



MFA

# Social Documentary Film

# Documentary film has changed dramatically

over the years, evolving into a fully realized art form. Growing audiences watch nonfiction in theaters, on TV and online to see fresh global stories, and be inspired by the lives of change-makers, artists and everyday people. These stories delve into our history, inspire action and let us discover distant regions and our own neighborhoods with a fresh eye. But, as evolutions in technology make it easier to make film, more content competes for the opportunity to be seen. So, it becomes vital to have the talent to produce a film that stands out. Those with true fluency in the form—and a network of like-minded artists and mentors—have a crucial advantage.

SVA's Social Documentary Film MFA program fosters filmmakers who are technologically and artistically assured. Students make many films throughout the program; each allows them opportunities to experiment and hone their craft with support, guidance and critique. They are introduced to the industry through an unparalleled faculty of active, award-winning filmmakers, as well as through internships, guest speakers, film festivals, screenings, and other events.

Located in the heart of New York City, "SocDoc" is a part of the most active documentary film community in the world. Students work directly with accomplished filmmakers—who are faculty, mentors and collaborators—giving students the benefit of their expertise. The department also works to foster a direct line into the production community that will be their best network after graduation.

SocDoc alumni have made an impressive impact. Alumni films have received more than a million dollars in production funding from Sundance Institute, ITVS, Just Films/Ford Foundation, Jerome Foundation, CAAM, IDFA Bertha Fund, Chicken & Egg Pictures, Tribeca Film Institute Frameline, and others. They have won an Emmy and the Student Academy Award, and received multiple nominations. Alumni have earned industry support via international film markets, have been broadcast on TV, received theatrical release in the U.S. and around the world, received countless views online, and played top-tier festivals including Berlin, IDFA, SXSW, Hot Docs, Busan and Tribeca.

Now in our tenth year, MFA SocDoc is proud to inspire and support the next generation of documentary filmmakers. No matter a film's topic or style—personal, political, comic, or revolutionary—documentary increases our awareness of the world, and ourselves. At SVA, we are committed to realizing that potential, and we welcome the opportunity to add you to our community of storytellers.

—Maro Chermayeff, chair

# About the Program

SVA's MFA program in Social Documentary Film provides a solid foundation in the fundamentals of nonfiction filmmaking, as well as an immersion into the critical and analytical process necessary to conceptualize and develop significant, socially relevant film. This program represents the convergence of the art of filmmaking, journalistic research, and social activism.

Our program is open to qualified students from varying backgrounds—prior filmmaking experience is encouraged but not required. Ultimately, we are looking for passionate, insightful individuals who know how to tell a great story, and are eager to learn how best to share these stories through documentary.

Working with documentary filmmakers as teachers and mentors in a collaborative environment, the MFA Social Documentary Film program will not only teach students how to tell a story, it will guide them toward a lifelong career in filmmaking.

The first year's core curriculum is devoted to exploring the past, present and future of

the art of documentary film, while mastering the tools and techniques needed to tell compelling stories. Each student will complete five to seven documentary shorts, in addition to other class assignments.

During the second year, students focus on their thesis films, and courses are designed to support them in their production. Each student will direct his or her own film, primarily filmed in the summer between first and second year, and serve as a key production crew-member on at least one other thesis project. These thesis projects must be reviewed and approved by the thesis committee and the department chair in order for the student to be eligible for degree conferral.

Degree candidates must successfully complete 60 credits, including all required courses, with a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.0. A residency of two academic years is required.

Interview workshop featuring alumnus Poon Watchara-Amphaiwan (2015).

MFA SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY FILM



# Vacant Light Founders Illuminate Stories in the Shadows

Amitabh Joshi (top)  
and Erik Spink both  
graduated from MFA Social  
Documentary Film in 2013.

The Himalayan village of Namdok is remote, windswept and cold. Largely neglected by the government of Nepal, it lacks basic infrastructure, including electricity. But Tashi Bista, who grew up in Namdok, has a dream—to bring light to his village by installing a makeshift wind turbine. His mission is a beacon of hope for his community, where lives can be changed by just one light. ▶





ABOVE: Amitabh and Erik in the SocDoc facilities. OPPOSITE: The poster from the film Amitabh began as his thesis.

