

Lingnan University
Department of Visual Studies

Course Title: Non-fiction Film

Course Code: VIS 3353

Recommended Study Year: 3rd and 4th years

No. of Credits/Term: 3

Mode of Tuition: Lecture/Tutorial

Class Contact Hours: 3 hours per week & 2 hours for screenings

Category in Major Programme: Programme Elective

Prerequisite(s): N/A

Co-requisite(s): N/A

Exclusion(s): N/A

Exemption Requirement(s): N/A

This course involves an optional Service Learning component.

Brief Course Description

Non-fiction (or documentary) film-making is one of the most exciting areas of cinematic production today. To those who have yet to discover documentary filmmaking, the type of filmmaking in question tends to be associated with rather plodding, perhaps even boring, films with little to offer other than “lessons” on some (perhaps rather obscure) aspect of reality. The fact is, however, that documentary filmmaking is as artistically innovative and interesting, and admits of as many different genres and types, as fiction filmmaking. In addition to artistry, innovation, creativity, humour and entertainment, non-fiction filmmaking offers the possibility of meeting, through film, realities and people distant from us. Sometimes the distance arises geographically, but it may also have to do with class differences or cultural differences. Non-fiction filmmaking opens our eyes, our hearts and minds, to realities that urgently require attention, or that merit affirmation and celebration. In this course we seek to understand why it is that documentary filmmaking is experiencing extraordinary success these days. We also aim to explore a wide range of different types of documentary films. We will focus on the many important questions raised by documentary filmmaking, questions having to do with ethical issues, with the very distinction between fiction and non-fiction filmmaking, and with the nature of truth. Students will be introduced to classic/canonized documentary films, but the emphasis will be on recent productions and on films that are designed with matters of justice, or with ideas about social and political transformation, in mind. Many of the films to be

discussed are by Chinese documentary filmmakers (from both the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong).

Aims and Objectives

- To acquaint students with key theoretical issues and debates concerning non-fiction film.
- To familiarize students with arguments concerning the distinction between fiction and non-fiction film.
- To introduce students to different types of documentary filmmaking.
- To introduce students to some of the key institutions that have promoted, or continue to promote, documentary filmmaking.
- To ensure that students are able properly to categorize any example of non-fiction film-making, or to provide a cogent account of problems involved in the attempt at classification.
- To promote reflection on the epistemological, social, political, and ethical dimensions of non-fiction filmmaking.
- To encourage understanding of recent developments in documentary filmmaking.
- To invite reflection on the considerable interest, on the part of contemporary audiences, in documentary filmmaking.
- To familiarize students with the role of documentary filmmaking in Hong Kong and mainland China, and with the salient features of such filmmaking.
- To ensure that students are familiar with some of the most important titles and filmmakers in the history of documentary film.
- To teach students how to develop a proposal for a documentary film.
- To teach students, through practical hands-on workshops and “Master Classes” with practitioners, some of the basic elements of filmmaking.
- To encourage reflection on the necessity for and nature of collaboration in filmmaking

Indicative Content

1. The ontology of cinematic images
2. Types of documentary filmmaking
3. Truth, reference, fiction
4. Travelogues, kino Pravda and Dziga Vertov, Griersonian documentary, propaganda films, direct cinema, cinema verite, performative documentaries, mockumentaries, activism and catalytic documentaries, fiction films with documentary elements (the bio-pic, Dogma, 6th generation filmmaking in the PRC), webcams, Youtube
5. Documentary filmmaking in Hong Kong (Visible Record, Video Power)
6. Documentary filmmaking in the PRC
7. Documentary theory
8. Manifestoes
9. Festivals and organizations supporting documentary filmmaking
10. Documentary filmmaking and risk

Indicative Films

Zana Briski, *Born into Brothels*

Du Hai-bin, *1428*

Cheung King Wai, *All's Right with the World*

---. *KJ: Music and Life*

Anders Oestergaard, *Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country*

