

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