This is the story of *Tashi's Turbine*, a feature-length documentary directed by Amitabh Joshi and produced by Erik Spink, who both received their MFAs from SVA in 2013 and together founded the production company Vacant Light shortly after graduating. The film started out as Joshi's senior thesis. Through support from the Princess Grace Foundation, the Ford Foundation and a grant for student artists, Joshi was able to make the story into a feature-length documentary. Collaboration with Spink as well as consultation with the SocDoc faculty enabled Joshi to "truly find the essence of Tashi's story." Additional grants followed and the film had its world premiere at the Center for Asian American Media Festival (CAAMFest) in 2015 and a broadcast premiere on the PBS WORLD Channel in 2016.

Through Vacant Light, Spink and Joshi have produced a variety of projects, including feature-length documentaries, digital education programs, and original branded content for companies, institutions and non-profits.





The topics covered in the films produced through Vacant Light vary widely, but there are certain themes that do emerge, “From the start of Vacant Light we have focused on stories of so-called ordinary people scaling impossible mountains. We aim to illuminate the stories that sit humbly in the shadows.”

Joshi and Spink credit SVA and the storytelling skills they learned here for their ability to work in several different modes of nonfiction film. Both men came to the MFA Social Documentary Film program soon after finishing their undergraduate degrees. Spink came to the program with a background in cinema history and theory, but “I felt like I needed more time developing my skills as a director and producer,” he explains. “I was not truly learning how to make a film. I wanted that experience and a network of mentors. Once I learned about the work of Maro Chermayeff [chair of SocDoc], I was determined to enroll.” Joshi was drawn to the program

because he wanted to build a foundation in documentary production. “I was in search of a program that allowed a comprehensive filmmaking experience, one in which there was space to explore,” he says.

Joshi explains that some students come to the program with concrete ideas for films that are driven by activism, “but others end up finding something more character-driven, and others might decide on a personal film.” He says that the story at the heart of *Tashi’s Turbine* started as a film that focused on a character, but themes of alternative energy and sustainability naturally emerged.

Whether a student’s motivation for documentary film derives from a passion for journalism, activism, the art of filmmaking—or any combination of these—the SocDoc Department is very accommodating. As Spink says, “Each student finds a mode of filmmaking that is most suited for him or her and pursues that road intensely into the thesis year and beyond.” That description certainly applies to *Tashi’s Turbine*, as well as to the work the two do at Vacant Light ([vacant-light.com](http://vacant-light.com)).

Stills from *Tashi’s Turbine*.

# Curriculum/ Sample Program

Graduates must complete 60 credits, including all required courses and the thesis project. A matriculation of two academic years is required.

## First Year

FALL	CREDITS
Cinematography and Sound I	3
Directing I	3
Editing I	3
Editing, Camera and Sound Labs I	0
Process and Style I	0
Producing I	3
Visionary Journalism I	3

SPRING	CREDITS
Cinematography and Sound II	3
Directing II	3
Editing II	3
Editing, Camera and Sound Labs II	0
Process and Style II	0
Producing II	3
Thesis: The Pitch	0
Visionary Journalism II	3

Students filming on the streets of New York City.

## Second Year

FALL	CREDITS
Process and Style III	0
Thesis: Directing	6
Thesis: Editing	3
Thesis: Producing	3
Visiting Artists: Documentary Masters	3

SPRING	CREDITS
Process and Style IV	0
Thesis: Directing Lab	6
Thesis: Editing Lab	6
Thesis Review and Presentation	3



# Course Offerings

A sample of our course descriptions follows. All course descriptions can be found online at [sva.edu/mfasocdoc/curriculum](http://sva.edu/mfasocdoc/curriculum).

## CINEMATOGRAPHY AND SOUND I & II

Success in the film industry requires fluency in the cinematic language and an immersion in the world of production techniques. Beginning with the use of image and sound as the tools of storytelling, these courses focus on gaining a comprehensive grasp of the technical and creative demands of documentary filmmaking. Through class and lab sessions, a range of equipment—cameras, tripods, lighting instruments, audio recorders and microphones—will be explored. Students will then focus on a broad spectrum of nonfiction techniques, including how to use camera angles, sound and lighting to convey meaning and further their narrative. Finally, on-camera interviewing skills—the essence of much of the documentary experience—will receive a thorough examination.

