

HISTORY, MEMORY, TRUTH, FICTION

CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES

UNIVERSIDADE PRESBITERIANA MACKENZIE

LESSON – WEEK 1
GENERAL INTRODUCTION
20 AUGUST 2019

I. "BREAKING THE ICE" (10 mins max.)

INTRODUCTIONS: JANE DE ALMEIDA; GREG COHEN

INTRODUCTIONS: STUDENTS (NAME, RESEARCH INTERESTS...)

Additional Questions:

- Background in visual studies? Film studies? Art history?
- Previous courses on documentary?
- Expectations/preoccupations for this course?

* **Program-Ementa: Structure, Logic**

- My approach (different than Jane's, but complementary to hers): **neither** to define documentary, **nor** to survey history of documentary...

... but rather, to think with documentary. I.e. to explore ways in which documentary practices (whether through moving or still image, installation, etc) have served to generate concepts: about social relations, about urban space, about "evidence," "reality," and historical knowledge, about *fiction itself* as a form of knowledge production.....

- The *aulas* conceived as interlocking, overlapping: themes/concepts/questions discussed in one will be continually re-visited in subsequent classes...

- Aulas: Themes, concepts, methods:

• **Aula 1:** Today. Lay out a series of *very* basic questions about documentary, as a way to explore our own preconceptions and misunderstandings of the term....

• **Aula 2:** Definitions of documentary... and the limits of *classification*.

◊ The questions "What *is* documentary?" "How do we know when we encounter a "documentary object?" "What distinguishes documentary objects from *non-documentary* objects?"

- ◊ The philosophical and ethical dilemmas inherent in such questions
- ◊ A series of audio-visual works that lay bare these dilemmas... without resolving them

- **Aula 3:** The concept of the (photographic) "document" as evidence...

- ◊ The "evidentiary" conception of documentary... and its inherent contradictions
- ◊ Case Study: photographs of the cadaver of Che Guevara
- ◊ Complicating the picture: Alfredo Jaar's installations of work on Rwandan Genocide
- ◊ Time permitting: the use of photography in W.G. Sebald's novels...

- **Aula 4:** Documentary *Labor* and the Concept of *Hospitality*

- ◊ Who is the "author" and who is the "protagonist" of the work of documentary?
- ◊ Who is the "host" and who the "guest" in the "documentary situation"?
- ◊ Case Study: Pedro Costa's *No quarto da Vanda* (Portugal)
- ◊ Time-permitting: Ramiro Gómez's *Tierra Roja* (Paraguay)

II. PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS [Slide 3]

- * What is meant by the term "documentary"?
- * Is a work of documentary work the same as a work of "history"? The news? Does a work of documentary have to have some direct link to *information* and "truth" in order to truly qualify as "documentary"?
- * Can we consider the work of documentary a "work of art" as well? That is, does documentary allow for "invention," "construction," "creation/creativity"?
- * If we had to *define* "documentary" (referring to cinema, photography, or other audio-visual media), how would we do it?
- **[Slide 4]** Possible Responses/Definitions (Nichols)...*all* problematic:

1. A "documentary" work refers (directly and explicitly) to actual "facts", without modifying them or introducing "new," unverifiable data...
2. A "documentary" work represents reality *objectively* ... (unlike the *non-documentary* work—i.e. "fiction"— which represents reality *subjectively*)
3. A "documentary" work addresses, and reveals, "real people" in their "real contexts" ...
They are not *professional* actors, but rather *social actors*
4. A "documentary" work can "tell a story" about "reality," yet that story is never the *interpretation* of events, but rather, the *actual history* of those "real" events.

III. COMPLICATING THE QUESTION: A FEW CASE STUDIES. DOCUMENTARY, OR NOT?

* DOCUMENTARY OR NOT?

For each of the following: assess "documentary" status of images in light of Nichols' 4 basic attributes of doc.:

• **[Slide 5] Photos by Silvio Zuccheri**

◊ ("reporting"/photojournalism... but note how these images are *framed* and *constructed*... the *mise-en-scène*)

• **[Slide 6] Photos by Paz Errázuriz:**

◊ ("art photography"... with a *documentary* frame... note the titles: an attempt to *override* the "subjective" nature of these images with a very concrete *here/who/when*?)

• **[Slide 7] Clip: *Los rubios*, Albertina Carri (Argentina, 2003)**

◊ A "documentary" about traumatic childhood memory of *national* trauma... in which director recurs to use of *stop-motion animation* in order to "represent reality"

* HENCE, what are some of the problems with these definitions of *documentary*?

- i. Many documentary works *do* "intervene" in "reality"... i.e. through *recreations*, *staging*, *mise-en-scène*, *framing*, etc...
- ii. Many documentary works are *not*, nor *attempt* to be *objective* in any way. To the contrary, they often aim precisely for the *subjective interpretation*....(often through *persuasion*) of "reality"

iii. The "social actor" of the documentary... is never exempt from his own *self-fashioning* before the camera... "Acting" implies "performance," whether in the documentary situation, or in a work of fiction...

iv. And... if a "documentary" work avails itself of "creative" methods in order to better "document" the "real" events it is attempting to analyze or convey?

Or... if a documentary work is attempting to "document" what does not give itself easily to documentation? (For instance: memories/memory)?

> Do such works continue to be "documentary" in any conventional sense?

*** (PROVISIONAL) CONCLUSIONS**

- **One of ourmost important objectives in this course: to question, complicate the limits of the definition of the "documentary" object and the "documentary" condition...**