethics in practice
- To think about establishing what are the limits to making of a documentary in terms of artifice, balance and truth
- To develop an awareness of where documentary principles end and creative work starts

Readings

Robert Sklar, 'Documentary: Artifice In The Service Of Truth' (1975) in Jonathan Kahana (Ed) *The Documentary Film Reader. History, Theory, Criticism*, OUP, 2016

Michael Renov, 'Toward A Poetics Of Documentary (1993)' in Jonathan Kahana (Ed) *The Documentary Film Reader. History, Theory, Criticism*, OUP, 2016

Bill Nichols, 'Documentary Ethics Doing the Right Thing' in *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary*, UCP, 2016.

Margaret C. Flinn, 'Signs of the Times: Chris Marker's *Chats perche*', *Yale French Studies*, No. 115, New Spaces for French and Francophone Cinema (2009), pp. 93-111

Review, Terrorists — The Kids They Sentenced, <https://variety.com/2003/film/reviews/terrorists-the-kids-they-sentenced-1200540733>

Screenings: *The Case of the Grinning Cat/ Terrorister - en film om dom dömda*



Chris Marker

The Case of the Grinning Cat is a Chris Marker's video essay examining French political demonstrations in the early 2000s. The feline of the title refers to the series of brightly colored drawings of a large, smiling feline that began to show up in mysterious fashion on various buildings and walls throughout Paris. Purportedly looking to solve the mystery of the unknown artist, dubbed M. Chat, the filmmaker uses it instead as a springboard to examine the city's changing social climate -- from the pro-American feelings generated shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, to the anti-Bush and Iraq War demonstrations.



Lukas Moodysson

This is a Swedish 2003 documentary directed by Lukas Moodysson and Stefan Jarl. It is about the sentences given to rioters arrested during and after the Gothenburg Riots in conjunction with the European Union summit in Gothenburg 2001, many of whom were found guilty of various crimes in a large number of trials. It was first shown on June 27, 2003. The film features people aged between 19 and 30 interviewed about their reasons to be at the demonstrations, the police actions, their arrests.

Class 4

Lecture: Documentary and social activism

Not surprisingly, documentary filmmakers can be witness to tragic and emotionally disturbing situations. Faced with truly terrible suffering it is a long-discussed fact that there is an overwhelming desire to intervene in the situation, to relieve the misery of someone in a dreadful condition. This experience can lead to documentaries initiating campaigns, charities and movements for change. But the filmmaker can be faced with a choice: leave with the footage and bring the issue to the attention of the world but let this person suffer, or intervene and become catalysts for change. What are the limits to involvement and commitment? How does documentary filmmaking produce encounters in which the viewer feels engaged and compassionate? How does one avoid the victimization of those filmed from a first-world perspective?

Aims

- To consider what the limits on advocacy and filmmaking might be or not be.
- How does one avoid being a privileged outsider operating with a colonial attitude?
- How far do you let emotion take over from the complexity of (unregulated) global economy?

Readings

James Quinn (Ed) *Adventures in the Lives of Others: Ethical Dilemmas in Factual Filmmaking*, I.B. Taurus, 2015, ch.1, ch.9, ch.19

Laurie Ouellette, 'How the Other Half Lives: The Will to Document from Poverty to Precarity' in June Deery and Andrea Press (Eds) *Media and Class: TV, Film, and Digital Culture*, Routledge, 2017, pp. 98-113.

Vladimir Cotal San Martin & Georgia Aitaki, 'Everybody Hurts? Reality-based Entertainment and Mediated Suffering in Sweatshop: Deadly Fashion,' forthcoming.

Screening: *Sweatshop: Deadly Fashion* (2015)



It started off as a web-series, charting the experiences of three young fashion bloggers, who spent a month living the life of Cambodian garment workers in Phnom Penh. But following headlines and articles all over the world, more than a million hits and many inquires, the web-series has been re-versioned into an hour-long documentary.

Frida, Anniken and Ludwig live, breathe and dream fashion. They spend hundreds of euros every month on clothes and make a living promoting the latest catwalk trends. Aside from the speculation that factory workers must be 'used to' their hard lives, they have never given much thought to the people who make their clothes. Now, they're trading their comfortable lives for those of Cambodian garment workers. As well as working in the factories, they have to survive on \$3 a day. But this is no exploitative doc, relying on shock value. It poignantly shows the consequences of cheap fashion.

Class 5

Lecture: Documenting climate action

Our final class will center around the 2024 short film *Puffling*. Set on a remote Icelandic island, the film follows two teenagers who swap night-time parties for puffin rescues in an effort to counter humanity's environmental impact. Blending the everyday with climate action, *Puffling* maintains a quiet, observational tone as it subtly weaves together the futures of people, wildlife, and nature, inviting reflection on the shared challenges of climate change.

Aims

- To get a sense of how documentary today is able to reflect on global challenges and sustainable futures
- To consider documentary as a form of filmmaking that combines everyday life with social conscience

Readings

Jouko Aaltonen, Jouko, 'Claims of Hope and Disasters: Rhetoric Expression in Three Climate Change Documentaries,' *Studies in Documentary Film*, 2014, 8 (1): 61–75.

Chloe Xiang, 'Preparing to Fly in "Puffling"', *The New Yorker*, 8 November 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-documentary/preparing-to-fly-in-puffling>

Screening: *Puffling* (Jessica Bishopp, 2023)



Puffling is a 2023 short documentary film by Jessica Bishopp, made in Iceland. Ahead of its online debut as part of The New Yorker catalog, it was selected at multiple festivals including DOC NYC, Palm Springs, Galway, and won an Oscar Qualifying award at Aspen.

Examination

You will be required to submit a reflective journal on the making of your documentary short and how it relates to the material we have studied.