

Boston University in Madrid
Introduction to Documentary Techniques.
September 2008

Course Objectives:

Students will learn the steps necessary to produce a documentary feature film. The first part of the course is a panorama of the most recent European documentary film. Students, with the professors' help, will analyze the most representative films of each category in order to study the stylistic keys of each documentary type. This theory-based section of the course will end with a close study of a documentary feature film with the director and screen writer.

Once the students have internalized the stylistic keys of documentary film, they will create a documentary film project, which will take up two-thirds of the course. Each student will develop an idea that will be made into a script. The last part of the course will focus on creating a documentary. Students must apply the techniques learned in the previous parts of the course: directing, camera operation, lighting, sound recording, and mounting. Students will be under the supervision of active industry professionals at all times during this process.

Recommended Bibliography:

Currant, Sheilla. *Documentary Storytelling for Film and Video Makers*. Focal Press.

Attendance: In order to benefit fully from the course and all it has to offer, it is imperative that students attend each session.

Throughout the course, students are responsible for extra work related to the film making process, during all stages of production: researching and developing the script, preparing and executing the film, and editing the short documentary.

Film making is a group effort in which individual contributions are rewarded by the end result: the film. One of the keys to successful group work is collaboration, complimented by a strong sense of communication, which can only be achieved after spending long hours together at work. The failure to participate by any member of the group during preparation, filming, and/or editing of the project will weaken the final product and cause a great burden to the rest of the group members.

Course Outline:

Part one: The Creation of History.

Unlike films that create, out of thin air, characters that live fictional lives, documentary film takes its characters out of real life. The documentary maker is an observer of reality who constructs a discourse using the situations created by real characters.

In this course, which takes place in Madrid, we hope to offer students the opportunity to create a documentary using as a springboard their experiences in a new country. The impressions made on students by their contact with a new society is an inexhaustible source of ideas for a documentary film. These ideas must have a point of interest based on the existence of conflict and tension. During preparation for filming, students must

develop their ideas in order to create a story with an initial situation, the complication of that situation, and a resolution.

All ideas must fit within one of the following categories:

- **Category A: Documentaries about Spain's current reality.**

Films in this category might focus on: developing stories that deal with the habits of Spanish society, painting a vivid picture of the life of an interesting character that lives in Madrid, or exploring cultural, political, scientific, or religious happenings. Students should keep in mind that every story must always have characters with different points of view.

- **Category B: Documentaries about events or characters in Spanish history.**

Students will be able to recount their stories with the help of archives, photographs, interviews with researchers, or the families of the protagonists. This type of project requires extensive research and compilation of testimonials to insure that a more complete vision of the historical event or character is created. Other ways of making a historical documentary include: adapting a book to film, for example, an autobiography or the fictional reenactment of events that have already taken place (a docudrama).

From a creative standpoint, we consider these types of films less interesting, therefore, we will not develop these types of projects.

- **Category C: Personal Documentaries**

Films in this category highlight the most intimate details of an interesting aspect of the filmmaker's life. Because our students are exposed to a new environment, we find that these kinds of projects can be very interesting. Our hope is to develop projects that are born out of students' impressions of Spanish society. We will encourage the creation of narratives that recount the experiences lived here by our students. Lastly, students might focus on developing a narrative that exposes their feelings as they investigate an aspect of Spanish society, as Agn s Varda did in her film "Los espigadores y la espigadora".

Second Part of the Course: Creating a Written Proposal

During this second part of the course, students will develop, with the guidance of a professional script writer, the idea that they will make into a documentary film. In order to do so they must develop a summary: a one or two page description of the idea they want to develop in their fifteen-to twenty-minute long documentary film.

In the world of professional film-making, a summary serves two purposes: it presents the idea to possible sponsors, and it informs the technical team of what to expect when making the film.

Once the summary is complete, students will go on to create a three-to five-page project proposal which will include the following:

- A. Title
- B. Synopsis
- C. Objectives
- D. Project description: including the protagonists and the filming locations
- E. Point of view (key personnel)
- F. Type of audience the film is intended for
- G. Timeline

Third Part of the Course: Preproduction, Filming, and Postproduction

During this part of our course students will form groups of at least two people. Students will choose the projects they consider to be the best for adapting to film. Once the projects are chosen, each group must develop a plan for executing the film in which they will specify the days, places, people, and hours they will be filming.

After teaching students how to properly operate the camera, lighting, and sound equipment, filming will begin. Time spent in class during this part of our course will be dedicated to watching what has been filmed and helping with and resolving students' production problems.

Once more than half of the film has been made, we will begin to teach editing techniques, which will lead us to mounting. Students will begin to choose shots and their first cut. During this part of the course, class time will be used to examine the montage, develop a structure, and determine the final cut.