

## ***Documentary History***

Lecturer: Nuno Sena

nuno.sena@sapo.pt

### **1) Program**

The purpose of these classes is to serve as an introduction to the history and theory of documentary film practice, as well as a chronological survey of documentary landmarks from early cinema to the late 1980's and its relationship to the different documentary modes (according to Bill Nichols classification).

We'll begin our journey with the first attempts to capture reality with the new technology of film by the Lumière brothers and their contemporaries, followed by Robert Flaherty (whose ethnographic entertainments, like "Nanook of the North", first defined the non-fiction film as a specific form in the public mind) and the invigorating contamination of documentary by the European avant-garde in the 1920's.

We'll then proceed with the institutionalization of documentary production in the 30's and 40's (social documentaries; John Grierson and Britain's GPO Film Unit; Nazi and Allied propaganda from World War II; American and Canadian uses of documentary as an instrument to promote social cohesion), contrasting these examples of a dominant expository mode of documentary with other films from a foremost poetic mode produced during the same period.

After which we will discuss early examples of the observational mode first flourishing in British free cinema and its dominance with the "revolution" of direct cinema and cinema vérité emergence in Canada, the United States and France in the late 1950's and early 1960's.

From there we will question the limits of observationalism and the growing degree of the director's visibility in participatory documentary from the late 60's (including the increasing engagement of documentary in cultural wars).

We will conclude our classes with a survey of subjective trends in contemporary documentary after three decades of technological, narrative and formal profound changes (the emergence of the video technology; first person documentary and essay films; reflexivity and performance as documentary modes).

During this journey, we will try to keep in mind the genre's problematic "blurred boundaries," those cinematic precincts where documentary blends with other modes of film practice. Our working thesis is that despite – or because of – the documentary's truth claims, it is actually obsessed with representation.

Thus, throughout our classes, we'll be asking questions such as:

What kinds of truth do documentaries mobilize (e.g., how do various documentary modes construct "objectivity")?

What's the difference between a "realist aesthetic" and an "aesthetics of the Real"? (Jonathan Haynes).

Through formal analysis of specific films, we will examine the "reality effects" of these works focusing on their narrative structures and the ways in which they make meaning. Our goal is to travel "the porous borders of a genre that promises reality by way of representation and objective truth by way of subjective perspective" (Linda Williams).

## **2) Methodology**

The eight classes are organized around lectures, screenings and discussions. On each class it is expected from the students to be prepared to discuss a previously announced selection of films and written texts, which links and documents are available in the course's page at DocNomads MOODLE.

### **Class presentations**

Each class will start with the presentation by an assigned group of three students in regard to a specific film. The presentation should emphasize aspects of the crucial importance of the film in the context of a particular moment in documentary development as film genre. The presentation is limited to a maximum of 10 minutes and it can include excerpts from the analyzed film (up to 2 minutes). Questions and commentaries from the teacher and from the rest of the students will follow. Prior viewing by all class members of the presented film is mandatory. All films listed below are available in the DocNomads directory hosted at the course's Google Drive. See the list of links to films in the "Resources" page at *Moodle*.

## **3) Classes summaries, filmography, and bibliography**

### **CLASSES 1 AND 2**

From realism in early cinema to the "Invention" of documentary in the 1920's: Robert Flaherty and the travel film, the European Avant-Garde film.

Film for the presentation in Class 1 (7 SEPTEMBER) by students Aishwarya Ashok, Aiya Akilzhanova and Ana Barjadze:

*New York Subway (G.W. Bitzer, 1905)*

Essential viewing for Class 1:

*Documenting reality in early cinema collection (various, 1895-1906)*

*Nanook of the North (Robert J. Flaherty, 1922)*

Film for the presentation in Class 2 (19 SEPTEMBER) by students Anna Mkrumyan, Annette Jacob and Borbàla Szekeres:

*À Propos de Nice (Jean Vigo, 1930)*

Essential viewing for Class 2:

*Regen/Rain (Joris Ivens, 1929)*

*Berlin, Symphony of a Great City (Walter Ruttmann, 1927)*

*Douro, Faina Fluvial//Labour on the Douro River (Manoel de Oliveira, 1931)*

Essential reading:

BARSAM, Richard M.; chapters "Exploration, Romanticism and the Western Avant-Garde" and "The Beginnings of Documentary Film" in *Non-Fiction Film – A Critical History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992

ELLIS, Jack C. e MCLANE, Betsy A. chapters "Beginnings: The Americans and Popular Anthropology, 1922-1929", "Beginnings: The Soviets and Political Indoctrination, 1922-1929" and "Beginnings: The European Avant-Gardists and Artistic Experimentation, 1922-1929" in *A New History of Documentary Film*. London and New York: Continuum, 2007

NICHOLS, Bill, chapters "How Can We Define Documentary Film" and "How Did Documentary Filmmaking Get Started", in *Introduction to Documentary*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001

ROTHMAN, William; chapter "Nanook of the North" in *Documentary Film Classics*, Cambridge, University Press, 1997

### **CLASSES 3 AND 4**

Political and social concerns in documentary: documentary as political activism, institutionalization in Great Britain and in the United States, documentary uses during World War II as propaganda and counterpropaganda and after the conflict as memory. European poetic documentary from the mid-40's to the late 50's.

