

Synopsis

'Visual Anthropology and the City' is a film course of documentaries on the city starting from the city symphonies of the 1920s to the video diaries of Jonas Mekas in New York and Slow Cinema by James Benning in LA. Urban anthropology has fascinated journalists, photographers and policy makers with the emergence of the Chicago School since the 1920s. Ethnography and long-term research facilitated deeper insights into the everyday lives of urban neighbourhoods that were often associated with violence, crime and housing problems. Cinema and photography have also since their inception engaged with the urban, and their development is deeply entwined with that of the modern metropolis. We are interested in films, photography, and writings that look

at modernity, subcultures, non- western cities, regeneration, urban elites, domestic space, social movements and urban architecture. In this course we will discuss films, photography and writings on the subject.



Session 1 The city symphonies of the 1920s



The term ‘documentary’ was coined by John Grierson, who after watching Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (1926) wrote in his review in *The New York Sun* “Of course, *Moana* being a visual account of events in the daily life of Polynesian youth and his family, has documentary

value”. The word documentary comes from the Latin word *docere* = to teach. Robert Flaherty’s films of the 1920s reached a high popularity for their well-staged authenticity of non-western life, very different in style and narration to Russian documentary of the same era. *Kino-Pravda* literally ‘cinema truth’, coined by Dziga Vertov in 1922, meant that “all people must continue to act and function in front of the camera just as they do in everyday life”. Vertov’s film *Man with a Movie Camera* from 1929 is based on montage, i.e. the juxtaposition of images. Many films of that period aimed to portray modern life, e.g. Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a City* is one of the early examples of city films revolving around urban life style and modern architecture.

Session 2 Jean Rouch and cinéma vérité

French filmmaker Jean Rouch (1917-2004) who is probably most well-known for his *Chronicles of a Summer* (1961), is one of the most controversial figures in ethnographic filmmaking. After an incident in Senegal while working as an engineer, Rouch became intrigued by the violent impact of colonial rule and



rapid economic development in colonial Africa. He started to collect ethnographic data on rituals and native life and collaborated with local people who acted in his films and helped writing the storyboard. Mixing documentary, performance, and fiction, Rouch experimented with genres and styles while also encouraging young African filmmakers to make their own films. As one of the founders of cinéma vérité, Rouch sees the camera as an active agent to create truth, as a provocation. *Petit à Petit* (1970) tells the story of an African businessman who is conducting ethnographic research in Paris – a reversed anthropology.

Session 3 The Heart of the Angel and observational cinema



The Heart of the Angel is a documentary made by director/producer Molly Dineen in 1989, before the 1992 renovation of the then 100-year-old Angel tube station on the London Underground. The film follows 48 hours

in the everyday lives of the people who work in the station, including London Underground foreman Ray Stocker, ticket-seller Derek Perkins, the groups of women called 'fluffers' who clean human hair out of the tracks to avoid the fire hazard, and the gangs of men who work with pickaxes in almost pitch-black conditions to renovate parts of the track in time for the following day. In this session we will discuss the history of British documentary and the stylistic conventions of observational cinema.

Session 4 La Haine and docu-fiction



While to most outsiders Paris seems the very picture of beauty and civility, France has had a long and unfortunate history of intolerance toward outsiders, and this powerful drama from filmmaker Mathieu Kassovitz takes an unblinking look at a racially diverse group of young people trapped in the Parisian economic and

social underclass. Vinz (Vincent Cassel), who is Jewish, Hubert (Hubert Kounde), who is Black, and Said (Said Taghmaoui), who is Arabic, are young men from the lower rungs of the French economic ladder; they have no jobs, few prospects, and no productive way to spend their time. They hang out and wander the streets as a way of filling their days and are sometimes caught up in frequent skirmishes between the police and other disaffected youth. One day, a street riot breaks out after police seriously injure an Arab student; the three friends are arrested and questioned, and it is learned that a policeman lost a gun in the chaos. However, what they don't know is that Vinz picked it up and has it in his possession, and when Vinz, Hubert, and Said get into a scuffle with a group of racist skinheads, the circumstances seem poised for tragedy. Here we will discuss the history of Paris' banlieue and colonialism.

Session 5 US filmmakers and Slow Cinema



‘Slow Cinema’ is a controversial term and refers to a variety of phenomena in filmmaking: long takes, long films, emphasis on landscape and architecture, excess of time, and a wide-ranging use of soundscapes. “It’s not slow cinema, it’s cinema,” insists Filipino independent film director Lav Diaz following the

screening of his eight-hour film at the Berlinale in January 2016: “It’s cinema, it’s just like poetry, just like music, just like painting where it’s free, whether it’s a small canvas or it’s a big canvas, it’s the same. Cinema shouldn’t be imposed on.” Filmmakers such as Safi Faye, Jacques Rivette, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Béla Tarr, Lav Diaz, Chantal Akerman, Pedro Costa, or James Benning (LOS) have experimented with representations of time and silence. Sukhdev Sandhu wrote in the Guardian in 2012: “Its techniques of dissolves, cutting and montage mirrored the rhythms – at once alienating and exhilarating – of modern life”. In contrast we watch personal accounts of everyday life of Jonas Mekas. Born in Lithuania and having studied philosophy in Germany, Jonas Mekas left for the States. Two months after his arrival in New York he borrowed money to buy his first Bolex camera and began to record brief moments of his life. He soon got deeply involved in the American Avant-Garde film movement and later founded Anthology Film Archives, a repositories of avant-garde cinema and a screening venue.

Session 6 Guest speaker: former Timeout
Nightlife Editor and Photographer Dave
Swindells

Dave Swindells will talk about his photographs that he took as a nightlife editor at Timeout on club culture and subculture in London during the 1980s-1990s.



Session 7 'The Exiles' and Native American on film

The filmmaker Kent MacKenzie spent much of his student days in the streets and bars of Los Angeles where he befriended a gang of American Indians during the early 1960s. Writing a script that follows the stories and dreams of urban life of his friends, the film *The Exiles* (1961), which had been lost in a forgotten archive until recently offers a refreshing perspective on

people who are forced to live in exile away from their native lands and traditions. Rather than a gloomy realist portrait Kenzie's chronicle remains wonderfully light and warm-hearted. It finishes in a beautifully captured scene set on a hill over the nightscapes of Los Angeles where young people are drinking, dancing, and drumming, reviving their traditions and rituals. More known in classic Westerns than in ethnographic films, Native Americans have been frequently used as stereotyped 'wild' people who fight against Western civilization. Either demonised or romanticised, Native Americans have been systematically silenced and exploited.



Session 8 Shinjuku Boys in Tokyo

From the makers of DREAM GIRLS, SHINJUKU BOYS by Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams introduces three onnabes who work as hosts at the New Marilyn Club in Tokyo. Onnabes are women who live as men and have girlfriends, although they don't

usually identify as lesbians. As the film follows them at home and on the job, all three talk frankly to the camera about their gender-bending lives, revealing their views about women, sex, transvestitism and lesbianism. Alternating with these illuminating interviews are fabulous sequences shot inside the Club, patronized almost exclusively by heterosexual women who have become disappointed with real men. This is a remarkable documentary about the complexity of female sexuality in Japan today.

