

# Two-Year Accelerated MASTER OF FINE ARTS *in* DOCUMENTARY

*New York Film Academy Documentary graduate,  
Kesang Choki shooting her thesis in Bhutan*



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## LOCATION

**LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA**

*Location is subject to change.*

*For start dates and tuition, please visit [nyfa.edu](http://nyfa.edu)*

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Students have the option to join a **special one-week documentary exploration** of an exciting locale\*



*Photo by Carlos Sanchez*



*In Belize, students journeyed to Oceanic Society's Research Station on Black Bird Caye and shot short documentaries while monitoring dolphins with resident scientists, snorkeling the Mesoamerican Reef with local Belizeans and practicing underwater cinematography in the Great Blue Hole.*

**W**hile filmmakers have the ability to transport us to brand new worlds, **documentary filmmakers are responsible for shedding light on facets of our world previously unexplored.** Whether they are tackling a historical subject matter, chronicling modern-day political movements, or exploring hitherto unknown individuals or subcultures, **the documentary filmmaker's career is an exciting and enlightening pursuit into better understanding the world in which we live.**

As documentary film has exploded in popularity over the past couple of decades, **there are now more platforms than ever before for aspiring documentary filmmakers to showcase their work.** Whether they take the form of a theatrical feature film, a made-for-television documentary, or a documentary short hosted online, **the demand has never been greater for skilled and insightful documentary filmmakers.**

New York Film Academy's Master of Fine Arts (MFA) Documentary Filmmaking program provides intensive, hands-on training to the next generation of documentary filmmakers in our accelerated six-semester, full-time graduate program. **The program is designed to educate talented and committed prospective documentary filmmakers in a hands-on, total immersion professional environment.**

Students learn to develop, direct, shoot and edit their own projects and are given the opportunity to further enhance their skills by acting as crewmembers on their peers' films. Film structure and history will be examined during in-class lectures. Students will be expected to deliver all projects by the deadlines set by the department.

*\*The documentary exploration is planned and supervised by NYFA faculty and staff. Please note, participants pay for the costs of their transportation, accommodation, and food. The trip is scheduled during a school vacation or semester break. It is offered as an optional experience, students are not required to participate.*

The MFA Documentary Filmmaking program is offered exclusively at our Los Angeles campus. **QUALIFIED STUDENTS HAVE THE OPTION OF COMPLETING COURSE WORK AT THE NEW YORK FILM ACADEMY IN NEW YORK CITY IN A ONE-YEAR NON-DEGREE PROGRAM AND THEN APPLYING THEIR COURSE WORK TO BE ACCEPTED FOR ADVANCED STANDING IN THE MFA DOCUMENTARY DEGREE PROGRAM.**

Documentary filmmaking students follow a demanding curriculum in which they achieve numerous educational and production goals. In a combination of hands-on classroom instruction and intensive schedule of film productions, **MFA students acquire a sound understanding and appreciation of motion picture arts and aesthetics while integrating knowledge of the business which will prepare them to realize their professional goals upon graduation.**

Our faculty are award-winning, professional documentary filmmakers who are active members of the documentary industry and boast a wide range of specialties. This allows students to hone in on a specific facet of documentary filmmaking. **As working documentary filmmakers, our faculty are able to give in-depth insight into the current trends and realities of the industry,** helping MFA students to graduate with a well-rounded foundation in documentary film and enter the industry with substantial experience.

## WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

While students do not need any documentary filmmaking experience to attend this program, it is strongly recommended that they come to the first day of class with at least one idea for a non-fiction project. These ideas will serve as a starting point for subsequent work in the program. If students do not have a story idea, they will be assisted by their instructors to formulate one. Students should be ready, willing, and able to work hard and learn within a fast-paced and focused environment.

Skills learned as a result of successful completion of the program include the following:

- The ability to work independently and collaboratively in a high-pressure creative environment.
- An in-depth knowledge of HD video cameras and sound equipment.
- Documentary producing and directing.
- The ability to write and pre-visualize a documentary project.
- In-depth experience working as a director, producer, director of photography, sound mixer, and editor on student productions.
- Mastery of digital editing software for picture and sound.
- Knowledge of documentary film history and aesthetics and current film practices and standards.
- Ability to research a documentary subject from multiple, balanced perspectives and to write for a documentary film.

*Please Note: curriculum and projects are subject to change and may vary depending on location. Students should consult the most recently published campus catalog for the most up to date course information.*





# DOCUMENTARY FILM PROJECTS



## MISE-EN-SCÈNE

The various elements of design help express a film's vision by generating a sense of time and space, as well as setting a mood and sometimes suggesting a character's state of mind. Each student will make a short film of fifty seconds to one minute using a single camera shot while paying close attention to the choice of composition, lenses, distances, and angles. This project emphasizes how the relationship of the subject to the camera creates drama and informs the audience about the character and action.

