

## FA324 Essay Film – As a Documentary Strategy

Seminar Leader: Emerson Culurgioni  
Email: e.culurgioni@berlin.bard.edu  
Office Hours: by appointment  
Course Tue, 14:00-17:15

### Course Description

There is some disagreement about what essay film is or is not: it's also known as the non-genre. Derived from the literary genre of the essay, it carries the French word *essai*, meaning trying. Essay films often have a personal, historical, or intellectual approach overlapping with the point of view and intention of the author. At its core is the work with the three elements text, image and sound. Characteristic is a creative blurriness in its form and content. Nevertheless, it can also be very precise in its intention, often framed by a commenting authorial voice. Coming from the tradition of documentary-filmmaking, essay films have the tendency of a specific research-approach both concerning the selection of the material and the relation between form and content: i.e. the use of documentary-, found-, media-footage, and archive material. Its often experimental approach, marks its artistic character and therefore deals with every kind of material in contrast to conventional filmic, more homogeneous formats. Its montage and dramaturgy are constructive, dialectic or associative rather than the continuity and determinism used in conventional fiction films. However, it is not necessarily an experimental film, since the focus can lie on the content rather than on the formal aspects. Only watching a variety of essay films over its history can give insight into what essay films are. In this course we will analyze their form, dramaturgy, montage in relation to their content to understand how each one is made. Students will then be asked to reflect on their own material interconnectedness with a globalized environment creating their own short essay films. On the practicing side, students can choose to develop a film script in the first part of the semester and, create their own short essay-film until the end of the course. Alternatively they can transfer/recreate short sequences of the films shown, as „homeworks“. This would result in either one longer essay film (~15 minutes) or different short „homeworks“ and essay film drafts, adding up to a maximum length of ~15 Minutes. A fully developed script, i.e. a written image, sound, text/commentary-concept for a 10-15 minutes film would be also considerable as final exam.

### Assessment

During the course we will watch and analyze several essay-films, paying attention to the relation between content and form as well as to the use of image, sound, and text/commentary. Attendance is mandatory, and active participation in discussions will be an essential part of the course. We will watch all the films constantly asking: What's the formal approach in relation to the content? How is it structured? What is the dramaturgy? What is the political message and context? What are the tools and strategies used? Whose perspective is it?

As final assessment students can choose of the following three options: 1) a short essay film by either writing and producing a short essay film (~15 minutes) or 2) by fulfilling „homework assignments“: they are based on the reproduction of sequences of films shown during the course, but also individually developed short essay film-experiments (homeworks are singular 1-5 minute mini-essay film drafts or parts of a final longer film-draft. All should be

shot with „simple“ tools like smartphones or any other audio-video recording device, also desktop recordings). 3) A final script for an Essay Film, with an elaborated text/comment, image, sound-concept would be considerable as final exam, too (10 to 15 minutes script length).

The instructor can give theoretical and practical inputs for the students, to start early on in the semester to develop ideas for the practical realization of the final assesment. Inputs could be delivered in form of questions (would you rather live in the past or in the future and why?), texts (Ursula K Le Guin — Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction; Nathan Jurgenson — The Social Photo — On Photography and Social Media), topics (AI, digital capitalism, social media, production of value like energy prices, stocks, money, inequality, opinions, followers, laws, real estate or the production of things food, tools, money, passports, borders, weapons, infrastructure etc.), and/or film-sequences and excerpts (Tom Tykwers „The human being in the thing“ or Max Grau „craving for narrative“; Peter Liechti’s „Lucky Jack“, Chris Marker’s „Letter from Siberia“; Harun Farocki’s Telekritik). The students should use, in any case image, text/commentary and sound separately, as a combination for audio-visual „essayistic“ short-films. Methods for writing a script, topics and formal ideas can be developed in class and/or during individual meetings. Required tools are a laptop and a smartphone and/or a camera and an external audio-recording device. We use the Internet as a large archive, specific image and sound design-archives that are available online. Most important is to have access to an editing software like Adobe Premiere or the free version of Davinci Resolve ([here](#)).

Homeworks and short Readings will be announced from week to week or during individual meetings. Midterm grades consist in a verbal meeting with the instructor in week 8. Final grade ist the finalization of the above mentioned options (1. - 3.) and should be presented in class during the wrap up in week 14.

