

COURSE SYLLABUS

UWC 5014: Fundamentals of Documentary Filmmaking

Instructor: Klara Trencsenyi, Visiting Professor of Practice
Central European University, Vienna Campus
Semester: Fall, 2023/24
Time: Wednesday, 8:50 – 10:30
Room: CEU Media Hub / TBC
Course level: MA
Credits: 2 Credits (4 ECTS)

Office hours: Wednesday 10.45-12.00 or by appointment

Course Description

This introductory documentary filmmaking course is designed to fit the interests and needs of CEU students across a variety of departments.

With the proliferation of moving images in both public and private spaces, and the incorporation of moving images into traditionally text-based media, the ability to communicate visually is becoming ever more important in numerous fields, a valuable research method in a number of academic disciplines, and moreover, an important form of basic literacy in contemporary society.

This course provides students a grounding in the craft of documentary film production, and the creation of moving images, instructing them in fundamental skills that they can apply to projects in their respective research, and beyond. These skills cover all phases of the documentary production process, from idea development, through pre-production and preparation, cinematography, sound and editing. Through learning to create moving images, in concert with formal analysis of documentary examples, students gain valuable, versatile skills, and gain literacy in this increasingly important mode of communication.

Class sessions combine lectures on relevant concepts, viewing and analysis of documentary examples, technical instruction on equipment, hands-on exercises, and critique of class projects and films at each stage of completion. Outside of class, working in small groups, students complete the final project, a short documentary film.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify major modes of documentary form, and the basic elements of documentary films, and critique their use.
- Apply a deliberate structure, theme, point of view, and style to a short, documentary film.
- Refine a documentary idea down to an engaging short, verbal pitch, and execute that pitch.
- Work with basic technical proficiency in a range of areas of video production: operate a video camera and tripod, an audio recorder and microphone, and the Adobe Premiere editing system, controlling all technical functions, to produce a short documentary film.
- Apply aesthetic concepts of cinematography, editing, and sound design to support a deliberate concept and vision in a short, documentary film.
- Refine a short documentary film through a series of progressively more refined versions, to a finished work.
- Articulate basic issues in documentary ethics.

Course Requirements and Assessment

1. *Final Film (50% of the final grade)*. The final project is a 5-8-minute documentary film. Students are encouraged to tailor this project to their respective discipline. Students will work in teams of two or three depending on course enrolment, and the scope and type of film the groups produce. Groups should be formed by the 3rd class meeting of the semester. The division of labor is up to the individual team, but all members must contribute to the project in equal measure.

Films will be evaluated on: the degree to which each element — cinematography, sound, editing— is used to support the subject matter; the degree to which a deliberate structure, theme, point of view, and style, as outlined in the proposal is applied; the degree to which aesthetic principles taught in class are applied in the execution of the film; and the degree to which the overall work is refined through each stage of the process, from pitch through rough cut to final cut, based on peer and instructor feedback.

2. *Film Proposal and Pitch (20%)*. This is a portfolio of materials including: a brief synopsis, a written treatment, an aesthetic statement describing the form and style, a shooting schedule, demo material (stills and/or trailer). The pitch is an in-class presentation of the concept of the film.

3. *Final Reflection and Self-evaluation (10%)*. 2 pages. The reflection can cover a variety of topics, including the group's approach to the film, how that changed throughout the process, and how that initial vision is reflected in the final work. The self-evaluation should cover what each student learned through the process of making the film, the successes of the group, the failures, and what crew members would now do differently based on what they've learned through this process.

4. *Participation in critiques and class discussions (20%)*. This course is a workshop, and is predicated on the active participation and contribution of all members to practical exercises and class discussions, but especially to critiques of student work. Each member has a responsibility to offer feedback in a constructive manner and will be evaluated on the degree to which they do. Each filmmaker has the responsibility to listen and note that feedback, and to incorporate it into their creative process.

