Course outline: MFA Directing Documentary

The MFA in Directing Documentary is a specialisation within the broader **MFA in Film, Television and Games**.

We put storytelling at the centre of the filmmaking process, while at the same time encouraging you to experiment and develop your personal voice. You'll get the best practical experience possible, making 4 films during your time on the course.

You will be taught and mentored by a wide range of practicing documentary filmmakers who work across different genres and various platforms. The course is practice orientated and highly collaborative. You will work with students from complimentary specialisms building the practical, technical and creative skills of directing documentaries.

Our documentary department has a long history of pushing the boundaries of documentary filmmaking and continues to reflect its commitment to innovation and success with recent Grierson and Bafta winners, such as Jessica Brady for “Tease” (2021), Mia Harvey for “With Women” (2023) and Laura Rindlisbacher for “Happy” (2023).

The course will focus on five core areas of Directing Documentary:

- Storytelling
- Film form
- Casting, research and development
- Technical skills
- From idea on paper to film on screen

Please find below an overview of the two year MFA Directing Documentary course.

Year One

The first year contains four assessed modules, and a wealth of other exercises and workshops.

The key modules are:

Module 1 - Observation:
This module builds on the course’s introductory camera, sound and editing workshops and explains the basics of how to research and shoot an observational documentary scene. It also develops the skills necessary to identify and capture meaning in a situation by observation alone, without interference or manipulation. It is designed to help you realise first-hand the depth of insight into character and story available to you through well-managed observation. In the process, you will research, film and edit your own observational scene. We believe that an engagement with observational documentary forms a fundamental building block to understanding storytelling in documentary.

Module 2 - Moment of Truth:
This module is about casting and story-telling in observational documentary filmmaking. Students are asked to make a short film that portrays a process of change. They need to find a situation and a central character that can embody that change and capture it in a very short

time. It can be a defining moment in a subject's life or the building of a narrative that artfully reveals change to the audience. Both require the ability to do basic research, win the trust of a character and shape a story. The project is designed to help you work through all the different film-making techniques you've learnt to date. The finished short film should have a duration of approx. 10 minutes.

Module 3 - Poetry:
Create a 3-5 minute short film exploring the relationship between story-telling and film language. The directors will collaborate with sound designers and experiment with the juxtaposition of sound, image and dialogue in ways which defy expectations, yet are formally convincing. In the process, you'll create a short film that expresses an idea, a character or an emotion with great economy of means. This is also a playful exercise where you are encouraged to push the boundaries of documentary film language.

Module 4 - Question:
This module is a joint exercise between Directing Documentary, Editing, Sound Design, Composing, Production Management and Location Sound Recording, introducing you to the basic principles of enquiry through film-making. Students are asked to identify a question about the world and to make a documentary film that attempts to answer that question. The heart of the task is not so much finding the answers but in identifying a subject that's ripe for interrogation, and to be inventive and tenacious in the film-making process. During the production you'll be introduced to working with a production manager, and with their help you'll be expected to build a production schedule and a budget, and to define the particular health and safety parameters appropriate to your story. It will be your most sustained task of the year and at the end of it you will be assessed on the extent to which you deliver a coherent, watchable and revealing piece of work – on schedule and on budget. The expected duration of the finished short film is 15-20 minutes.

The modules above will be complemented by sessions and workshops on subjects such as narrative in documentary, film form, cinematography, sound, research and development, casting, working with archive, interviewing techniques, commentary and pitching amongst others.

You will be encouraged to do a short period of work experience, to give you a brief flavor of what a working life in the film and television industry might entail.

Year Two

As in year one there will be workshops exploring in more depth various aspects of documentary filmmaking.

The two modules of the second year are the completion of the Question Film and the Graduation film:

Module 4 cont. - Question:
You will complete the edit, sound mix and grading of your Question film, which will be repeatedly reviewed in the School's large cinema.

Module 5 - Graduation Film:
This module is a joint exercise between Directing Documentary, Editing, Sound Design, Composing, Digital Effects, Production Management and Location Sound Recording, bringing together what students have learnt about themselves, about storytelling, and about the processes of filmmaking. To help you realise the film, you'll be expected to build a team of collaborators from the students with whom you've been working in the previous year. The film

can be a piece of work that builds on established documentary film-making methods, or one that breaks conventions to challenge assumptions about the genre. But you'll be assessed on how well you deliver a documentary film that gives an audience revealing insights into a contemporary issue and the extent to which it does so with confidence, skill and creative flair.

Dissertation:
During the year the students also complete their Dissertation module (the outline of which dissertation is delivered in Year 1).
As part of the work necessary to qualify for an MFA, each student is required to produce an independent written dissertation or video essay. This runs from the start of the 1st Year to September of the 2nd Year. Following discussions with the Documentary Department Dissertation Tutor, and Screen Arts tutors in the first half of the 1st year, students deliver 500-word outline proposal by June of the 1st year; 2000-word detailed proposal and structure by November of 1st Year (students may not progress into 2nd year if they fail to deliver this). Full draft dissertation of 7,000-10,000 words (including sources and bibliography) must be delivered by February of 2nd Year and following discussion with tutors, final version of dissertation by April of the 2nd Year.

An alternative option of a twenty minute video essay is also available to MFA students.

The aim should be to undertake original research of an investigative nature, which extends the boundaries of specialist knowledge within particular areas of filmmaking.

Development Project:
There is an opportunity to develop an idea, which can be your calling card for when you graduate. This can be for a long format documentary. We will help you identify and develop an idea, which has the potential to be financed after you leave film school.

Meet the Industry
Students will meet a number of industry professionals working in the UK at the moment. They will be available to discuss their areas of expertise, their companies and their careers to give a thorough understanding of where they sit in the current industry landscape, how they got there and how students might fit within the landscape as they move forwards into their careers.

In addition to the above you will receive leadership coaching and we will assist you in finding work experience tailored to your professional ambitions.

Masterclasses
Throughout the two years course there will be a series of masterclasses from a wide range of documentary makers both British based and International. Past invitees include, Kim Longinotto, Alexander Nanau, Kirsten Johnson, Werner Herzog, Roberto Minervini, James Bluemel, George Amponsah, Arthur Carey and Chloe Lambourne amongst others.

Festival Visits
As part of the course students will visit two of the leading documentary film festivals in the UK and worldwide respectively: Sheffield Doc Fest and IDFA.