

MEDIA STUDIO DESCRIPTIONS

FLEX TERM, 2024

CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY

Exploring how filmmakers and moving image artists are expanding the possibilities of documentary



Photo: Martin DiCicco / Courtesy of Sundance Institute

KEY QUOTES

"the only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true."

Hito Steyerl, *Documentary Uncertainty*,
Re-visiones, vol.1, 2001.

STUDIO QUESTION

What are the theoretical and cultural underpinnings of the trends, themes and styles within the contemporary documentary industry?

STUDIO DESCRIPTION

This studio offers an overview of stylistic and thematic trends present within contemporary documentary. In this studio you will watch a variety of short and feature documentaries from around the world from Oscar nominated documentaries, documentaries that have premiered at major international film festivals and documentaries made by individuals and collectives with the aim to create social change (impact documentaries). You will learn to define what makes a successful documentary and identify the tools and approaches needed to have your work seen by a large audience. This studio will involve experimenting with different documentary styles and approaches through a series of sketches and reflections to hone your technical skills and refine your process.

Some of the skills and topics covered will include;

- Understanding the documentary landscape and developing projects with this in mind
- Technical creative skills for achieving distinct stylistic approaches
- Storytelling skills
- How to develop and deliver a successful impact campaign alongside a documentary film
- Duty of care and the ethical responsibilities do filmmaking teams have to their subjects
- Pathways to finance, the philanthropic sector and partnerships
- Campaign implementation and outreach
- Documentary distribution and locating audiences

Some of the key questions considered in the course will include;

- What are the techniques and approaches that will make your project stand out in the industry?
- What does the process of project development and distribution involve for documentary filmmakers?
-

STUDIO LEADER

Lucie McMahon is a film practitioner based in Melbourne. Lucie is currently undertaking a master by research at RMIT University, where she also lectures and tutors in cinema and media studies. Lucie's creative practice research looks at queer documentary and queer history in Melbourne. Lucie also works as a freelance producer on a variety of film projects, most recently she has completed her first screen Australia-funded feature documentary *Things Will Be Different*.

GOLDEN AGE CINEMA

Exploring modern classics for the big and small screen



Cranston and Aaron Paul in Breaking Bad (2021, Dir. Vince Gilligan), Sophie Turner in Game of Thrones (2019, Dir. David Benioff and D.B. Weiss), James Gandolfini in The Sopranos (1999, Dir. David Chase), Michael K. Williams in The Wire (2007, Dir. Joe Chapelle), Jon Hamm in Madmen (2015, Dir. Mathew Wiener)

STUDIO PROMPT

How might focusing on the impressive, groundbreaking work created during the golden age of film and television, provide solid filmmaking skills and techniques?

STUDIO QUOTE

"TV functioned almost as a trainer for film - spurring the big-screen medium to great heights to distinguish itself. While TV threatened at various times to swallow up film's audience and it certainly produced some impressive, groundbreaking work, on the whole it was never a true creative threat to the film medium" Richard Rushfield, *Hollywood Golden Ages*, 2024

STUDIO DESCRIPTION

The four great Golden Ages of Hollywood began with its inception in the 1930s, and was an audacious industrial answer to cultural and financial challenges. In the 1970s, it was a genuine revolution against a decaying system. The 1990s heralds Cinema's most recent Golden Age and notably contains a large variety of genres and a veritable cornucopia of quirky, engaging independent films breaking into the mainstream. The final Golden Age of Hollywood (prestige TV), started as a niche alternative, then gained so much traction that it facilitated building an entirely new industry. The Golden Age of Television (also known as Peak TV or Prestige TV) is a period widely regarded for its extraordinary number of high quality internationally acclaimed TV shows. The contemporary

period is generally identified as beginning in 1999 with *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1999).

The new Golden Age brought creator-driven tragic anti-heroic dramas of the 2000s and 2010s. Understanding the visual narrative characteristics that the Golden Age entails such as the representation of complicated characters who may be morally ambiguous or antiheroes with questionable behaviour, complex plots, hyper-serialized storytelling, diverse points of view and playful explorations of modern-day issues, offers more than just an appreciation of this distinctive era—it also provides credible tips and techniques that aspiring film makers can incorporate into their own films such as the importance of crafting your story, writing a screenplay, and viewing your screenplay as a means to creating a self-contained story. From a creative standpoint, *TV shows* offer unparalleled opportunities for storytelling. The longer format allows for deeper character development, more intricate plotlines, and a richer exploration of themes. Writers and directors can experiment with different narrative styles and pacing, which is often constrained in the extended format of movies.

This studio will embrace the notion of how exploring peak filmmaking can provide techniques for creating elite entertainment and exciting visual narratives. Enabled by exploration of traditional cinema and a range of cloud software and apps, this studio will provide a comprehensive overview of the development of visually compelling prestige filmmaking, the techniques used to produce short cinematic video content and the industry opportunities for filmmaking and film production. Prestige dramas typically embrace narrative complexity, merging serialized storylines, episodic plots, and innovative techniques such as temporal play or twists. However, the format is also suitable for documentary, animation, music videos, experimental films, and more. The only real requirement is that they communicate a well-developed story arc or deliver a concept within a condensed timeframe.

This course will be a comprehensive orientation to this field, delving into a wide range of theories and histories of golden era prestige visual storytelling, while grounding students in an introduction to contemporary tools and techniques. In this studio, students will create film, video and audio work that will potentially include an exploration of media applications and approaches such as the art of framing, colour theory, chroma keying, LUTs and plugins as well as traditional filmmaking & Foley techniques. The class will be a blend of discourse, discussion, and practical experimentation.

