

SEMESTER 5 (NEP)

Documentary Theory and Practice (FMSCOR505M)

5 CREDITS (Mixed Mode: Theory with Practical Exercises)

Course Description

The course is a comprehensive introduction to the history, theory and practice of documentary film. It takes a holistic approach bringing the global and Indian perspectives in documentary filmmaking and aesthetics. The students will engage in key debates around reality, representation, truth and ethics. The practical components of the course will equip students with fundamental skills to conceptualize, research, shoot, and edit short documentary projects transforming theoretical knowledge to creative practice.

Course Objectives

- Students will be introduced to the nature of documentary cinema
- Students will be introduced to different modes of documentary
- Students will be introduced to the conceptual and ethical concerns pertaining to documentary cinema
- They will be exposed to global documentary traditions and contemporary debates on the subject
- They will be introduced to the history and major movements, and filmmakers of Indian documentary cinema
- They will be introduced to the intricate process of documentary filmmaking, distribution, and exhibition

Learning Outcomes

- Identify major modes, conventions, and techniques of documentary cinema in a global and Indian contexts
- Critically evaluate documentary films using key theoretical frameworks concerning representations, objectivity, voice and other concerns
- Demonstrate an understanding of the ethical responsibilities and practical challenges involved in documentary production
- Develop a documentary project from conception to post-production, including research, proposal writing, shooting, and basic editing.

Evaluation Policy and Assignment

Practical Project: 25 %

Internal Assessment: 25 %

End term Exam: 50 %

Module 1

What is a Documentary?

- The Classical Narrative and the Documentary Subject
- The Contract of Viewing
- Early Documentary Practices (Actualities, Ethnographic Film, and City Symphonies)

Practical Seminar: Choosing and Pursuing Documentary Subjects

Themes: Documentary Value (aesthetic, persuasive, social, political, personal/universal)

- Feasibility (Questions of accessibility; permission, legal issues, time frames, budget, possible sources of funding and distribution, availability of equipment and crew members, etc.)
- Research [Exploring the subject; Primary (archival material, locales, persons and processes related to the topic, firsthand experience, etc.) and Secondary (existing literature, news reports, films and styles related to the subject) sources, selecting sub-topics, connecting the subject to broader perspectives, thinking about rough narrative structures]

Readings

Kelly Anderson and Martin Lucas, *Documentary Voice & Vision: A Creative Approach to Non-Fiction Media Production* (Routledge, 2016), 1-16, 51-59.

Nichols, B. 2001. 'How do Documentaries Differ from Other Types of Film.' in *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana: Indiana University Press. 20-42

De Jong, W. (2012). The Classic Narrative, in (eds.), W. De Jong, E. Knudsen and J. Rothwell, *Creative Documentary: Theory and Practice*, Harlow, U.K: Pearson. p118-130

Ward, P. (2005). 'Defining Documentary' in *Documentary, The Margins of Reality*. London: Wallflower Press. p.6-31

Module 2

Modes of Representation

- Bill Nichols' Six Modes: Poetic, Expository, Observational, Participatory, Reflexive, Performative.
- The Rise of Direct Cinema (US) and Cinéma Vérité (France): Contrasting philosophies.
- Documenting the Invisible: Experimental Documentaries and Formal Abstractions

Practical Seminar: Shooting Interviews

Themes: Choosing the location and using the Interview setting creatively

- Teamwork, Roles and Responsibilities
- Single/ Double Camera set up
- Interview Compositions
- 3-point lighting and natural lighting
- Maintaining Log Sheets
- Role of the Interviewer (Preparing Questionnaire, Interview Techniques, Participation in Interviews, etc.)

Readings

Anderson and Lucas, *Documentary Voice & Vision*, Part 2: Production

Nichols, B. 2001. 'What are documentaries about?' in *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana: Indiana University Press. p61-82

Module 3

Indexicality, “Truth” and Phenomenology

- Indexicality and the Politics of Truth Claim (“Creative Treatment of Actuality”)
- The Observational Eye: The Narrative of Everyday
- Indexicality and the Question of Ethics

Practical Seminar: Framing, B-Roll, and supplementary material

Themes: Framing as a Narrative Device

- Preparations for Candid shooting (Scouting, planning, Scheduling and Preparing Call Sheets, Awareness of parallel actions, Improvisation, shooting BTS)
- Rights and Responsibilities of a Documentary Filmmaker (Media laws, Consent and Release forms, PR skills and making the subject/locals feel comfortable, etc.)
- Guerilla Shooting
- Shooting Actions in Reflexive and Observational Modes
- Reenactment and Shooting Performances
- Denotative and Connotative use of B-Roll
- Pick up Shoots
- Using Supplementary Materials (Photographs, Maps, Graphics, Tables, Newspapers,
- Audio clips, Stock Footage, etc.)

