

Interdisciplinary Documentary Media Practices

Proposal

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We propose an Interdisciplinary Documentary Media Program (IDMP) that fosters a community of CU filmmakers across departments and programs, taking advantage of the strengths of existing CU faculty, courses, and facilities, as well as the cluster of successful independent filmmakers in Colorado. At the core of this program will be the Documentary Lab, a physical locus for the proposed (1) Master of Fine Arts degree in IDMP, (2) graduate certificate in IDMP, and (3) undergraduate minor in IDMP. These three programs will be mutually enriching, informed by cutting edge theoretical trends in the field, emergent cross-platform technologies, and a distinctive interdisciplinary approach. In keeping with the CU Mission Statement, the IDMP will promote CU and Colorado as a “global crossroads of ideas and discovery.”

Unique Opportunities

In recent years, documentary has witnessed a rise in popularity among audiences and commensurate returns in terms of box office revenues. The box office success of the documentary is underpinned by the significant increase of scholastic inquiry into the philosophical, aesthetic and ideological dimensions of the form.

The Boulder/Denver area is home to a thriving community of filmmakers and production companies that a documentary program could partner with. Local professional filmmakers have a keen interest in the development of documentary programs at CU Boulder, including filmmakers Olivia Ahnemann, Steve Hoggard, and Daphna Rubin of Hoggard Films; Jim Butterworth of Naked Edge Films, Daniel Junge co-director of the Academy Award-winning short documentary *Saving Face*; and Louie Psihoyos, co-founder of the Oceanic Preservation Society and director of the Academy Award-winning *The Cove*. Several of these filmmakers are regular guests in our classes, and offer internships to CU students. They will advise the newly formed program.

Current CU Boulder faculty will provide a rich environment for producing, teaching, and writing about documentary. For example, The Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR) recently sponsored the successful documentary *Chasing Ice*. Human Geography faculty working in China are exploring the uses of documentary media in cultural studies. Faculty in the Department of History have been consultants for PBS documentaries. Both the Fiske Planetarium and Department Physics faculty have been involved in documentary media projects. The Journalism and Mass Communication program offers a course on documentary production for journalists. Faculty in the Department of Art and Art History and the Film Studies Program teach creative documentary media and have exhibited documentary work extensively (Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, Documenta Madrid, MoMA’s Documentary Fortnight, La Biennale Di Venezia) and are founders of initiatives such as the Black Audio Film Collective.

In addition, CU research centers are interested in collaborating with the IDMP including the Center for the American West, The Center for Asian Studies, The Brakhage Center for the Media Arts, and the Center for Media Religion and Culture. The program will serve as a nexus for collaboration with these centers, extending the reach and impact of their research by involving them in the creative documentary media process.

The Interdisciplinary Program

The MFA, graduate certificate, and the undergraduate minor in IDMP will be offered by drawing on faculty expertise in Film Studies, Anthropology, Media Studies, Art and Art History, Journalism, as well as new faculty located in the IDMP.

The goal of this program is to meaningfully integrate documentary practice within the research process itself. As noted ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall argues, the immersive visual nature of these media provides ways of understanding that are not simply ancillary to text, but of a different mode of knowledge altogether. Success along these lines may be accomplished through a variety of styles and approaches. Innovative filmmakers and scholars such as Trinh T. Minh-ha (Professor, UC Berkeley) are critically engaging in alternate, visually focused methods of knowing and knowledge creation.

While some MFA documentary programs have a single thematic focus—for example, on documentary social activism, as is the case at University of California, Santa Cruz and The School of Visual Arts, in New York—the IDMP will foster a perspective encouraging experimentation with a variety of approaches and forms. This strategy will expand the documentary canvas both by encouraging students to explore, apply and invent different modes of storytelling and research as well as utilize emerging technologies in documentary practice. The curriculum will consist of core courses, workshops, fieldwork, and seminars. Courses on topics such as research methodologies will employ cross-disciplinary team-teaching with the intention of providing a substantive interdisciplinary environment.

We are at a threshold moment where innovative multimedia approaches are redefining media enterprises such as reportage, which is adopting the investigative documentary form and exploring new ways of establishing agency through media. For instance, Tony and Ridley Scott created *Life in a Day*, a crowd-sourced drama/documentary film comprised of video clips selected from 80,000 submissions to YouTube on July 24, 2010. The IDMP program will tap into this dynamic participatory media culture in which the boundaries between producers and consumers have become increasingly porous. Such an important cultural shift in the media landscape requires a pedagogy that trains students to both reflect on their role as active participants in social change and understand their position as producers of content in the vast and complex new media

ecology. Our program will play a vital role in enhancing students' visual storytelling and expressive capacity. The MFA thesis project will focus on producing an intellectually rigorous and innovative contribution to documentary media.

