

OLLI@Berkeley Fall Semester, 2026

GLOBAL LENS: Documentary Films with a Wide-Angle Point of View

This course offers a vivid exploration of nonfiction filmmaking as seen through the lens of international directors addressing audiences within their own cultural contexts. The view from abroad—refreshing, revealing, and occasionally jarring—invites OLLI members to encounter how filmmakers across the globe engage with reality, storytelling, and the ethics of representation. Screenings will include recent documentaries, followed by discussions that probe each film's goals, strategies, aesthetics, and moral dimensions. We will discuss how documentary film serves simultaneously as an art form, a mode of advocacy, and a means of cultural expression, developing a critical vocabulary for analyzing how meaning, perspective, and emotion are constructed through cinematic form.

The selection of films this term will include introductions by some of the filmmakers themselves. This semester's films explore the complex nature of relationships between fathers, sons, daughters, lovers and all creatures of the earth, including films from Asia, Europe and the Americas. See descriptions below.

The venue for Global Lens is the beautiful Freight & Salvage (aka "The Freight"), which offers high-quality large-screen film presentation along with a cozy lobby area outside the theater to continue our film discussions following the screenings. Covered parking is located just steps away at the Center Street Garage, with entrances on Addison Street.

Dates/Times: Wednesdays, 9:45am-noon, September 23, 30, October 7, 14, 21

Course type: In Person

Location: The Freight & Salvage, 2020 Addison Street, Berkeley

Co-Instructors: Niels-Ole Rasmussen and Karen Davis (contact: kdavis@csumb.edu)

Niels-Ole Rasmussen is a director at Copenhagen Film, making documentaries and series for Danish & European broadcasters. Active in the international documentary filmmaking community, he serves as a juror and coordinator for the prestigious Prix Europa, the INPUT Conference & the Japan Prize. Niels likes coffee and likes deliberating where the current state of affairs will take humanity. He will join the class via Zoom from wherever he is around the globe.

Karen Davis is Senior Film Programmer Emerita and Program Consultant for the Mill Valley Film Festival and Professor Emerita at California State University at Monterey Bay. She has also taught courses in world cinema at Vassar College, St. Mary's College of California and the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Films to be screened and discussed include:

WEEK 1: SEPT 23

OUR TIME MACHINE 81min (dir. S. Leo Chiang and Yang Sun, China 2019)

43-year-old Maleonn is one of China's most influential conceptual artists today. His father, Ma Ke, was the artistic director of the Shanghai Chinese Opera Theater. After being humiliated and forbidden from working for a decade during the Cultural Revolution, Ma Ke immersed himself in theater. The mysterious excitement of Ma Ke's creative world inspired the young Maleonn, but his father's absences stoked early feelings of resentment. When Ma Ke is diagnosed with Alzheimer's, Maleonn pours everything into an ambitious new theater project: "Papa's Time Machine," a visually stunning time-travel adventure told with human-sized puppets. At the play's heart are autobiographical scenes inspired by Maleonn's memories with his father. He hopes this will bring them together artistically and personally. Through the production of the play, the two men confront their mortality before time runs out and memories are lost forever.

In Chinese with English subtitles

(description courtesy of the Rafael Film Center/DocLands)

WEEK 2: SEPT 30

SKIN OF GLASS 90min. (dir. Denise Zmekhol, US/Brazil, 2023)

When she learns that squatters occupy the landmark São Paulo skyscraper her late father, Roger, designed in the early 1960s, Bay Area documentarian Denise Zmekhol returns to her hometown to investigate—and make peace with her dad's memory. The Edifício Wilton Paes de Almeida, nicknamed the "Pele de Vidro" (Skin of Glass) for its windowed facade, was the first building of its kind in South America, a shiny symbol of Brazil's promising future. Zmekhol recalls an idyllic childhood that would give way to eventual estrangement from the man whose innovative structure would become a dilapidated eyesore in a film that weaves together family photographs, archival material, testimonials from friends and colleagues, and impressive drone footage of the decaying high-rise. Not simply the story of a family and a building, the documentary also relates how the Skin of Glass has come to symbolize the escalating inequities of Brazil—the "Once and Future Country." In English and Portuguese with English subtitles

(description by Shari Kizirian courtesy of BAM/PFA)

WEEK 3: OCT 7

MISTRESS DISPELLER 94min (dir. Elizabeth Lo, China/US, 2024)

When Mrs. Li discovers evidence of her husband's infidelity, she takes drastic measures to save her marriage at all costs. She employs Wang Zhenxi, affectionately referred to as Teacher Wang, to be her "mistress dispeller." Teacher Wang is part of a burgeoning cottage industry in China that works in precarious ways to repair failing marriages. Through calculated infiltration of Mr. Li and his mistress's extramarital life, Teacher Wang proceeds to masterfully manipulate both parties to bring an unassailable end to their affair. Elizabeth Lo's provocative documentary paints a spellbinding portrait of a woman for hire and delicately gains unprecedented access to the intimate private lives of all parties involved in the doomed love triangle. Mistress Dispeller is an extraordinary examination of love in the 21st century and of those willing to preserve it, by any means necessary.

In Mandarin with English subtitles. *(description by Jordan Klein courtesy of SFFILM)*

WEEK 4: OCT 14

FAUNA 74min (dir. Pau Faus, Spain, 2023)

In a forest on the outskirts of Barcelona an old shepherd and his flock live alongside a high-tech laboratory for animal experimentation. Two opposite worlds facing each other. Two worlds that are two sides of the same coin. While the shepherd, afflicted with a bone disease, witnesses his profession disappearing, scientists are busier than ever researching the covid vaccine. 'Fauna' is a science fiction fable about the relationship between humans, animals and science in post-pandemic times. In Catalan and Spanish with English subtitles, *(description courtesy of Taskovski Films)*

WEEK 5: OCT 21

JACOB HOLDT: MY LIFE IN PICTURES 90min (dir. Niels-Ole Rasmussen, Denmark, 2016)

"Jacob Holdt: My Life in Pictures" is the story about the son of a village priest, destined to be a priest himself. But Jacob rebels against his father and the expelled son becomes an outcast in Gods own country, USA. In the 70's the Danish vagabond tours America with only one rule of thumb: never say no – to anything or anyone, a radical philosophy with radical consequences. Where everyone else walks out, Jacob walks in. He befriends sinners and outcasts: the needy dirty old men, the murderers, the Ku Klux Klan, the prostitutes, the pimps, the drug addicts and even the rich. His wanderings on the dark side of American Society leads him to the black communities – from the ghettos in the North to the cotton fields in the South. Today the vagabond is an acclaimed photo artist exhibiting his pictures from the vagabond years in museums of modern art all over the world. And, even more importantly, he uses his acquired wisdom to fight racism in Denmark. Now, at the age of 67, Jacob feels an urge to understand his life and write the final book about it. During his research he revisits defining people from the long journey of life. Why did Jacob learn to say yes, where we say no? *(description courtesy of the Danish Film Institute)*