#### Grade Breakdown

Class participation (includes attendance, maintenance of all common and private spaces used for production / rehearsal, communication with Professor and other students): 40%  
Homework and in-class work: 40%  
Project presentations for critiques (includes end of semester presentations / performances): 20%

#### Schedule

##### Week 1: Introduction

Tuesday, Jan 31 – Introduction to the course//Presentation of the syllabus.

Overview of the beginning of essay films until today. Intertextual approach to essay films. Suggestions for exam-formats. Selection of short essay films of the upcoming author’s in the course.

##### Week 2:

Tuesday, Feb 7 — Mandatory in-class facility orientations and introduction technical aspects of Essay Filmmaking as a low budget art-practice. Author film as an opposition to Hollywood.

Guest Stefanie Schroeder (artist and filmmaker):

Titles: 40h, max. 2 months 2017; Holy Smoke 2018 (bank-film); 13 Versuche die Luft

anzuhalten 2020; [ˈdʊŋk|dʊɪflant] 2016; The Effect of Cannonry on Thunderclouds 2018; mystery shopping 2022.

Week 3:

Tuesday, Feb 14 — Chris Marker 1: letters and memory as Essayistic Form

Titles: Letters from Siberia 1958, Sans Soleil 1982

Week 4:

Tuesday, Feb 21 — Peter Liechti: the diary or the personal, the private and the public 1. -

Titles: Lucky Jack 2015

Week 5:

Tuesday, Feb 28 — Guest: Juliane Henrich: the diary or the personal, the private and the public 2.

Titles: From The West 2016

Week 6:

Tuesday, Mar 07 — Harun Farocki 1: „operative Bilder/ technical images“

Titles: Between Two Wars 1978, Images of the World and the Inscription of War 1988

Week 7:

Tuesday, Mar 14 — Harun Farocki 2: commentary versus images

Titles: The Trouble with Images 1973, As You see 1986 , Leben BRD 1990

**Week 8: Mid Terms (individual feedback for feedback)**

Tuesday, Mar 21 — Harun Farocki 3: late influence, images and structures, surface and politics

Titles: The Creators of Shopping Worlds 2001, Lisa Rave „Europium“ 2014 and Carmen Losmann „Oeconomia“ 2020

Week 9:

Tuesday, Mar 28 — Kevin B Lee: Desktop Documentary

Titles: Transformers the Premake & Bottled Songs. Hasan Özgür „Trajan“ (Berlin Biennale 2022), Joler Vlad – New Extractivism

Spring break: Apr 3 – Apr 7

Week 10:

Tuesday, Apr 11 — Shelly Silver: traveling, film as social experiment, writing auto-fiction

Titles: 5 lessons & 9 questions about Chinatown 2009, What I'm Looking For 2004, suicide 2003, a tiny place that is hard to touch 2019

Week 11:

Tuesday, Apr 18 — Agnes Varda: „cinematic writing“ and Left Bank Filmmaking

Titles: The Gleaners and I 2000

Week 12:

Tuesday, Apr 25 — Philip Scheffner: radical filmmaking

Titles: Tag des Spatzen 2015, Havarie, 2018, Europe 2022

Week 13:

Tuesday, May 2 — Alexander Kluge: intellectual filmmaking

Titles: Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike, DVD 2019 „Bilderwelten vom Großen Krieg 1914–1918“, "Die Macht der Gefühle" (1983; ZDF, 1985), Deutschland im Herbst (1978)

Week 14: Wrap up

Tuesday, May 9 — feedback, preparation for presentations

## **Requirements**

Students are expected to:

- Turn off phones during class time.
- Initiate appointments with the Professor or arts staff outside of class time.
- Respond to emails from their professors in a timely manner.
- Inform their professors at the beginning of the semester if photos of student's identity, artwork, works in progress are NOT to be taken and / or used for Bard College Berlin.

