

Teaching how to make the past visible.

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Today, when we are concerned with major future issues on how to achieve more sustainable living conditions and a more sustainable use of resources, we also need to see ourselves in a broader context of time. It is very important that we are able not only to look forward but also backward, and to reflect on questions such as: How did people lead their lives in other times? How were major challenges met in the past? Questions like these are also raised in the UNDP Sustainable Development Goals (UNDP 2015).

In recent years, new digital media tools have changed how we manage our memories and what we remember. Digitisation has made it easier to explore collections in galleries, libraries, archives and museums, and to make use of old photographs, artwork, prints, manuscripts, letters and diaries. Online access to cultural heritage has even presented new avenues for filmmakers. Technology has opened up new opportunities in many different ways. Almost everyone nowadays has an easy-to-use film camera in their mobile phone, and it has become much easier to both edit and publish films online. As José van Dijck pointed out, this means that new practices and forms of cultural expression are being developed at the crossroad where memory meets media (2007). Irene Ros also gives us examples of this development (2022).

At museums, archives and cultural heritage sites there is also a growing need to learn more and to find ways to convey historical knowledge and historical insight using different forms of media, not least film. For this reason, I have developed two freestanding courses in historical documentary production, where beginners build on their practical filmmaking competence through close collaboration with professional documentary filmmakers. These two undergraduate courses are taught online so that professionals (or those who are cultural heritage enthusiasts in their spare time) can continue working while taking them part-time.

Courses of a new kind

Dalarna University is renowned for being Sweden's leading university when it comes to online education. These new courses contribute to didactic development by taking on the challenge of remote teaching and generating learning and skills, also in the field of film production. Students learn to mediate history through the creation of short historical



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documentaries that combine narration, archive material and newly filmed footage.¹ Similar courses in historical documentary production online, as far as I know, do not exist at other universities in the Nordic region, nor elsewhere in Europe.

Development in communication technology has opened up new opportunities to create online courses even in film production. Digital communication nowadays allows students not only to see and hear each other in the online classroom, but also to show each other films without interruption to image or sound, and to discuss them during viewing. Only a few years ago, technology used for online lessons required extensive preparation. Back in 2018, the teacher had to spend hours before each lesson uploading the videos that were to be shown during that lesson. And the idea that all students in the online classroom could easily show films to each other in real time was unheard of.

The curriculum breaks down the documentary production process into clearly defined steps, enhancing students' ability to gain in creative and technical confidence. Students and teachers meet regularly on Zoom, in small seminar groups, to discuss and review the ongoing work. During the two courses, students turn their ideas into completed documentary films.² Along the way, they examine how historical documentary film has the potential to convey knowledge about our past and how archival footage allows us to better understand the constantly evolving present. Also in this respect, the courses contribute greatly to pedagogical development and education. The students come to reflect on the relevance of using historical documentary film production outside traditional professional fields such as film and TV production, thus broadening the main field of societal application.

Between artistic and academic research

As a lecturer in the arts with a specialization in historical documentary film production, I find myself at the intersection of artistic research and academic research. I have myself produced many historical documentaries and also written a number of non-fiction books on history. One example is a historical documentary about Herman Lundborg, head of the Swedish State Institute for Race Biology in Uppsala, "*What measures to save a people?*" (2015, 59 min).³ I made this film together with Claes Gabrielson, and in collaboration with Swedish Television, at the same time as I was writing a literary nonfiction book, a biography on Lundborg. Figure 1 and 2 show how looking at race biological photographs in an archive was interpreted by Claes Gabrielson in the film. From my double stance – of both the artistic and the academic researcher – I have been able to reflect on how filmmaking contributes in a special way to the understanding of history. And I have come to the conclusion that the filmmaker can attain and convey a special kind of understanding of history.

Thanouli writes about historical film, both fiction and non-fiction, saying that it "liberates the forces of imagination, while, at the same time, unleashing our scepticism regarding our ability to fulfill Ranke's dream to present the past "wie es eigentlich gewesen" (2019, p. 231). Bell concludes that the historical documentary plots new ways to narrate and that the genre "encourage[s] the viewer to actively engage with how we make sense of the past" (2011, p. 26). In other words,

¹ The two courses at the first cycle (undergraduate) level are "Film as a Narrative Medium for Cultural Heritage and History" (7.5 Credits) and "Film as a Narrative Medium for Cultural Heritage and History - Continuation Course" (15 Credits). The first course started in January 2019 and has been offered six times, the second started in August 2020 and is offered for the fourth time in autumn 2022.

² Two examples of student projects are as follows: one, "*Gustaf Larsson. A Farm Worker's Life*" (2022, 10 min) by Josefine Svensson, curator at Södermanlands museum. This film received the second prize for "Creative editorials" at the European Digital Storytelling Festival in July 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rocWjjUykHY>; and two, "*Single Ticket Only*" (2022, 6 min) by Garbis Sarafian. About his father's photograph collection from Cyprus. This film and Hagop Sarafian's photos from Cyprus have become part of the collection at The Center for Visual Arts and Research Nicosia, Cyprus: <https://vimeo.com/672418289>

³ "*What measures to save a people?*" (2015, 59 min) <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/66847>

there are insights that can be gained through documentary filmmaking that cannot be captured in the same way when carrying out research for academic writing about the same material.