## OBSERVATIONAL

Each student produces a visual portrait about an activity or process. Students are challenged to observe the subject closely and find the most effective shots for revealing the subject to an audience. Use of camera angle, shot size, focal length, and editing patterns are emphasized. Each student directs, shoots, and edits a film of up to 2 minutes.

## PERSONAL VOICE

The autobiographical documentary is one of the paths taken by American filmmakers in recent years. The subject of a personal voice film is the filmmaker him/herself. Each student creates a film of up to 3 minutes that documents his/her own life experience while seeking to find an honest voice and a unique style.

## INTERVIEWS

Interviews are at the core of every documentary. Each student learns how to conduct an interview and be the interviewee as well. This will help students to write better questions and develop a rapport with their subject. This exercise integrates synchronized sound with picture and will be 3 minutes long.

## MONTAGE

Montage-style editing is used to move the story or idea forward. It can be used to great effect in the compression of time and to create visual collisions or unexpected continuations between shots. In the editing room, students will cut the images to work in harmony with rhythm and pacing. Music may be added in post for this short film.

## CHARACTER

Each student is challenged to build a portrait using image and sound. Students are encouraged to reveal the character through his/her actions rather than by way of scenes or talking heads. Each student directs, shoots, and edits a film of several minutes.

### **LOCATION STORY/MOTS (MAN ON THE STREET) PRODUCTION WORKSHOP**

Each student directs a story about an event at a selected location capturing the essential moments unfolding over the course of a few hours. They look beyond factual content and reveal the heart of the event through appropriate coverage and editing, while incorporating the characteristics of the location to enhance the visual appeal of the film. Handheld shooting, motivated camera moves, and shooting for editing in an uncontrolled situation are emphasized. Students are challenged to think on their feet, to solve location issues, and to adapt to last-minute changes.

### **COMPILATION FILM**

To appeal to a broader audience, documentary filmmakers have embraced the hybrid of visual and audio elements. Students create a compilation film that combines different types of footage such as vérité, home movies, stock footage, and stills. This exercise emphasizes directorial and editorial control to actively engage an audience and express a point of view. Coverage, advanced directing, and lighting techniques are emphasized, as well as the use of metaphors and juxtapositions.

### **SOCIAL ISSUE**

Social Issue documentaries can take on a wide variety of formats and styles, but they all tell a compelling story that illuminates pressing societal issues. No documentary education would be complete without including the opportunity to make one. Each student selects a social issue or investigative topic that brings a fresh perspective to a social/political issue or documents a local story that has larger implications. Students are encouraged to use interviews and narration as building blocks for this project. They learn to get to the essence of an issue through interview techniques and incorporating differing viewpoints.

### **INTERMEDIATE DOCUMENTARY**

The culmination of the first year of the Documentary program is a film of the student's own choosing. Through research, writing, and planning, each student produces an original short documentary.

### **DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT OF IDEA & PRE-INTERVIEWS**

Students delve deeply into research of his or her topic in order to find the story. This includes looking at archival material and researching potential experts and interviewees. The student takes on the role of Director and creates the treatment, outline and eventual script for his or her Thesis Documentary.

### **COLLABORATIVE PRODUCTION FILM (GROUP)**

Students work as a team, under the close guidance of their instructors, to produce a collaborative project for a nonprofit organization. Students are encouraged to put their acquired skills and creativity to work to benefit a cause. Through this process, they learn to meet the demands of a professional client, while developing a working knowledge of what it takes to produce a high quality film from start to finish.

### **PREPARATION FOR MASTER'S THESIS DOCUMENTARY FILM**

Semester five focuses on the preparation of each student for his or her individual thesis film. By the end of this semester students will have finished pre-production and be ready to start shooting their films. They will have stepped into the producer's role, completed a Documentary Proposal, created a budget and shooting schedule and filled the crew positions. Students will then be ready to direct their own documentary.

All students learn the professional touches that distinguish professional films such as the use of color, motion graphics, titles, sound design, and music. They will have gained the confidence and the skill set necessary to execute their first large-scale film.

### **MASTER'S THESIS DOCUMENTARY**

The sixth and final semester culminates in the production of the Master's Thesis Documentary. All students are challenged to incorporate lessons from all other courses in the design and execution of their thesis films. Students present their projects to a Thesis Committee for approval and work individually with their faculty mentors throughout production and post-production.

## COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

### YEAR ONE OVERVIEW

In Year One, students undergo a thorough regimen of classwork and film production that builds the groundwork for a professional life in the art and craft of documentary filmmaking. By the end of the first year, students will have produced several shooting/editing exercises and short documentary projects ranging from two to ten minutes in length and a Year One Final Documentary project of up to fifteen minutes in length. *While the emphasis of the program is on hands-on immersion in the art of documentary filmmaking, students will also receive instruction in film studies and the industry as a whole.*

### SEMESTER ONE

#### DIRECTING THE DOCUMENTARY I

This hands-on directing course establishes a foundation for all future film projects. Through lectures, screenings, and assignments students explore documentary techniques, genres, and styles. Students learn to develop an idea from concept through post-production as they produce and direct five short documentary projects: Mise-en-scène, Observational, Personal Voice, Montage, and Character.

#### CAMERA & LIGHTING I

In this course, students master basic camera and lighting skills in motion picture photography, touching on technical details such as aperture, shutter speed, focus, frame rates, white balance, video latitude, gels, and filters. In hands-on lighting sessions, students learn to work with and enhance available and natural light situations. With the help of hands-on exercises, students become more fluent with camera and lighting techniques and begin to focus on the role cinematography plays in telling and enhancing non-fiction stories.

#### PRODUCTION SOUND

This course provides hands-on training in location sound recording using digital sound equipment. Students master recording techniques such as setting proper gain levels and sample rates for sync and non-sync sound. It covers field recording wild sound and mic techniques for voices. This class emphasizes the importance of recording usable location sound for a smooth sound transition in post-production.

#### WRITING THE DOCUMENTARY I

This course covers the importance of writing as a storytelling and planning tool. Students are introduced to the basic story elements: character, conflict, story structure, dramatic arc and theme. The course introduces different ways of telling stories: with words (commentary, narration) and without words (character's voice, scenes, situations). This class covers the process of planning, defines what logline, synopsis, approach, and point of view are, and shows how to convey them in writing.

#### EDITING I

In this course, students learn the fundamentals of using digital editing software while exploring the particular challenges of documentary storytelling. Through lectures, discussions, and assigned projects, they will cover digital workflow, basic editing techniques, and the logging and organization of their footage.

#### DOCUMENTARY FILM ANALYSIS

This introductory course surveys the world of documentary films through lectures, screenings, and group discussions. Students will expand their understanding of the documentary genre as well as non-fiction storytelling. Class includes analysis and the beginning of a critical dialogue.

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## SEMESTER TWO COURSES

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### DIRECTING THE DOCUMENTARY II

Research and development skills are an essential part of every documentary. Students are guided by their instructor to seek out original resource material. Students conduct preliminary interviews in their field of inquiry and do searches for archival materials and stock footage they would like to use, and learn how to incorporate them into their compilation film. By the end of this course, students will have designed a visual and audio plan for shooting their Year One Final Documentary.

### CAMERA & LIGHTING II

Students are introduced to more sophisticated HD cameras and hybrid cameras (still and video) and techniques. Through workshops, this class further immerses students in the technical and creative demands of cinematography in relation to documentary storytelling. Students go beyond getting a basic image and focus on how to visually convey aspects of the story such as tone, mood, place and relationships. Advancing their understanding of lighting in special situations is an essential component of this class. By the end of this course students will understand how cinematography serves their individual stories and will have a preliminary shot list to use for their upcoming shoot.

### POST-PRODUCTION SOUND

This class covers the technical side of syncing sound with picture and selecting appropriate sound effects to enhance the authenticity of the film. Students learn how to use sound editing software and gain hands-on experience recording and editing narration and voiceover. Students are introduced to sound design as it relates to achieving the appropriate tempo and mood for each scene and learn to find and select music cues and sound effects. The culmination of the class is to combine all of the above elements for a professional sound mix.

### WRITING THE DOCUMENTARY II

In this course, students learn to convey the essential elements of their own story through a properly formatted proposal, a synopsis, and a treatment narrative that uses visual language and personal style. Once that has been accomplished, students are ready to break down the treatment into a scene-by-scene shooting script.

This course goes deeper into the process of writing the documentary film as it extends from research to shooting to editing. In addition, students learn to write grant proposals for funding as well as to develop a preliminary pitch from the treatment for later use in marketing.



### EDITING II

In this course, students learn intermediate editing techniques to shape and form their films. The goal is for students to master the process so that they have confidence in their storytelling abilities and a range of tools with which to express their own point of view. By the end of this class, students will have gained a greater understanding of how to transform the raw footage of their films into compelling lively stories.