## **Academic Integrity**

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

## **Attendance**

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

## **Policy on Late Submission of Artworks / Presentations**

Assignments (artworks, essays, performances, oral presentations) that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (Example: B+ becomes C+). The Professor is not

obliged to accept assignments that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

#### Facility Guidelines:

“The Factory” – Eichenstrasse 43

#### The Factory Policy Agreement

- 1) “The Factory” at BCB (Eichenstrasse 43) has space and facilities available to BCB students with an academic purpose for using the building. Mandatory in-class orientations are required to retain chip access to the Factory. Chip access to The Factory is from 7am to 10pm everyday during the semester. At 10pm students will be asked to leave the building by BCB security personnel.
- 2) Students agree to only use the common spaces that are available for their needs, and must respect private spaces that are off-limits. For requesting to reserve the dance / theater space and / or Seminar Room 6, please fill out the online [Factory Reservation Form](#). The Factory Staff will get back to you within two weekdays. (Monday - Friday).
- 3) No smoking is allowed anywhere inside the building. There are to be no projects using open flames (such as candles, torches, lanterns, fireworks, etc.) inside any part of the building.
- 4) Fire exits and lanes must be kept clear of any obstructions.
- 5) Spray painting and handling of any hazardous (chemical or combustible) material is not allowed inside the building. Contact the Studio Arts Manager concerning working with these materials. All work surfaces (indoor and outdoor) must be properly protected with a drop cloth or a packing paper provided by the workshop.
- 6) No sandals, flip-flops, or bare feet will be allowed inside the workshop and studio 6.
- 7) Students must make sure all lights are turned off and doors are closed when leaving the building. No windows or doors are to be left opened or cracked. All electrical items must be unplugged when not in use.
- 8) If BCB workshop tools must be borrowed for a purpose outside of the building, please contact The Studio Arts Manager (by appointment).
- 9) There are to be no architectural changes to studios or any areas inside or outside of the building without first speaking with the Studio Arts Manager.
- 10) During completion week, any space used by a student must be returned empty with clean walls and floors. All garbage must be bagged (or boxed) and properly disposed of. Final grades may be penalized and / or fines imposed if items are left (or renovations unfinished) by the inspection deadline.
- 11) Contact Studio Arts Manager directly with any questions: [j.park@berlin.bard.edu](mailto:j.park@berlin.bard.edu)

AV Facilities – Platanenstrasse 98 (downstairs)

- 1) BCB's AV (Audio / Visual) facilities provide a limited quantity of AV equipment to support those students enrolled in arts classes that require specific items. AV facilities do not include any black and white or color printing services for students.
- 2) The opening times may change every semester to adapt to specific course times and social distancing conditions. Borrowing equipment is currently implemented by scheduling an advance appointment through this link: <https://janinaschabig.youcanbook.me/>  
AV facilities are ONLY available during days when classes are held (closed during official BCB holidays).
- 3) All items checked out are due back during AV hours the following day, unless other arrangements have been made in advance directly with AV Staff.
- 4) Items to be reserved on a specific date should be requested at least one week in advance. Without reservation, availability is limited to a first-come, first-serve basis.
- 5) The AV Staff may exclude students from borrowing items at any time, if the student:
  - failed to return items in time
  - failed to return items in person (pick up and/ or return by friends is not allowed)
  - returned items with missing pieces
  - returned items damaged or in poor shape
- 6) AV equipment will be given out only to those students responsible in organizing, picking up as well as returning their items IN PERSON. No exceptions.
- 7) All items returned late, regardless of patron's position at BCB, will be subject to a 1 Euro fine, per day.
- 8) Any item returned without accessories (such as cables, SD card, batteries, tripod head, lens cap, etc) will be subject to a 1 Euro fine, per day (the same as late returns).
- 9) Any items missing will be subject to patron reimbursement for its value (or under special circumstances, replacement, at the discretion of AV Staff). Any items damaged or malfunctioning are expected to be reported to Staff upon check-in.
- 10) Please use the AV email to inquire about equipment or policy, as well as to reserve (av@berlin.bard.edu). Do not contact AV Staff through their personal emails.
- 11) We strongly suggest personally visiting the facilities to inquire and reserve before borrowing equipment!
- 12) AV equipment is limited at BCB. Whenever possible students are encouraged to use their own devices (computers, cameras) for production purposes.
- 13) Contact AV Staff directly with any questions: av@berlin.bard.edu

Photo Darkroom Facilities – Platanenstrasse 98 (downstairs)

Computer Pool and Media Lab – Kuckhoffstrasse 24 (upstairs)

\*\* Guidelines to be offered during orientations.