

FA333 (Re)Imagine Realities: Experimental Documentary

Seminar Leader: Janina Schabig
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Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

In this hands-on filmmaking course, we will explore experimental approaches to documentary film, challenging traditional notions of truth, representation, and storytelling.

At a time when the boundaries between fact, fiction, and fabrication grow increasingly unstable, this course invites you to consider experimental documentary as a mode of inquiry, a practice that unsettles fixed meanings and reorients how we see, feel, and make sense of the world. How do we represent what was never recorded? How can documentation give form to the intangible: a feeling, a rumor, a haunting? In the absence of evidence, can speculation become a form of truth-telling? Through engagement with both original and found materials—i.e. archival footage, photographs, text, and sound—we will explore how experimental practices can embrace subjectivity, respond to absence, and challenge the illusion of objectivity, expanding not only what is true, but how truth can be felt and formed.

A mix of short production assignments, in-class exercises, artist talks, readings, and screenings—including works such as Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*, and Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*—will support you in developing your artistic voice as filmmakers and deepen your understanding of documentary's power to shape perception and meaning. While prior filming and editing knowledge is useful, no prior in-depth experience with audiovisual production is necessary, only a willingness to experiment, to question, and to (re)imagine.

Requirements

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.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the Bard College Berlin Accessibility page. Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

- Attendance of ALL classes is expected.
- More than one unexcused absence (that is, absence from one three-hour session) will significantly affect the participation grade for the course.
- Arriving late will be noted and after two late arrivals, the participation grade will be affected.
- Arriving more than 15 min after the start of the class will be considered an absence.

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

Assessment

Your attendance & participation are key components of this course. This includes showing up on time, coming prepared with notes on the week's readings or viewings, and being ready to take part in class discussions and hands-on exercises. You will be assessed on your overall engagement, how you contribute to conversations, complete assignments on time, show responsibility in group or independent work, and communicate clearly with both classmates and your instructor.

Assignments

1. Recording exercises

→ 3 shots and soundscape. Due Wednesday, October 01st by 2 pm.

2. Midterm Project “The Unseen - Documenting the Invisible”

Create a 2 to maximum 3 minute video exploring something intangible or invisible: a memory, a rumor, a feeling, a haunting presence or an absence. This can include found, live or staged footage, abstract visuals, soundscapes, voiceover, or any experimental method that challenges traditional documentary norms.

Deliverables:

- A 2-3 minute video. Due Tuesday, October 14th by 2 pm.
- A short reflection (approx. 200 words) explaining your conceptual framework and techniques in preparation for presenting your video. Due Wednesday, October 15th by 2 pm.

3. Final Project “Reimagining Documentary”

Synthesize course themes by creating a work that challenges or expands the documentary genre. Develop a 3 to maximum 10 minute piece that investigates a subject of your choice through an experimental lens. You are encouraged to mix formats: live or archival footage, personal recordings, interviews, text, sound design, reenactments, or abstract elements, to explore ideas of fact, fiction, memory, or speculation. Consider the boundaries between truth and fabrication, presence and absence, and how form shapes meaning. Stages:

1. Proposal (200-250 words): Outline your concept by describing your idea, intended materials, and experimental approach.
2. Rough cut: Submit a rough cut (around 70-80% complete) for feedback. Focus on structure, pacing, and tone.
3. Final cut: Incorporate feedback and finalize your piece.

Deliverables:

- Proposal due Tuesday, November 11th by 2 pm.
- Rough cut due Tuesday, November 25th by 2 pm.
- Final cut due Tuesday, December 9th by 2 pm.

Policy on Late Submission of Artworks / Presentations

Assignments that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (Example: B+ becomes C+). The instructor is not obliged to accept assignments that are more than 24 hours late. Where the instructor 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. Students receive end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are also entitled and encouraged to make an appointment with the instructor to receive individual feedback on seminar participation and work, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

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| 30% | Attendance & Participation |
| 20% | Exercises |
| 20% | Midterm Project |
| 30% | Final Project |

Schedule

Week 1: Sept 03 *Introduction*

- Please bring a document, self-made or found (e.g. a photo, newspaper article, note, short video or sound recording, etc.) that resonates with you in some way. Use it to introduce yourself and share the story behind your choice.
- Course overview, objectives and expectations
- Chris Marker, Hito Steyerl

Homework:

→ Read: Truth, Dare or Promise, Chapter 1: Art or Life? by Hito Steyerl (p. 1–9).

Week 2: Sept 10 *The camera eye*

- Dziga Vertov, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Lucien Castaing-Taylor & Verena Paravel
- Camera workshop

Homework:

→ Record the same subject multiple times using different cameras and/or settings. On Oct. 1st, present 3 distinct shots (max. 5 minutes total) that each reveal a different visual perception or “truth” about the subject.

Week 3: Sept 17 *Cinematic Listening*

- Humphrey Jennings & Stewart McAllister, Mia Engberg, Lucrecia Martel
- Sound recording workshop

Homework:

→ Record one environment or subject using different microphones or approaches. On Oct. 1st, present a soundscape (max. 1 minute), that offers at least 2 distinct ways of hearing or understanding the same auditory event.

→ Read: NFB Blog: Stories We Tell: A post by Sarah Polley

→ Watch: Polley, Sarah, dir. *Stories We Tell*. 2012. 149 min. Streaming via Kanopy.

