European Documentary Film
Semester and Year: Spring 2017
European Humanities
3 credits
Major Disciplines: Film Studies, Media Studies, Visual Arts
Tuesdays and Fridays, 13.15-14.35 in The DIS Movie Theatre

20,000 Days on Earth (Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard, 2014)

Instructors:
Morten Egholm

Alexander Lind
Documentary film director, The National Danish Film School 2013. BA (Honours). Alexander Lind got international recognition when his graduation film from the National Film School of Denmark "Carl and Niels" was selected for the prestigious film festival IDFA in Amsterdam and later won the New Nordic Voice talent award at short and documentary film festival Nordic Panorama in Malmö. Alexander Lind is currently working on his two first feature documentary films, one about a boy facing life during and after a parent having a psychosis, based in Denmark and another one in Uganda about the struggles of people living with mental disabilities and their loved ones. Alexander also works as an external lecturer at The National Danish Film School.

European Documentary Film | DIS: Study Abroad in Scandinavia | Related Disciplines: Film Studies, Media Studies, Visual Arts
Course Description

Documentary films are gaining more critical and commercial prominence these years, especially the ones increasingly pushing the boundaries of fact and fiction. While the ideal of earlier documentary films most often has been objectivity, modern documentary filmmakers more deliberately choose to distort this credo to offer new ways of interpreting reality. Focusing on European documentary film and some of its most prominent historical and contemporary names, this course approaches documentary film from two angles:

1. An analytical and contextualizing approach
2. A hands-on, ‘Do It Yourself’ production

Starting with the films themselves the analytical part of the course offers an in-depth understanding of the theory, history, genre and ethical considerations of documentary films, with an emphasis on films with a poetic self-reflective approach and films blurring the border between fact and fiction.

In the production, students will work (individually) throughout the semester to produce their own collection of documentary cinematic moments. Starting from a micro-analysis of films watched in class, students are asked to work with specific cinematic parameters to record documentary fragments from their own realities. Towards the end of the course, these moments are edited into cinematic sequences. All shooting takes place outside of class, and is part of students’ homework.

The production is linked to a short paper explaining the choices made and the aesthetic/narrative tools used in the production and a presentation of the production in class where you explain these elements to your fellow students. We will watch films by directors such as Dziga Vertov, Pirjo Honkasalo, Nina Hedenius, Werner Herzog, Janus Metz, and others.

Field Studies

Wednesday, February, 15, 8.30-12.30 & Wednesday, April, 5, 1-5 pm.
Field study time will be dedicated to the production part of the course

Evaluation:

Short paper, theoretical-analytical, based on work analyzed in class (3-4 pages) 15 %
Midterm, focusing on the course’s theoretical-analytical part 20 %
Production (progress and learning effect throughout the semester) 35 %
Short paper on the production 20 %
Participation 10 %
Short paper
Topic: Choose a film analyzed in class, or a film by your own choice, and apply it to Bill Nichols’ modes of representation. 3-4 pages long, double space. Due in class on Friday, February 24.

Midterm
The test consists of questions of relatively simple facts (like: Who made this or that film?), questions of more complex character (like: explain the observational mode and apply to a film seen in class), and questions to be answered with a short essay (like: Describe Werner Herzog’s method in Grizzly Man). The answers will be weighted differently. Midterm takes place in class on March the 17th.

Production
The production will consist of five homework shoots through the semester and final edit of the collected material. Further instructions will be given throughout the production sessions.

Short paper on the production
A report explaining the choices made and the aesthetic/narrative tools used in the production. 3-4 pages, double space, more detailed information will be given throughout the semester. Due on the last day in class, May 2.

Literature:


Corner, John: The Art of Record – A Critical Introduction to Documentary, 1996.


Ellis, Jack C. and Betsy A. McLane: A New History of Documentary Film, 2008.


Grierson, John: Grierson on Documentary, 1979.

Lane, Jim: The Autobiographical Documentary in America, 2002.


Film Viewings

*Please note that it is mandatory to watch each film before the relevant class.* Below you will find a schedule of film viewings that allows you the opportunity to view the films together as a class – on a (relatively) big screen. If, for some reason, you are unable to attend a viewing or would like to see a particular film again, it will be available on reserve in a specific semester shelf at the Library (ask one of the librarians). *Keep in mind* that these films act as the texts of this course and it is therefore just as necessary to watch each film attentively (i.e. take notes) before the class sessions in which it will be discussed.