Zhao Liang, *Petition*
Weijun Chen, *Please Vote for Me*
Tammy Cheung, *Secondary School*
---. *Village Middle School*
---. *Rice Distribution*
---. *Speaking Up*
---. *Speaking Up 2*
---. *Invisible Women*
Werner Herzog, *Grizzly Man*
Hu Jie, *In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul*
Simone Aaberg Kaern, *Smiling in a Warzone*
Albert and David Maysles, *Salesman*
Michael Moore, *Fahrenheit 9/11*
Jean Rouch, *Les Maîtres fous/Mad Masters*, 1955
---. *Mammy Water*, 1956
---. *Les Tambours d'avant*, 1972
---. *Jaguar*, 1967
---. *Moi, un Noir*, 1959
---. *Petit à petit*, 1971
---. *La Pyramide humaine*, 1961
---. *Les veuves de 15 ans*, 1965
Jeppe Roende, *The Swenkas*, 2004
Morgan Spurlock, *Supersize Me*
Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*
Cui Zi'en, *We are the ... of Communism*
Chen Weijun, *To Live is better than to Die*
Cui Zi'en, *Queer China*
Zhou Hao, *Senior Year*

Teaching Method

Lectures, group discussions, formal debates, filmmaking workshops, Master Classes/Meet-the-Practitioners sessions, Service Learning (optional)

Learning Outcomes

On completion of this course students will:

- Know how documentary filmmaking is classified according to types, and will be able to apply this knowledge in relation to specific instances of documentary filmmaking
- Understand the key epistemological and ethical debates that documentary filmmaking has generated, and will be able to articulate a reasoned, justified position on the issues in question

- Have the capacity to identify the institutions that have played a decisive role in promoting and facilitating documentary filmmaking, and to articulate and assess the philosophies and modes of operation associated with these institutions
- Be able to assess a given documentary films on ethical grounds
- Be capable of accurately describing the different models that inform activist documentary films, and of articulating a reasoned account of these models' strengths and weaknesses
- Be knowledgeable about trends in documentary filmmaking in Hong Kong and mainland China, and be able to assess these trends in relation to different types of value (aesthetic, epistemological, political etc)
- Be acquainted with a large number of canonized documentary films
- Have acquired an in-depth understanding of the formal properties of some of these classic films and of their role in the history of documentary filmmaking
- Be able to understand and articulate the impact that technological changes have had on the history of documentary filmmaking
- Be able to design, execute and assess (according to a range of relevant criteria) a documentary film.
- Have the capacity and the inclination to collaborate effectively on theoretical as well as practical projects

Assessment

Continuous Assessment: 100%, with the following break-down:

Students Opting for Service Learning

Participation: 25%

Measurement of learning outcomes:

Students will be graded on their presence at in tutorials, at lectures, in screenings, and in briefing sessions. In addition, grading will take into account evidence of students' preparedness for lectures, tutorials, and briefing sessions, as well as the quality of their contributions to discussions and group work.

Production of a short documentary: 30%

Measurement of learning outcomes:

Working in pairs or small groups, students will plan, shoot, and edit a short (20 minutes) documentary focusing on issues/practices/sites etc identified as requiring exploration/attention by our SL partner. Students will be graded on the quality of their research, on the design and execution of their filmmaking project, and on their teamwork.

Analytic reflection on the documentary filmmaking process: 10%

Measurement of learning outcomes:

Accompanying the documentary will be an individually authored reflection (4 pages, double-spaced) on the filmmaking project. This text will articulate the goals of the documentary project, the approach adopted, problems encountered and any relevant solutions to them. It should clearly identify the students' particular areas of responsibility. Attached to each text should be a declaration, signed by all members of the group, in which the contributions of each student, percentage-wise, are stated. Students will be graded on the acuity of their analysis and on the depth of their reflection about design issues and about production challenges and solutions.