### PRODUCING THE DOCUMENTARY

The producer takes care of the business side of making a documentary film. This course looks at the roles and responsibilities of producers (from executive producers to line producers) from pre-production to post. Students will learn how to create a schedule, and put together a budget. They learn how to create a basic business plan, apply for grants, and how to obtain fiscal sponsorship as a 501C (nonprofit organization).

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## SEMESTER THREE

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### PRODUCTION & POST-PRODUCTION SEMINARS

Instructor led all-day seminars help students prepare for their greenlight meetings and actual productions. Instructors will visit students on their location shoots. Post-production seminar guides students as they produce a rough cut and final cut of their documentary film.

### INTERMEDIATE DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION

The culmination of the first year is a documentary film of the student's own choosing. Through extensive research, writing, and planning, each student should be prepared to produce a final documentary of approximately 15 minutes in length. Students incorporate lessons from all other courses in the design and execution of their Year One Documentary. This course allows time for each student's shoot and for them to crew on their fellow classmates' shoots. NYFA instructors work weekly with individual students to oversee production of each student's Intermediate Documentary project.



### THE BUSINESS OF DOCUMENTARIES

Students will learn to plan and prepare for the work that follows after finishing their film. This course will cover some of the legal, budget issues and marketing challenges that lay ahead of any new filmmaker. Students develop the skills to revise their budget, polish their business plan, and develop a pitch while in class. They learn about the ever-changing world of competitions and film festivals. The different kinds of distribution channels (theatrical, iTunes, YouTube, etc.) that are available will be discussed in class.

### NEW MEDIA

This class provides an overview of how the web is changing how we create, produce, sell, and distribute films and TV programs. The internet is a place for content creation in narrative and documentary styles of storytelling through web series and webisodes. Netflix, Yahoo, Google, CNN, and others have developed original video programming that competes with the type of content people have historically seen on television, on demand, and through pay-per-view. Mobile devices have also become capable of offering video content. In this course, students develop a sense of the filmmaking challenges and opportunities presented by new media and how they can adapt their style of storytelling to them.

### INTERMEDIATE DOCUMENTARY POST-PRODUCTION

Students will have post-production time for editing their film's picture and sound and to produce the final cut of their intermediate film. In a series of hands-on exercises with their instructors, students learn more advanced post-production techniques including title creation, color correction, accommodating poor quality footage, animating photos and maps, creating textures, and lower thirds. Software used includes Avid, After Effects, ProTools, and Photoshop. NYFA instructors will work weekly with individual students to oversee post-production of each student's Intermediate Documentary project.

## YEAR TWO OVERVIEW

Coursework in the second year includes a series of highly specialized classes and workshops designed to further develop students' knowledge and skills as professional documentary filmmakers. Students learn the finer points of documentary filmmaking and find their personal style through the development of their own idea. The master's thesis is intended to reflect the student's strengths as a documentary filmmaker and should be of professional quality. All students are expected to have a role in multiple thesis productions besides their own.

At the end of semester six, the MFA Documentary Filmmaking student will have produced his/her own Thesis Documentary (up to 30 minutes in length) that can then be used for a number of alternatives after graduation: a film ready for short film festivals, a non-fiction piece that can be serialized as webisodes, the start of a possible feature documentary film or as a "calling card" as part of their reel for film and television jobs.

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### SEMESTER FOUR

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#### WRITING & DIRECTING THE THESIS DOCUMENTARY

It is very important for the documentary filmmakers to learn how to write questions for interviews and to learn different interviewing techniques. They must find the heart of their stories and also discover their own voices to become compelling storytellers. Documentary films today use re-enactments with actors to enhance the story. Students will determine when and how to use re-enactments appropriate for documentaries. They will write scripts for actors to use in re-enactments and learn to direct performances. Writing techniques for narration will also be explored.

#### ADVANCED CINEMATOGRAPHY

Students expand on the cinematography skills they have acquired in previous semesters while working on increasingly more demanding and sophisticated multi-camera projects on location. Under the close guidance of an experienced Cinematographer/instructor, students refine their working knowledge of high-end HD cameras and advanced lighting techniques.

#### COMMUNITY FILM PROJECT

Students, as a class, will produce a short film for a non-profit organization. This process will bring together all of the skills they have learned in producing, directing, shooting, lighting, sound, and editing as well as how to work together in a collaborative environment.