Those students graduating with the MFA in IDMP will have the option to explore work in a variety of national and international media organizations and settings. These include television, social media, newsgathering, as well as working with non-profit advocacy organizations such as the Oceanic Preservation Society. Graduates will also have enhanced possibilities when pursuing academic careers.

Graduate students in the MFA program will have the opportunity to develop as educators in their roles as teaching assistants - supporting the undergraduate minor in IDMP. The minor will expose students to the study of documentary from both the perspective of viewers and producers of media. The program will provide students with a working knowledge of documentary research and production, introducing them to media-based research methodologies in such a way as to complement the students' major curriculum.

A graduate-level IDMP certificate will be available through the program for CU students who seek to integrate documentary media into their studies. This program will be open to any student pursuing a graduate degree in any department at CU Boulder. By sharing experiences and core courses with MFA students, certificate students will provide a diverse spectrum of research interests and enrich the curricular environment. Current CU graduate students are working on projects including collaborative media with Australian Aboriginal communities, a documentary on undocumented war veterans in the US, using visual media in an ethnographic approach to tourism development in China, and a documentary on Arab-American identity. Such students would benefit greatly by participating in a dedicated graduate certificate program rather than approaching these practices in a piecemeal fashion.

Resources Required

Integral to the program will be the Documentary Lab. The lab will sustain innovation, experimentation and production. It will be a multi-purpose, multi-media learning environment. The Documentary Lab will serve as a dedicated place to workshop ideas for interdisciplinary projects with faculty and graduate students affiliated with other departments and research centers. Through the lab leading professionals and artists will explore specific topics and provide critical feedback. The lab will serve as a forum to connect CU to the vibrant regional documentary production scene.

While building on CU faculty expertise and computer labs and other resources, the IDMP will require an investment in facilities, faculty, and media production equipment. We anticipate offering 6 graduate level courses, 6

undergraduate courses, and one service class per year. The program will be comprised of 20-25 graduate students (MFA and Graduate Certificate students combined) and 50 undergraduate students (Minor).

Therefore, we anticipate hiring five new faculty to service the program. Two hires would be at the senior level to provide programmatic leadership. New faculty will be both accomplished and make cutting-edge contributions to the field.

Graduate teaching assistantships and fellowships should be established in order for the program to compete on a national level.

For this program to succeed, it should be part of an academic entity that fosters and encourages progressive interdisciplinary research and teaching involving media as a broadly conceived cluster of creative practices and studies. CU faculty whose research and/or creative work align with the goals of the program should have the option to participate in the program as either instructors and/or researchers.

Addendum

Authors

Reece Auguiste, Assistant Professor Film Studies, is a documentary filmmaker and scholar with a focus on national cinemas and transnational context. Auguiste's interests are film theory and criticism, aesthetics, digital media, and the ephemeral poetics of the moving image. He has also curated film programs for the National Civil Rights Museum and Midland Arts/The Drum (UK), and BluesFest, and was a co-founder of the Memphis Film Forum. His essays on film criticism and aesthetics have appeared in books and journals including *Framework*, *Borderline*, *Cineaction*, *Undercut*, *Questions of Third Cinema*, *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective*, *The British Avant-Garde Film 1926-1995*, and *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture-Media*.

Dan Boord, Professor Film Studies, Chair of Film Studies from 2005-2009, is Director of the Stan Brakhage Center. Boord teaches creative documentary within the Film Studies Program. His video works have screened at Documenta Madrid and MoMA's documentary fortnight. They have also twice been selected for screening at La Biennale Di Venezia, the Venice Film Festival. His works are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Long Beach Museum in Long Beach, California (now part of the Getty Museum, Video Art Collection), and at the Art Museum, the University of California, Berkeley.

Nabil Echchaibi, Assistant Professor Journalism and Mass Communication, specializes in identity politics among young Muslims in the Arab world and in diaspora. His work has appeared in various international publications such as *Javnost*, *International Communication Gazette*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, and *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research*. He is currently working on a manuscript on transnational Islamic communication and the impact of satellite television and social media on religious authority, Muslim self-agency, and the prospect of a global Muslim civil society. His book *Voicing Diasporas: Ethnic Radio in Paris and Berlin between Culture and Renewal* (Lexington Books) was published in 2011. His co-edited book *International Blogging: Identity, Politics and Networked Publics* (Peter Lang) was published in 2009.