Analytic response to a surprise screening: 25% (1 page, single-spaced)

Formal debate based on the analytic response: 10%

Measurement of learning outcomes

Following the surprise screening students will be given two statements about the film. They will choose to defend one of these statements. All students opting for the same statement will brainstorm as a group about ways of defending that statement. Each student will then write up a one-page argument in support of the statement over the course of one week. The following week a formal debate will be held in which students belonging to "pro" and "con" teams will pit their arguments against each other. The one page argument will be assessed on its cogency and insights. The debate will assess students' ability to defend a stated position effectively and to work together effectively as a group.

Students Who Do Not Opt for Service Learning

Participation: 25%

Measurement of learning outcomes

Students will be graded on their presence in tutorials, at lectures and in screenings. In addition, grading will take into account evidence of students' preparedness for lectures and tutorials as well as the quality of their contributions to discussions and group work.

Analytic response to a surprise screening: 25% (1 page, single-spaced)

Formal debate based on analytic response: 10%

Measurement of learning outcomes

Following the surprise screening students will be given two statements about the film. They will choose to defend one of these statements. All students opting for the same statement will brainstorm as a group about ways of defending that statement. Each

student will then write up a one-page argument in support of the statement. The following week a formal debate will be held in which students belonging to “pro” and “con” teams will pit their arguments against each other. The one page argument will be assessed on its cogency and insights. The debate will assess students’ ability to defend a stated position effectively and to work together effectively as a group.

Final term paper: 40% (8 pages, double-spaced, with a bibliography of at least 6 entries)

Measurement of learning outcomes

Each student will select a central issue or question related to documentary film history or practice and will research and explore it with reference to at least two films not shown in class. Students will be graded on the quality of their research, their ability to articulate their thoughts clearly, the cogency of their argument, and their attentiveness to and understanding of the particular films selected for discussion.

Visiting Filmmakers

We will meet at least one documentary filmmaker in the course of the semester, in the context of a Master Class or Meet-the-Practitioner session.

Required Readings

Selections from:

Aitken, Ian. *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film*. London: Routledge, 2005 (three volumes).

Berry, Chris., and Lu Xinyu and Lisa Rofel, eds. *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

Barnouw, Erik. *Documentary: History of the Non-Fiction Film*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Barsam, Richard. *Non-fiction Film: A Critical History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Chanan, Michael. *The Politics of Documentary* (London: BFI, 2007).

Chu, Yingchi. *Chinese Documentaries: From Dogma to Polyphony*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Hight, Craig., and Jane Roscoe. *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.

Hjort, Mette., ed. *Dekalog 01: On The Five Obstructions*. London: Wallflower, 2008.

Plantinga, Carl. *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing the Documentary*. Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2004.

Renov, Michael., ed. *Theorizing Documentary*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Ward, Paul. *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (London: Wallflower, 2005).

Supplementary Readings

Bruzzi, Stella. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. Boulder: Netlibrary, 2001.

Corner, John. *The Art of Record*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.

Kaplan, Ann E., and Ban Wang, eds. *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004.

Important Notes:

- (1) Students are expected to spend a total of 9 hours (i.e. 3* hours of class contact and 6* hours of personal study) per week to achieve the course learning outcomes.
- (2) Students shall be aware of the University regulations about dishonest practice in course work, tests and examinations, and the possible consequences as stipulated in the Regulations Governing University Examinations. In particular, plagiarism, being a kind of dishonest practice, is “the presentation of another person’s work without proper acknowledgement of the source, including exact phrases, or summarised ideas, or even footnotes/citations, whether protected by copyright or not, as the student’s own work”. Students are required to strictly follow university regulations governing academic integrity and honesty.
- (3) Students are required to submit writing assignment(s) using Turnitin.
- (4) To enhance students’ understanding of plagiarism, a mini-course “Online Tutorial on Plagiarism Awareness” is available on <https://pla.ln.edu.hk/>.

* Numbers of hours are subject to adjustment for individual courses.