

FVNMA 2900 SOPHMORE SEMINAR
THE ART OF THE REAL

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“Documentary is a clumsy description, but let it stand.”
(John Grierson)

“Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change.”
(Bertold Brecht)

“If you want to make a documentary, you should automatically go to the fiction, and if you want to nourish your fiction, you have to come back to reality.”
(Jean-Luc Godard)

What defines a documentary? Why have these definitions proved so fluid, contradictory, and even contentious over the years? If all films, fiction included, have documentary aspects, and if no documentaries are devoid of manipulation, what marks the dividing line?

This course will undertake a historical survey of documentary film, from the silent era to the present day, a time defined by an unprecedented ubiquity of documentary images. Documentary is in no way a monolithic form, and our emphasis will be on the varieties of form-conscious non-fiction that enrich and complicate the relationship between reality and representation. We will also contend with the array of fiction and hybrid films that thrive on the generative possibilities of the real.

The history of documentary is in many ways a history of finding “suitable forms,” as Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl have put it, and accordingly, this course doubles as a history of formal experimentation in film and video. We will consider a wide range of canonical works, many of which have been central to eternal debates about documentary practices, alongside contemporary works that engage some of the most pressing questions facing the documentary field today. Today’s interactive, immersive and location-based technologies may pose the greatest challenge yet. Their capacities for representing in innovative ways and forging new relationships among subjects, makers and the public, while exciting, can also seem at odds with the notions of expertise, authorship and the carefully structured points of view that characterized the past.

This course will explore non-fiction filmmaking and particularly the rapidly changing partnership between technologies and ways of seeing using three approaches:

- 1) a critical look at key moments in the history of non-fiction film making;
- 2) discussions with film makers regarding their visions and choices today;
- 3) with hands-on cinematic exercises

Film makers who will be invited to share their films and choices with us include: J.P. Sniadecki; Chris Bobel and Chris Walley; Daniel Hui; Lisandro Alonso; Mark Mitten; Alex Fattal; John Gianvito.

We will also discuss films by Tim Asch, RJ Flaherty, Jean Rouch & Edgar Morin, Jean Vigo, Luis Bunuel, Shirley Clarke, Ben Russell, Chantal Akerman, Michael Glawogger, James Benning, Joaquim Pinto, Lucian Taylor and Verena Paravel, Robert Lemelson, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Urophong Raksasad.