Background course reading

- Roberts-Breslin, Jan. *Making Media: Foundations of Sound and Image Production* 3rd Edition, New York, NY: Focal Press Assessment
- Anderson, K & Lucas, M. 2016. *Documentary Voice & Vision*. New York: Routledge

These texts are available for online reading and chapter download

Course Schedule

(all assignments can be found on Moodle)

Week 1: Documentary Fundamentals

Course Introduction; Storytelling basics; Elements of the Documentary; Documentary Forms

Viewing material:

- Viktor Kossakovsky: Tishe! (2003), André Kertész' Photos From the Window
- Alyssa Grossmann: Into the Field (2006) - excerpts
- Hirt-Lutherova-Novac-Varsányi: Cold War Neighbors (2011) 8'
- Eneós Cárka: Where are you now? (2020) 8'
- A selection of short films shot by CEU students

(Salome Kobalava, Mariam Shah, Maliha Mohsin, Shabnam Singla, Julia Siebenhirter, Vera Riesz-Marianna Wycha-Subham Manadar, Helena Mede, Tyla Myree-Ana Gersh-Annika Augusiak)

Reading:

- Bill Nichols, 'What Types of Documentary Are There?' in: Introduction to Documentary (Indiana University Press 2001) p. 99-137.

Exercise (in class, several groups):

Create a onepager synopsis on the basis of a news item / photograph.

Week 2: Editing

Editing concepts and principles; Technical instructions and hands-on exercises.

Introduction to Adobe Premiere editing system by **Ádám Húshegyi, CEU Media and Visual Education Assistant.**

Viewing material:

- Chris Marker: Letters from Siberia (1957) - excerpts
- Su Friedrich: Sink or Swim (1990) - excerpts
- Susana Sousa Dias: 48 (2010) - Trailer
- Katarina Cizek: Highrise (2008-15) – excerpts
- Péter Forgács: Danube Exodus (1998) – excerpts

Reading:

- Bordwell, David and Thompson Kristin. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw- Hill Education, 2016. Pp.

Exercise (in class, individual):

Editing a 5-shot video from found footage (phone App)

Assignment (due 4th October 2023):

Please book a [Media Lab edit station](#) and watch the first Premiere Editing Tutorial (50 minutes). Prepare a 2-3 minute edited sequence (one scene, teaser etc.) from the material indicated in the video.

Week 3: Cinematography

Documentary proposals and treatments; Visual Language, Composition;

Forming groups

Viewing material:

- D.A. Pennebaker: Daybreak Express (1953) / Joris Ivens: Rain (1929) 14'
- Geyrhalter: Our daily bread – excerpts / Pedro Costa: Vitalina Varela (2019) - excerpts
- Bela Tarr: 'Visions of Europe' segment (2004) 7'
- Hassan Fazili: Midnight Traveler (2019) - excerpts

Exercise (Groups, in class):

Shoot a sequence to introduce a person/ a space/ an object within the CEU building.
(Phone)

Reading:

- Synopses and Treatment examples from international film festivals, EDN

Camera EXTRA SESSION: Technical Functions (time TBD, Week 3.)

In-class technical instruction on the camera; Camera check-out procedure

Exercise:

Make a sequel / remake of a short film shot by your colleagues last week (camera)

Week 4: In class pitches – visual demo material

Each group pitches their project to the class, receives feedback.

Viewing:

- Alan Berliner: First Cousin Once Removed (2012) – excerpts
- Rithy Panh: The Missing Picture (2013) - excerpts

Week 5: Sound Recording

Microphones and location sound recording

Lecture + Hands-on training by **Thomas Aichinger, CEU Audio Education Specialist**

Exercise, reading: TBC

Week 6: Interviewing

Interview preparation & techniques; Documentary ethics

Shooting with natural lights. Review lighting equipment.

Viewing material:

Barbara Myerhoff: In Her Own Time (1985) – opening scene

Helena Trestikova: René (2008) – closing scene

Bernadett Tuza-Ritter: A Woman Captured (2018) / Máté Kőrösi: Divas (2021) – excerpts

Practical exercise:

Interview situations

Week 7: Lighting. Practical shooting scenarios. Rough Cuts 1.

Each group screens a rough cut of their film, receives feedback;

Overview of Film Festivals and Documentary Distribution

Week 8: Audio Post-production

Sound editing, narration, music

Practical session with **Thomas Aichinger, CEU Audio Education Specialist**

Week 9: Rough Cuts 2.

Each group screens a close to final rough cut, receives feedback

Week 10: Titles, Color Correction; Edit Lab

Practical session on visual postproduction

Week 11: Fine Cut Screening

Screening and critique of fine cuts of projects

2024 (TBD): PUBLIC SCREENING, CEU Auditorium