Figure 1: From the film *What measures to save a people?* (2015) Photo: Claes Gabrielson.

Besides being a senior lecturer in Image Production at Dalarna University, I am also affiliated to the Centre for Nordic Studies at the University of Helsinki, where I am currently writing my doctoral thesis in history on race biology, photography and collaboration over national borders within the scientific network for racial hygiene from 1910 to 1935. In short, I examine the role photography played at a time when ideas about and the practice of racial biology were widespread within Europe. In addition, I am making a historical documentary film on the same topic.

In my work, both as filmmaker and academic writer, I can examine the special possibilities that the medium of film offers to explore the past. I can observe how my work with film affects my understanding of the topic, and I can investigate how I, as a filmmaker, both acquire and can convey another kind of understanding of the history of, for example, a race biology photo collection.

Historical documentary as genre of its own

The term documentary film was coined in the 1920s by Scottish filmmaker John Grierson, who defined it as a narrative genre or, more precisely, as “the creative treatment of actuality”. The documentary film is always, in one way or another, about what has been. Something is recorded that is later played back. What is shown belongs to the past when the screening occurs. In the recorded film, you see what has happened. The leading film theorist Bill Nichols describes the documentary film as a type of creative storytelling with thoughtful design and conscious aesthetic posture (2017, p. 106 -109) (Bruzzi 2006, p. 3). Nichols writes that documentaries “offer an aural and visual representation of some part of the historical world” (p. 31) and that they “speak about the historical world through both sounds and images” (p. 48)

But I think this approach of Nichols is too general. We need to recognize that historical documentaries differ from other documentaries, and ought to be treated as a special genre within a wider context of documentary filmmaking. The genre can easily be defined by not primarily focusing on actions and events that take place in real time in front of the camera. This is a genre where actions have already occurred before the camera starts recording. Here the filmmaker is confronted with very different conditions: to portray something that has already happened – maybe a long time ago. In

focus in the story are actions that took place in the past. The narrative, therefore, has to be built up with different kinds of traces, memories, archival documents, photographs or other forms of testimony. And the filmmaker has to master a process whereby these traces – that at a first glance may seem unsubstantial, maybe even boring – can open up in front of the camera and turn into something full of vitality, interesting and even very touching (Cuevas 2022, pp. 29 - 33).

Historical documentary film production should be based on robust archival research and an academically diligent use of sources, but it should *not* be conceived as just an academically oriented video essay, a lecture with audiovisual material. The students must also learn to develop narrative and aesthetic components of historical film production, to focus on the thoughtful design and conscious aesthetic posture that is the mark of creative documentary filmmaking. The genre can be seen as a kind of ‘essay film’, as the voice of the narrator often becomes very personal when inviting the audience to see what is left from the past, and to reflect on a material that is sometimes very enigmatic and maybe unexplicable (Alter Corrighan 2017, pp. 9- 17, Sourdis & Lucas 2019, p. 82). It is also useful to consider Alexandre Astruc’s concept of ‘le camera stylo’ in this context, the idea that film can be used not only for storytelling but also to communicate thoughts: “the idea of a Descartes of cinema is no paradox in itself”, says Astruc (p 96). Historical documentary film produced this way is obviously something rather different than the infotainment products of for example History Channel, that often focus on well-known spectacular events and use reenactment to show historical action “live”.

Discovering history through filmmaking

The camera lens can serve as a kind of (metaphorical) magnifying glass for historical knowledge. When you slow down and carefully view a series of photos, listen to an old recording, or watch and listen to old footage, the material can take on a different or deeper meaning when observed in a new age, because it is being introduced into a new context (Edwards 2012, pp 24 - 25). In my teaching, this is precisely the starting point: looking through the viewfinder, you can get closer to those traces of history. The philosopher Walter Benjamin observed how comprehension this way can be extended “by close-ups of things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, and by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film /.../ Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye” (Benjamin 1992, pp. 229- 230).



Figure 2: From the film *What measures to save a people?* (2015) Photo: Claes Gabrielson.

To produce historical documentaries is a very special narrative craft that concentrates on seeing and discovering certain poetic qualities and audio-visual opportunities in a given material, and on building a relevant story context around those findings. The special ability of the medium of film to bring together what is otherwise separate is central to my teaching. Walter Benjamin was also particularly interested in the montage, the film editing itself – how images and sounds are put together to create certain experiences. As a filmmaker, you start from what others have left behind them. It can be any type of trace: a photograph, an audio recording, a drawing, a painting, a document, an old book, an object, a historical setting or a landscape. Or, of course, a human being – a living witness. But it is by combining different types of traces that you can take advantage of film's special capacity to make things meet that otherwise would not meet. In the historical documentary film, you can both look out over a landscape and look into an archive at the same time. You can let objects, documents and photos “return” to the places they originally belonged. And when you, as a filmmaker, display some concrete preserved historical material, you can even evoke philosophical or existential thoughts about the very conditions of our knowledge. How is it that we even know anything today about times that once were?

The watching and making of historical documentary films stimulate thoughts on our own existence in a particular way.

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