Readings

Anderson and Lucas, *Documentary Voice & Vision*, 17-28.

De Jong, W. (2012). "Life Does Not Tell Stories: Structuring Devices in Documentary Filmmaking", in (eds.), W. De Jong, E. Knudsen and J. Rothwell, *Creative Documentary: Theory and Practice*, Harlow, U.K: Pearson. P 97 to 117.

Doanne, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign"

Freud, "A Note upon the Mystic Writing Pad"

Sobchack, *A Address of the Eye: The Phenomenology of the Film Experience*, excerpts

Module 4

Documentary and Contested Subjectivity

- Ethnographic Films and the Colonial Perspective
- Essay Films and the Limits of Reality

Practical Seminar: Documentary Sound Recording

Themes: Choice of equipment according to set up (types of microphones, recorder, mixers, and their settings)

- Recording Sound in uncontrolled situations (choosing the right spot, microphone positioning, crowd control, improvisations and best compromises)
- Sound-Image relationship in Documentary films

Readings

Rogers, "Music, Sound and the Non-fiction Aesthetic"

Rothwell, J. (2008) Filmmakers and Their subjects. In T. Austin and De Jong, W (eds.) *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives and Practices*. London: Open University Press. p:152-156

Module 5

Circuits of Production

- Modes of Distributions of Documentary Films
- Documentary as a hegemonic institution
- Documentary Genres

Practical Seminar: Documentary Pitching

Themes: Possible Funding Agencies

- Writing Documentary Proposals (Logline, Synopsis, Treatment, Historic Background or Relevance, Subject/Protagonists, Director's note, Access, Possible Crew Members and Budget)
- Visual Materials for Pitching (Shooting and Editing sample clips, supporting explanations, Test screenings before application)
- Different stages of Funding Applications (Development Application, Production Application, and Postproduction Applications)

Readings

Adorno, *Culture Industry Revisited*, excerpts.

Anderson and Lucas, *Documentary Voice & Vision*, 41-49.

Farocki, "Reality would have to Begin"

Module 6

Documenting the Social and the Personal: Questions of History, Memory, and Politics in Documentary Films

- Vertov and Solanas: Form as a Manifesto or Political Statement
- Newsreel Documentaries as the Voice of Power
- Home Movies as Archival Bodies
- Documentary as Ecstasy and Trauma
- Documentaries as Useful Media (Institutional and Educational Films)

Practical Seminar: Documentary Editing and Post Production

Themes: Watching footage, Transcribing, Labelling and Maintaining backups

- Dividing footage into modules or sections
- Paper Edit (Structuring narrative outline according to available materials)
- Arranging the Timeline
- The Rough Cut and feedback sessions
- Securing Release for copyrighted materials or finding alternatives
- Refining the narrative and the Final Cut
- Processing Production Sound for Documentaries (cleaning, leveling, mixing)
- Sound Design and Documentary Music
- Basic Color Correction
- The Final Mix, Test Screenings, Subtitling and Release

Readings

Anderson and Lucas, *Documentary Voice & Vision*, 29-40 and Part 3:

Nichols, B. 2001. 'How have Documentaries Addressed Social and Political Issues' in *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana: Indiana University Press. p139-168.

Postproduction.

Solanas, “Towards a Third Cinema”

Vertov, *The Kino Eye*, Introduction

Module 7

The Indian Context

- History of documentary filmmaking in Colonial India
- Postcolonial Indian documentary since Films Division
- Key Figures of Indian Documentary: Anand Patwardhan, Ranjan Palit, Rakesh Sharma, Nistha Jain
- Key Documentary Films: Jai Bhim Comrade(2011), Bombay: Our City(1985), Gulabi Gang(2012), The Elephant Whisperers(2022)

Practical Seminar: Documentary Distribution and Exhibition through Film Festivals

Themes: Preparing Promotional Materials (Making Posters, Cutting Trailers, Representative Stills and Media kits)

- Organizing Screenings and generating reviews for further Promotion
- Rational Assessment of the Finished Film and Selecting Appropriate Festivals
- Using Festival Aggregators (Introduction to platforms like FilmFreeway)
- Meeting Technical Specifications for Festival Submissions
- Writing Festival Synopsis and Director’s Biography

Readings

Battaglia, Guilia, and D. Parthasarathy (eds.). *Documentary Films in India: Critical Aesthetics at Work*. New Delhi: Palgrave Macmillam, 2022

Jain, Ahuja, and A. Sharma. *Indian Documentary: Histories and Practices*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2023