Week 4: Sept 24 *Staging and the invisible*

- Sarah Polley, Yuval Hameiri
- Lighting workshop

Homework:

- Read: Walter Murch / Watch: Editing tutorials
- Upload 3 shots and soundscape exercises to Google Classroom before next class.

Week 5: Oct 01

- Present your recording exercises (10 minutes per student)
- Short editing workshop (bring in a laptop with pre-installed editing software)

Homework:

- Finalize your midterm project

Week 6: Oct 08 *Conveying intangible realities*

- Engberg, Mia, dir. *Belleville Baby*. 2013. 75 min. Screening in class.
- Discussion in pairs, followed by group reflection

Homework:

- Upload your midterm project to Google Classroom by 2 pm, Tuesday, October 14.
- Prepare a short introduction (max. 3 minutes) to present your video to the class. Focus on the creative, experimental choices you made regarding content, camera work, sound, and editing. Think about what kind of feedback you'd like to receive, and bring 2–3 questions to guide the group's response.

Week 7: Oct 15

- Midterm projects presentation and feedback

Homework:

- Read: Black Looks, Chapter 7: The Oppositional Gaze by bell hooks (p. 115–131).
- Watch: Dunye, Cheryl, dir. *The Watermelon Woman*. 1996. Streaming via Kanopy.

Week 8: Oct 22

- Fall break, no classes

Week 9: Oct 29 *Authorship & Resistance*

- bell hooks, Cheryl Dunye
- Guestspeaker

Homework:

- Start researching and working on your final project
- Read: Film-Philosophy 22.1: Deep Truth and the Mythic Veil (p. 39–59)

Week 10: Nov 05 *Ecstatic truth?*

- Herzog, Werner, dir. *Lessons of Darkness*. 1992. 54 min. Screening in class.
- Marker, Chris, dir. *La Jetée*. 1962. 28 min. Screening in class.
- Discussion in pairs, followed by group reflection

Homework:

- Prepare a proposal pitch for your final project. This should include a 200–250 word concept outline describing your idea, the materials you plan to use, and your experimental approach, informed by the texts, themes, and subjects covered in this class. Include a visual element such as a moodboard, storyboard, sketch, or a few test shots, and 2–3 questions you'd like feedback on. These can focus on aspects such as the clarity of your concept, the use of form and materials, or any specific challenges you're anticipating. Be ready to present your proposal (around 5 to maximum 7 min) in class next week and participate in a feedback session.

Week 11: Nov 12

- Final project proposal presentations (5 - 7 minutes per student)
- Workshopping technical questions

Homework:

- Watch: Tutorials

Week 12: Nov 19

- TBD
- Individual/ group meetings to work on your final project

Homework:

- Upload your rough cut to Google Classroom by 2pm, Tuesday, November 25th
- Prepare a brief introduction (max. 3 minutes) to present your rough cut to the class. Focus on the core concept you're aiming to convey and explain the creative, experimental choices and methods you used to explore or express it. Think about what kind of feedback would be most helpful as you move toward your final cut, and come prepared with 2–3 specific questions to guide the group's response.

Week 13: Nov 26

- Rough cuts presentation and feedback
- Selecting if/ what you would like to share at Open Studios

Homework:

- Incorporate feedback and finalize your video

Week 13: Dec 03

- Workshopping how to present your projects
- Loglines, synopses, posters, experimental approaches?

Homework:

- Upload your final cut to Google Classroom by 2 pm Tuesday, December 9th.

Week 14: Dec 10

- Screening and discussion of final cut
- Group reflection: evaluations, lessons learned, next steps in filmmaking

Week 15: Dec 17

- Completion Week

*please note:

The syllabus/ schedule may change. The most recent syllabus will always be available on Google Classroom.

Policy on the use of facilities:

1. The Factory (Eichenstrasse 43) and Monopol (Provinzstr 40-44) at BCB offer space and facilities to BCB art students. Chip access is from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day, including the weekends during the semester. The buildings cannot be used outside these hours.
2. Fire exits and lanes must be kept clear of any obstructions.
3. Students agree only to use the designated class spaces or communal workshops. Respecting the building and its facilities is crucial, as they are shared resources that need to be preserved for the benefit of all.
4. For your safety and the safety of others, smoking and drinking alcohol are strictly prohibited anywhere inside the building.
5. Unauthorized events and/or parties are not permitted. Projects using open flames (such as candles, torches, lanterns, fireworks, etc.) are not permitted inside the building.
6. Spray painting and handling any hazardous (chemical or combustible) material is not permitted inside the building.
7. All work surfaces (indoor and outdoor) must be adequately protected with the workshop's drop cloth before spray painting or working with plaster.
8. During completion week, any space used by a student must be emptied, with clean walls and floors. All garbage must be adequately disposed of. Final grades may be affected or withheld if any item remains by the inspection deadline.
9. When leaving the building, students must ensure all lights are turned off, all electrical items must be unplugged, and doors must be closed.
10. Contact the Studio art manager directly with any questions: j.park@berlin.bard.edu

Emergency phone numbers:

Police (calling from a German landline or cellphone): 110

Fire (calling from a German landline or cellphone): 112

Ambulance and Paramedics (calling from a German landline or cellphone): 112

Out-of-Hours Medical Care (calling from a German landline or cellphone) : 116 117