## DIRECTING I & II

The potency of any documentary relies on the instincts of the director, whose acuity of mind and eye must be able to translate intellectual content into an aesthetic experience. These courses will address topics that include how to most effectively tell a story, how to conduct meaningful and informative interviews and how to navigate the relationship between subject and filmmaker. With an emphasis on originality as it applies to the documentary, students will explore new media and a variety of directing styles, tones and techniques. Included will be an extensive study of documentary film history and theory, which will examine a wide range of texts and films and look at such genres as realism, formalism, *cinéma vérité*, essay, feminism and postmodernism. Class assignments will emphasize the interview technique, with exercises involving interviews within the class itself as well as with family and friends, and “man on the street” interviews with anonymous pedestrians.

## EDITING I & II

If viewing a film is understood to be an interpretive process, then the orchestration of image and sound, and the rate at which information is disseminated, is critical to the endeavor. The editor transforms footage from observation to an engrossing experience. These courses examine the critical role that editing plays in nonfiction programs, and look at how the editing room is often the arena where the structure and narrative arc are created. Classic and contemporary documentaries will be screened to provide students with a fundamental understanding of editing styles, aesthetics and techniques. Topics will cover a wide range of subjects—from continuity of motion to montage, jump-cut, music usage and program structure. Finally, these courses will explore voice-over narration, sound design, music and other postproduction techniques to further the story and deepen the experience.

## EDITING, CAMERA AND SOUND LABS

In addition to the core classes and the Process and Style guest lecture series, students in the first year attend two lab sessions per week. One lab covers camera and sound, and one covers editing—both labs deal with the nitty-gritty of how to use all of the equipment. The labs provide students with hands-on opportunity to get comfortable using microphones, cameras and editing software, especially AVID, as storytelling tools, while also opening up the core classes to discussions of aesthetics and style.

## PROCESS AND STYLE I, II, III & IV

Independent voices from the field will share their professional experiences and offer diverse perspectives in documentary film. Primarily in this course, documentary filmmakers will screen their new films and discuss their careers. Additional lecturers will discuss a range of specialized topics, including new technologies and new platforms; film festivals and distribution; the relationship between subject and filmmaker; the pitch; job opportunities and career advancement. These courses are required in both years of the program.

## PRODUCING I & II

Multifunctional and multidimensional in approach, the role of a documentary film producer is to initiate, coordinate, supervise and control all matters in the realization of a film project, such as fund-raising and hiring key personnel. Beginning in the first semester, students will receive a full grounding in what

they need to know to proceed with their first assigned projects. All key aspects of documentary production will be covered in these courses, from pitch, grant writing and budget preparation, to production set-up, accounting, scheduling, crew management and postproduction workflow. Students will learn how to analyze a project and apply this analysis in cost and project management, from preproduction rights to editing and film distribution. In addition, they will learn how to implement production arrangements singular to the field of documentaries. How to read, understand and negotiate contracts with vendors, crewmembers and distributors will be included.

### THESIS: THE PITCH

Getting an idea off the ground and maintaining the momentum is often one of the most difficult facets of a production, even for talented filmmakers. Yet without the proverbial green light, even the best ideas atrophy by the wayside. Using their own project ideas, students will articulate their vision clearly and concisely and deliver this pitch to a panel of film industry professionals and faculty. Students will answer questions and address comments posed by the panel. The course objectives are to build confidence in the presentation of ideas and master a professional pitch, in addition to securing a well-conceived topic for their graduate thesis film.

### THESIS: DIRECTING

This course will guide students through the process of bringing their thesis ideas and script to fruition. Of central focus will be the aesthetic and overall style considerations for thesis films. Emphasis will also be placed on the student-director's communication with the producer, cinematographer, sound recordist and other personnel who will assist on the project and help to make each student's thesis vision a reality.