*“Doing a documentary is about discovering, being open, learning, and following curiosity.”*

*- Spike Jonze*

#### ADVANCED EDITING

Documentary films often find their true forms in the editing room. This makes the editing process extremely important because a story may take a different shape after the footage has been shot. In addition, archival footage, graphics, and visual effects may be added to create more compelling stories. This course will include techniques for including home video, photographs, drawing, and maps that are not necessarily of professional quality. Students will decide when to use voiceover and how to cut for it.

#### INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES

This class will help prepare students to find their individual career path and recognize their strengths and talents through a series of current and timely talks on the subject of documentary filmmaking. Guest filmmakers and industry professionals will share their experiences with students through seminars, class discussions, and screenings. Mentors will work individually with students to explore the next step in their careers.

## SEMESTER FIVE

### PRODUCING THE THESIS DOCUMENTARY

As their thesis scripts are finished and polished, students will apply their knowledge of production management to their projects in an intensive environment. Under the guidance of their producing instructors, students will thoroughly prepare their shooting scripts and schedules for production. They will perform all of the necessary logistical measures: obtaining location permits, securing interviewee/actor releases, clearances, and securing insurance. In addition, a detailed budget and calendar will be completed.

### RESEARCHING, DEVELOPING, & DIRECTING THE DOCUMENTARY

Students focus on developing the directorial vision for their thesis documentary projects. They will have the time to complete assignments to research and develop their own ideas in depth. Students learn how to select potential on-camera interviewees and develop a working relationship with them. In addition, they will identify and interview experts in the field, and locate archival footage and other support material.

### SOUND DESIGN

This class goes beyond editing sound elements to a more comprehensive view of the entire film. It requires understanding the director's vision and being able to interpret it with sound. Students will gain an understanding of the value of setting the emotional timbre, mood, pacing, and feel of each scene. Music can either be in the form of a score and/or source music that has been prerecorded. The rights and clearances of using preexisting music will be covered. Adding sound effects to animation or motion graphics and stills will be discussed.

### POLISHING: COLOR, VISUAL EFFECTS, & GRAPHICS

This course covers the essential elements of color grading, color balancing for photos, and color mapping when more than one camera has been used to shoot the footage to enhance perceptual visual compatibility. Graphics can convey important information and statistics quickly in charts, graphs, and through animation. If reenactments are needed, motion graphics are a way of doing them in the documentary style. This class will give directors an understanding of what graphics can add to their film, a way to talk to graphic artists and gives them a language to communicate their ideas.

### PRODUCTION WORKSHOPS

The importance of vetting ideas and determining feasibility are essential to producing a documentary. As part of that process, the budget and schedule are paramount. Movie Magic is the film industry's tool of choice and students will have an opportunity to learn how to use it and apply it to their thesis projects. Working with composers to create an original score is one of the most effective and exciting aspects of bringing a director's vision to fruition. In this workshop students will meet and work with composers to learn how to communicate their vision and allow for creative collaborations to take place. In addition students will master the art of music cue placement. Time will be given to learn how to select source music and how to combine using a score and source to meet the director's goals.



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## SEMESTER SIX

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### THESIS DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION

At the beginning of this course, all student producers/directors must be given the go-ahead (greenlight) from their instructors before they can check out equipment and assemble the crew they need to shoot their thesis film. Students will shoot their own film as well as crew for their classmates' films. Each student will have a thesis committee composed of their instructors and will meet with them on a regular basis to gauge the progress of their film and to receive feedback.

### THESIS DOCUMENTARY POST-PRODUCTION

It is often said that the edit is the final rewrite of the script and this class helps guide the student through that process. Students receive extensive notes from classmates and instructors that must be analyzed and either incorporated, interpreted, or set aside. This process helps students to gain a more objective perspective on their material and edit their "final rewrite" more effectively. All of the knowledge students have gained from previous classes in sound, color, and graphics will be used to create a fully realized professional documentary film.

### MARKETING THE NON-FICTION FILM

This class will help students to determine the final purpose of their thesis film and the steps that follow. The appropriate legal, business and marketing steps will be discussed in class. Regardless of direction, the first step is to copyright the film so that they own the rights to their intellectual property. The second step is to create a website or Facebook page to show it and any other film work they may have done to others. A pitch will be developed in class, along with a polished business plan. Students will have the opportunity to cut a trailer or teaser for their final documentary in class. This course will identify student competitions and film festivals that are appropriate to the style of their film and how to apply. Students will learn about what kind of distribution is available (theatrical, iTunes, YouTube, etc.) and strategize about what distributors to target for their films.

### MIXING

This class will help students to make better decisions regarding the balancing required to combine dialogue, music, motion graphics, titles, color grading, narration, and sound effects with the locked picture. At the end they will have created a unique synthesis of all of the elements that enhance their story and give it a professional finish.