STUDIO LEADER BIO

Cat Lew is a Video Artist, Sound Designer, Audio Engineer and Educator. She has a diverse creative practice, having produced video art and sound design for Melbourne Fringe Festival, West Projection Festival, Incinerator Gallery, Mesma Studio, Cinema Viscera, City of Melbourne and City of Maribyrnong. Her large-scale collaborative audio-visual work was recently part of an art exhibition for Creative Brimbank. She currently teaches digital media, film & sound editing and design at VU Polytechnic, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and RMIT.

CONSTRAINTS AS CREATIVE FUEL

How limitations serve as stimulus for inspiration and innovation.



Artist: LFHCS

KEY QUOTES

"The less you have, the more you can do with your imagination." - Chloé Zhao

"Get used to the bear behind you." - Werner Herzog

STUDIO DESCRIPTION

This studio will delve into the world of constraint-based media making. In this studio, we will explore how limitation can serve as catalyst for expanding creative potential.

By working within specific parameters, we will explore ways to think creatively and push beyond traditional boundaries.

Through practical exercises, we will embrace restrictions and discover ways to be resourceful and creative in our problem-solving.

As we navigate this studio, we will challenge our assumptions about what is possible within a given set of limitations, developing skills to think creatively under pressure and to innovate by necessity.

We will not only experiment with a variety of limitations and constraints, but also with a variety of audiovisual media forms: video works incorporating both visual and audio elements, audio works and purely visual works.

The one enduring requirement is that all these works have an intentional narrative focus within the work itself.

In the first half of the course, creative constraints will be stipulated as we experiment with different limitations and how they challenge us to think laterally and innovatively about media making.

In the second half of the course, projects will be student-led, with small groups defining and refining their own choice of constraints, as well as the form of their works.

Throughout the course, students will have the opportunity to reflect on their creative process, exploring how they approach challenges and overcome obstacles, as well as investigating their own creative process.

STUDIO LEADER

Sebastian is a freelance creative. He works as a director, editor, actor and sessional tutor. He is a 2017 Masters (Film & Television) graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts. Over the last decade, he has directed over a dozen shorts and web episodes, exploring both naturalistic and stylised genre work. He is passionate about female-driven work, stories that explore underrepresented and unconventional characters.

Short film "Tiny Darlings" (2022) was recently awarded Best Fantasy at Hybrid Genre Australia, experimental horror short "Carved Into Flesh" (2019) was awarded Best Male Director, Best Cinematography and Best Editor at Aphelion Film Festival and Best Composer at Atlantic Bridge Film Festival, and psychedelic road trip short "The Happiest Of My Life" (2015), awarded Best Ozploitation Short Film at the American Grindhouse Film Festival. Music video directing credits includes clips for Ru Paul's Drag Race Down Under finalist Karen From Finance, Forest Collective and Die Roten Punkte. In 2019 he was selected for the Directors Immersive program at CinefestOZ to pitch sci-fi feature "She Now Romeo", written by Jeni Bezuidenhout, to an industry panel.

Sebastian wrapped principal photography on feature film "We Will Never Die", which he is directing and editing, earlier this year. The film is currently in post production.

www.sebastianbertoli.com

www.panopticoncollective.com

HEADS WON'T ROLL.

Omitting the on-screen interview in documentary production



NOTES ON BLINDNESS (2016, dir. Spinney, J & Middleton, P)

STUDIO QUOTES

“Avoid the stereotype of the documentary as a hearty gruel of talking heads and archival footage, spooned out as artlessly [as American school lunches]”

- Scott Tobias, quoted in Maxine Trump's, *The Documentary Filmmaker's Roadmap* (2018)

STUDIO QUESTION

Why do some filmmakers omit on-screen interviews, and what reaction(s) might this elicit from the audience?

STUDIO DESCRIPTION

In *Heads Won't Roll*, students will engage in a variety of studio activities (including screenings, discussion, practical exercises, and reflective tasks) which explore the various ways in which documentaries might be made without onscreen interviews (sometimes called "talking heads"). The first half of the semester finds students responding to the work of contemporary filmmakers who've opted not to include these kinds of materials (including Frederick Wiseman, Laurie Anderson, Asif Kapadia and others). During the first half of semester, students will also evaluate and improve their own media production skills in a series of in class exercises and sketch tasks. The second half of the semester finds students working in small groups to devise, pitch and produce a major work that adds to the genre of "headless" documentary - be it through conventional documentary practices (observational filming, collating copyright-cleared archive) or more unorthodox, experimental approaches (animation, collage/visual abstraction, perhaps even AI-generated vision). Unless otherwise negotiated, this major work will be submitted as a high-definition video of 4-5 minutes in duration, with a stereo sound mix.

STUDIO LEADER BIO

Rohan Spong is a writer / director / cinematographer whose feature length films *ALL THE WAY THROUGH EVENING* (2012) and *WINTER AT WESTBETH* (2016) have been released in cinemas (Australia, New Zealand & US), been broadcast on television (ABC, SBS, FOXTEL, 7PLUS, and PBS/WORLD), acquired by streaming services (Binge, DocPlay) and selected by numerous film festivals (including MIFF, Sydney Film Festival, DOC NYC). His work has also been programmed at cultural institutions including ACMI, MONA, Boston Museum of Art, Lincoln Center (NYC) and the US Library of Congress.

You can read more about his work at www.rohanspong.com.