Paul Shankman, Professor of Anthropology, is a cultural anthropologist specializing in Samoa, the South Pacific, anthropology in the media, and the analysis of ethnographic film. He has conducted fieldwork in Samoa since 1966 and worked with Pacific Islanders in the United States. His work has appeared in the *American Anthropologist* and *Current Anthropology* as well as in popular magazines. His recent book, *The Trashing of Margaret Mead*, was published by the University of Wisconsin Press. He was featured in the recent BBC documentary, *Tales From the Jungle: Margaret Mead*, and has been on National Public Radio as an expert on Margaret Mead. He was the 2011 Distinguished Lecturer in Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History.

Selected External Programs Reviewed for This Proposal

Certificate Programs

Harvard's primary graduate program is the Sensory Ethnography Lab, though they also have a new documentary program through the law school and the prestigious Film Studies Center, which supports ethnographic academics and professional filmmakers. The Sensory Ethnography Lab, directed by former CU Anthropology Professor Lucien Castaing-Taylor, is an interdisciplinary graduate program that specifically opposes anthropological conventions of interpretation and translation, and seeks to convey phenomenological affect in film practice. The Harvard Law Documentary Studio program is much less structured than the Sensory Ethnography Lab, and does not offer courses yet, but does provide technical and financial support for student projects, as well as fostering a community of filmmakers. In the future, they plan to establish partnerships with faculty, offer coursework, establish an online archive, and facilitate festival submission.

The New School's graduate certificate in Documentary Media Studies is perfect for aspiring documentarians who already have a great idea for the kind of film they want to make. In fact, it's a requirement for entry into the program, in addition to having a B.A. from another institution. The one-year program is brief but thorough. As an addendum to their classes, students are required to attend biweekly "Doc Talk" events, featuring noteworthy documentarians.

NYU's Culture and Media certificate program is targeted toward anthropology and cinema PhD students. The program focuses on ethnographic film history and theory, culminating in an individualized film project. It is generally completed over two years, including intensive summer coursework.

Masters Programs

The **UC Berkeley** School of Journalism's MA documentary program may seem unnecessary to the aspiring filmmaker. But when you consider the degree it yields - a Master of Journalism - the TV news reporting requirements make a lot more sense. This two-year course is all digital, and it places a predictably heavy emphasis on working with found footage, making it a great fit for students more interested in historical documentaries. Though students don't get to do much hands-on production work until their second year, they do develop a very strong sense of their craft in the first, taking related courses in other disciplines.

Duke offers a highly interdisciplinary bachelor's program and MFA program, both of which emphasize still photography and its influence on the documentary. The curriculum also focuses strongly on the history of the art form, with courses this year on Classic Documentary Films and Traditions in Documentary Film. Students are encouraged to pursue relevant coursework in other departments such as history and sociology, in the hopes that they produce work that utilizes

the craft as an agent of social change. In fact, the Center runs a program called 'Literacy Through Photography,' wherein students from local public schools are given workshops to capture images from their own lives.

Ryerson University's Documentary Media two-year MA program is the only one of its kind in Canada. Ryerson, like Duke, places a strong emphasis on still photography, and just recently acquired The Black Star Collection, an impressive resource of almost 300,000 photos. The coursework at Ryerson is extensive and faculty members include filmmakers, scholars, and historians from all over the world, connecting students with opportunities to intern and apprentice both locally and abroad.

The **UC Santa Cruz** MA in Social Documentary program is designed for future documentarians committed to social change and to documenting communities, cultures, issues, and individuals who are marginalized in our current landscape of representation, focusing on social injustice and documentary ethics. The program trains students through individual and group projects that involve them in production, lighting, cameras, locations, subject, character choices, editing techniques, motion graphics and animation, trailers and websites. Students should come into the program with a developed project idea. The program seeks to prepare graduates for careers in independent media, documentary, human rights work, and creative contributions to a range of fields.

The **UC Santa Cruz** Digital Arts and New Media MFA serves as a center for the development and study of digital media and the cultures that they have helped create. Faculty and students are drawn from a variety of backgrounds, such as the arts, computer engineering, humanities, the sciences, and social sciences, to pursue interdisciplinary artistic and scholarly research and production in the context of a broad examination of digital arts and cultures.

Stanford University's two-year Documentary Film and Video M.F.A. starts with the basics. In addition to learning all the facets of digital production, students are also versed in 16mm film, giving them a better sense of the true origins of documentary filmmaking. M.F.A. students get a solid grounding in theory and history, not to mention preparation for filmmaking in the real world, learning the ins-and-outs of documentary financing.

Wake Forest's Documentary Institute's two-year master's program has a strong emphasis in documentary history and even offers a course on the ethics of non-fiction filmmaking. In addition to having access to state-of-the-art equipment and facilities, as well as successful documentary filmmaker faculty, students have the opportunity to set up a summer internship between their two years of coursework, with past placement at National Geographic, HBO Documentary Productions, and the Discovery Channel.

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