Film for the presentation in Class 3 (26 SEPTEMBER) by students Elizaveta Kozlova, Feroza Gulzar and Jean Marie Ndiokubwayo:

*Night Mail (Basil Wright, 1936)*

Essential viewing for Class 3:

*Misère au Borinage (Henri Storck, 1933)*

*Triumph des Willens/Triumph of the Will (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935)*

*London Can Take It (Humphrey Jennings, 1941)*

Film for the presentation in Class 4 (3 OCTOBER) by students Karen Ayach, Marie Tsarenkov and Marta Massa:

*The House is Black (Forugh Farrokhzad, 1963)*

Essential viewing for Class 4:

*Nuit et Brouillard / Night and Fog (Alain Resnais, 1955)*

*La Seine a Rencontré Paris/The Seine Meets Paris (Joris Ivens, 1957)*

*Le Sang des Bêtes/The Blood of the Beasts (Georges Franju, 1949)*

Essential reading:

ELLIS, Jack C. e MCLANE, Betsy A. chapter "Institutionalization: Great Britain, 1929-1939", in *A New History of Documentary Film*. London and New York: Continuum, 2007

NICHOLS, Bill; chapter "How Can We Differentiate among Documentaries? Categories, Models, and the Expository and Poetic Modes of Documentary Film", in *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, 2001

ROTHMAN, William; chapter "Night and Fog" in *Documentary Film Classics*, Cambridge, University Press, 1997

## CLASSES 5 AND 6

The Triumph of Observationalism: Free Cinema, Direct Cinema and Cinema Vérité.

Film for the presentation in Class 5 (11 OCTOBER) by students Martin Herr, Miguel Molina Ruiz and Olha Tuharino:

*Momma Don't Allow (Karel Reisz e Tony Richardson, 1955)*

Essential viewing for Class 5:

*Isole di Fuoco (Vittorio De Seta, 1957)*

*On the Bowery (Lionel Rogosin, 1956)*

*Moi, un Noir/I, a Negro (Jean Rouch, 1958)*

Film for the presentation in Class 6 (17 OCTOBER) by students Rodolfo Sandino Rossman, Sandra Gjorgieva and Saurav Bishwakarma:

*Les Raquetteurs/The Snowshoers (Michel Brault e Gilles Groulx, 1958)*

Essential viewing for Class 6:

*Primary (Robert Drew, 1960)*

*Chronique d'un Été/Chronicle of a Summer (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961)*

*Don't Look Back (D.A. Pennebaker, 1967)*

*Salesman (Maysles brothers, 1969)*

Essential reading:

BARSAM, Richard M., chapter "American Renaissance in the 1960s: The New Nonfiction Film" in *Non-Fiction Film – A Critical History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992

ELLIS, Jack C. e MCLANE, Betsy A. chapters "British Free Cinema and Social-Realist Features, 1956-1963" and "Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité" in *A New History of Documentary Film*. London and New York: Continuum, 2007

SAUNDERS, David, chapter "Bringing Life to the Wasteland: The Beginnings of Direct Cinema", in *Direct Cinema – Observational Documentary and the Politics of the Sixties*. London: Wallflower, 2007

HENLEY, Paul; chapters "Chronicle of a Violent Game" in *The Adventure of the Real – Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009

ROTHMAN, William; chapters "Chronicle of a Summer" and "Inspired Performance", in *Documentary Film Classics*, Cambridge, University Press, 1997

## **CLASSES 7 AND 8**

Engagement, Reflexivity and Performance: The expansion of subjectivity in contemporary documentary.

Film for the presentation in Class 7 (21 NOVEMBER) by students Sébastien Willem, Shaojun Wang and Thy Minh Hoang Pham:

*The Girl Chewing Gum (John Smith, 1976)*

Essential viewing for Class 7:

*David Holzman's Diary (Jim McBride, 1967)*

*The Thin Blue Line (Errol Morris, 1988)*

Film for the presentation in Class 8 (28 NOVEMBER) by students Tianji Yu, Valeriya Kim and Yeasir Arafat:

*Rules of the Road (Su Friedrich, 1993)*

Essential viewing for Class 8:

*Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse/The Gleaners and I (Agnés Varda, 2000)*

*En Construcción/Work in Progress (José Luis Guerín, 2001)*

Essential reading:

BRUZZI, Stella; chapter "The Legacy of Direct Cinema", in *New Documentary – A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, 2000

MACDOUGALL, David; chapter "Beyond Observational Cinema", in *Transcultural Cinema*, Princeton University Press, 1998

NICHOLS, Bill; chapter "How Can We Describe the Observational, Participatory, Reflexive and Performative Modes of Documentary Film?", in *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, 2001