FM226 Experiments in Documentary: Three Approaches

Instructor: Paul Festa  
Course Times: Mon 15:15-18:30; Screenings Monday 19:30  
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Course Description
Open to students of any level of filmmaking experience, the course pursues hands-on, historical, critical, and creative investigations of documentary film. A group project and six independent ones will explore three potentially overlapping documentary types: personal, aesthetic, and social issue, with special consideration given to the city of Berlin as a background for or subject of these investigations. Throughout our critical and creative work, we will analyze and devise techniques that help make vivid or bypass the familiar language of traditional documentary storytelling, elicit unguarded responses from our subjects, bring questions of identity to light on film in a fresh way, and further an experimental tradition of dissolving boundaries between documentary and other modes of filmmaking.

Requirements
Attendance at all classes is expected. More than one absence will significantly affect the grade for the course.

Sessions will be in three parts: 1) Managing, shooting and evaluating the group project 2) Discussing the prior week’s screening & reading, with special focus on how it might inform our work; occasional Q&As with directors 3) Critiquing the prior week’s assignments. Management of the group project rotates.

Class time is showtime. Late submissions will gum up the screening calendar and cannot be considered. As such, assignments are due midnight Friday. Each filmmaker will be graded on the top five of six assignments. Submitting a sixth assignment is encouraged but not required, and the first and final assignments are non-optional. This policy is meant to accommodate the exceptional assignment that falls victim to computer-plus-backup failure or other extraordinary circumstances.

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FILMMAKERS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR BACKING UP THEIR WORK AT ALL TIMES
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Grade Breakdown
Five independent projects make up 70 percent of the grade, with 30 percent of the grade determined by contributions to the group project, technical and production assistance to your fellow filmmakers, and class participation including mandatory blog posts on the week’s assigned screening and reading.
Schedule

WEEK 1, AUG 31: PRODUCTION MEETING
Begin shooting and planning the group project; class survey; division into Team A and Group #1
SCREENING: Coming attractions from selected assigned films; five 19th-century shorts; Rain; Man With A Movie Camera
READING: From Erik Barrow, Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film
ASSIGNMENT: Both groups: Film with no cuts or soundtrack (1-3 min.)

WEEK 2, SEPT 7: ORIGINS I
ASSIGNMENT: Group A: Develop Week 1 film or start over, using cuts and sound, but no dialogue (3-6 min)
SCREENING: Portrait of Jason

WEEK 3, SEPT 14: EXPLOITATION/EXALTATION I: “I need you to break him”
ASSIGNMENT: Group 1: Develop Week 1 film or start over, using cuts and sound, but no dialogue (3-6 min)
SCREENING: Apparition of the Eternal Church
READING: Malcolm cont’d

WEEK 4, SEPT 21: THE TALKING HEADS I: Make your camera disappear
ASSIGNMENT: Group 1: Put an interview subject under productive duress (5-8 min)
SCREENING: Berlin: Symphony of a Great City

WEEK 5, SEPT 28: ORIGINS II
ASSIGNMENT: Group A: Put an interview subject under productive duress (5-8 min)
SCREENING: Grey Gardens
READING: Essays on cinema verité by Lewis Jacobs, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.; on Grey Gardens by Ilona Hongisto

WEEK 6, OCT 5: EXPLOITATION/EXALTATION II: “But the movie, the movie, mother darling!”
ASSIGNMENT: Group A: Capture people on film without asking them questions (6-12 min)
SCREENING: Nanook of the North
READING: Essays on Nanook by Robert Sherwood, Ricciotto Canudo, Erik Barnouw, Richard Barsam

WEEK 7, OCT 12: ORIGINS III
ASSIGNMENT: Group 1: Capture people on film without asking them questions (6-12 min)
SCREENING: Waking Life

*** OCT 19 – FALL BREAK ***

WEEK 8, OCT 26: THE TALKING HEADS II: Cover them with ink
ASSIGNMENT: Group 1: Capture an act of creation (6-12 min)
SCREENING: Spiral Jetty; A Visit to Picasso; The Mystery of Picasso
READING: Melissa Sanford, “The Salt of the Earth”

WEEK 9, OCT 5: MAKING ART ON MAKING ART: Smithson and Picasso
ASSIGNMENT: Group A: Capture an act of creation (6-12 min)
SCREENING: **Härte**

**WEEK 10, NOV 2: THE DRAMATIC REENACTMENT:** Then and now  
Q&A with **Härte** director Rosa von Praunheim (unconfirmed)  
**ASSIGNMENT:** Group A: Explicitly re-enact a scene or secretly stage it (6-12 min)  
**SCREENING:** **Paris Is Burning**  
**READING:** Essays by Essex Hemphill, Jackie Goldsby, Terrence Rafferty, bell hooks

**WEEK 11, NOV 9: PERSONAL / POLITICAL / PERFORMATIVE I:** Documentary realness  
**ASSIGNMENT:** Group 1: Explicitly re-enact a scene or secretly stage it (6-12 min)  
**SCREENING:** **Round Eyes in the Middle Kingdom**  
**READING:** Essay from "Release Print," the journal of The Film Arts Foundation

**WEEK 12, NOV 16: PERSONAL / POLITICAL / HISTORICAL I:** Round Eyes  
Q&A with **Round Eyes** director Ron Levaco  
**ASSIGNMENT:** Group 1: Revise and expand a prior work (8-20 min)  
**SCREENING:** **Tarnation**

**WEEK 13, NOV 23: PERSONAL / POLITICAL / PERFORMATIVE II:** Tarnation  
Q&A with **Tarnation** director Jonathan Caouette (unconfirmed)  
**ASSIGNMENT:** Group A: Revise and expand a prior work (8-20 min)  
**SCREENING:** **The Times of Harvey Milk**

**WEEK 14, DEC 7: PERSONAL / POLITICAL / HISTORICAL II:** Harvey Milk  
Q&A with **Times of Harvey Milk** director Rob Epstein (unconfirmed)  
Final crits of assigned works and group project

DATE TBA: School screening of selected work and group project