**Each film will be screened once, at 6.30 pm on the given date in The DIS Movie Theatre next to the library, in Vestergade 23:**

**Schedule:**

**Theme 1: European classics**
- The Man with the Movie Camera
- Night Mail

Friday, January, 20:

**Theme 2: Contemporary Nordic Documentary**
- How to Pick Berries
- From Thailand to Thy
- The Testament

Tuesday, February, 14:

**Theme 3: The Portrait documentary**
- My Body
- Max by Chance
- Mother is God

Tuesday, March, 7:

**Theme 4: German and Austrian Docu.**
- Grizzly Man

Friday, March, 17:

**Theme 5: The Music Documentary**
- 20.000 Days on Earth

Friday, April, 7
Course schedule:

1) **Friday, January, 20:**
   Introduction to the course
   The two tracks of the course: 1) Theoretical, analytical, film historical and 2) production
   Readings:
   Bill Nichols: “Introduction to Documentary”, Chapter 1: “How to Define Documentary Film?” (p. 1 - 41)

**Theme 1: European Documentary Classics**

Screenings:
*The Man With the Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929, 69’)
*Night Mail* (Harry Watt & Basil Wright, 1936, 23’)

2) **Tuesday, January, 24:**
   Theory/analysis session: ‘The creative treatment of actuality’. The classical tools in Documentary film making; Examples to analyze: *The Man with the Movie Camera* and *Night Mail*
   Readings:
   John Grierson: “First Principles of the Documentary”
   Betsy McLane (et. al.): *A New History of Documentary film*, chapter 1 + 2

3) **Friday, January, 27:**
   Theory/analysis session: Early important documentaries, part II

4) **Tuesday, January, 31:**
   Theory/analysis session
   Readings:
   Bill Nichols: Introduction to Documentary, Chapter 6: “How can we differentiate between Documentaries?” (p.142-171)

5) **Friday, February, 3:**
   Production session – analysis and assignment
   Fragments from theme screenings are addressed, focusing on *a moment in time*.
   Homework: 3 moments, 3 framings

**Core Course Week, February, 6-11**

6) **Tuesday, February, 14:**
   Production session – screening
   Each student’s homework is screened and discussed.

**Theme 2: The Contemporary Nordic Documentary**
Screenings:
*How to Pick Berries* (Elina Talvensaari, 2010, 19’)
*From Thailand to Thy* (Janus Metz, 2008, 58’)
*The Testament* (Christian Sønderby Jepsen, 2011, 86’)

7) **Friday, February, 17:**
   *Theory/analysis session*
   Readings:
   Bill Nichols: *Introduction to Documentary*, Chapter 7: “How can we describe the Observational, Participatory, Reflexive, and Performative Modes of Documentary films?” (p. 172-211)

8) **Tuesday, February, 21:**
   *Theory/analysis of The Contemporary Nordic Documentaries*

9) **Friday, February, 24:**
   *Production session – analysis and assignment*
   Fragments from theme screenings are addressed, focusing on *space, place and room.*
   Homework: 3 rooms.
   NB! HAND IN SHORT PAPER!

**Travel Break, February, 25 – March, 5**

10) **Tuesday, March, 7:**
   *Production session – screening*
   Each student’s homework is screened and discussed.

**Theme 3: The Portrait and the Autobiographical Documentary**
Screenings:
*My Body* (Margreth Olin, 2002, 26’)
*Max by Chance* (Max Kestner, 2004, 29’)
*Mother is God* (Maria Bäck, 2015, 31’)

11) **Friday, March, 10:**
   *Theory/analysis session*
   Discussion of conventional portrait documentaries

12) **Tuesday, March, 14:**
   *Theory/analysis session*
   Discussion of non-conventional portrait documentaries (the screenings)
   Bill Nichols: *Introduction to Documentary*, Chapter 8: “How have Documentaries addresses Social and Political Issues?” (p. 242-252; Note: Only the last 10 pages of the chapter)

13) **Friday, March, 17**
   *Midterm, 80 minutes in class*
Travel Break, March, 18-26

**Theme 4: Contemporary German and Austrian Documentary Filmmakers**

Screening:
*Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005, 103’)

14) Tuesday, March, 28:
- Introduction to modern German documentary: Werner Herzog and Ulrich Seidl
- Laura Ruth Johnson: *Man and Animal*

15) Friday, March, 31:
- **Production session – analysis and assignment**
  - Fragments from theme screenings are addressed, focusing on *characters and self-portraits*.
  - Homework: 3 video diaries.

16) Tuesday, April, 4:
- **Production session – screening**
  - Each student’s homework is screened and discussed.

17) Friday, April, 7:
- **Theory/analysis session**
  - Blurred boundaries between facts and fiction in German/Austrian documentary. Ulrich Seidl as case study.

**Theme 5: The Music Documentary**

Screening:
*20.000 Days on Earth* (Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard, 2014, 97’)

18) Tuesday, April, 11:
- **Theory/analysis session**
  - Analysis of the screened film. The Non-Conventional Rockumentary
  - Robert Edgar (et al.): *Music Seen. The Formats and the Functions of the Music Documentary*  

Travel Break, April 12-17

19) Tuesday, April, 18:
- **Production session – analysis and assignment**
  - Fragments from theme screenings are addressed, focusing on *staging/interference*.
  - Homework: 3 x one character/one place

20) Friday, April, 21:
- **Production session – screening**
  - Each student’s homework is screened and discussed.
  - Assignment: sound recording. Preparing for editing.

21) Tuesday, April, 25:
- **Presentation of productions**
22) Friday, April, 28:
   Presentation of productions

23) Tuesday, May, 2:
   Presentation of productions + conclusion