### VISIONARY JOURNALISM I & II

The field of social documentary film is as much about journalism as it is about filmmaking; therefore, it is paramount that the journalistic process be comprehensively examined. From finding and researching a story to writing a treatment and a shooting script, learning and adhering to established journalistic ethics is of primary importance. This course will engender an understanding of the ethical standards inherent in print and broadcast journalism and nonfiction writing as they relate to social documentary. Working within these structures, we will approach how to successfully tell a story—from origin of concept to finished project.

### THESIS: DIRECTING LAB

Bolstered by critiques of professional film directors and fellow classmates, students will gain additional insights and the technical resources to develop their thesis films. Directors' cuts of thesis films will be screened and analyzed, and students will have the opportunity to incorporate valuable suggestions into the final work.

### THESIS: EDITING

On average, in documentary films there is a ratio of 10 hours of footage shot for every minute in the final film. This course will address the challenge of managing the sheer bulk of media that will have been amassed for the thesis film. While shooting may continue throughout much of this period, students will be required to block out the basic sequence from what has already been filmed, and how the narrative together into a rough cut. The goal is to bring projects into readiness for fine-tuning and finishing in the spring semester.

### THESIS: EDITING LAB

This course will encompass all of the finishing touches for the thesis film projects, including opening titles, closing credits, sound editing and mixing, visual effects, color correction and film scoring. A professional editor, under whose guidance students will strengthen their editorial acumen while completing their thesis films, will supervise the editing lab.

### THESIS REVIEW AND PRESENTATION

During their final semester, students will present their thesis projects to a team of faculty advisors for review, advice and critique, and will introduce their documentaries to the film community at large.

### VISITING ARTISTS: DOCUMENTARY MASTERS

To help forge relationships between experts in documentary film and MFA SocDoc students, these seminars offer in-depth study and discussion of the craft of documentary storytelling. Seminar topics include creative producing and personal filmmaking, and vary each year based on student interest and changes in the field.

### THESIS: PRODUCING

Half of producing is getting the film made; the second half is getting the film seen. Filmmakers need to know how to reach their audience; and how to maximize in an ever-changing marketplace. In this course, students will build upon the previous Producing classes to strengthen their skills at conceiving and pitching ideas and executing those projects on budget. Using their thesis films as a model, students will also discuss the division of distribution rights, and strategies for funding, distribution and marketing, and finding the most advantageous position in the marketplace.

# Notable Alumni

**Daniela Alatorre**  
head of documentary  
programming, Morelia Film  
Festival (Mexico)

**Adam Banicki**  
VP of video, Fatherly.com

**Sasha Friedlander**  
director, *Where Heaven Meets  
Hell* (PBS), *Grit* (HotDocs)

**Yuqi Kang**  
director, *A Little Wisdom*  
(Busan Film Festival)

**Alexa Karolinski**  
director, *Oma & Bella*  
(Berlin International  
Film Festival)

**Mark Kendall**  
director, *La Camioneta*  
(SXSW Film Festival)

**Olga Lvoff**  
director, *When People Die  
They Sing Songs* (NHK Japan;  
Russian theatrical release)

**Bao Nguyen**  
director, *Live From  
New York!* (NBC)

**David Osit**  
director, *Thank You for  
Playing* (PBS POV,  
Emmy Winner 2017)

**Enes Ozdil**  
documentary commissioning  
producer, TRT World (Turkey)

# Faculty

To learn more about the faculty members  
visit: [sva.edu/mfasocdoc/faculty](http://sva.edu/mfasocdoc/faculty).

**Maro Chermayeff**  
chair; director, *Half the Sky*;  
producer, *Marina Abramovic:  
The Artist Is Present*

**Julie Anderson**  
executive producer,  
*The Talk* (PBS)

**Axel Baumann**  
cinematographer,  
*Liberia: An Uncivil War*

**Alan Berliner**  
filmmaker, *Nobody's Business*;  
*First Cousin Once Removed*

**Mira Chang**  
producer, *A Path Appears*

**Lori Cheatle**  
producer, *51 Birch Street*;  
*Captivated: The Trials of  
Pamela Smart*

**Peter Chelkowski**  
filmmaker, *Carnival Roots*

**Ann Collins**  
editor, *Swim Team*

**Deborah Dickson**  
filmmaker, *Lalee's Kin*;  
*Ruthie & Connie*

**Michael Epstein**  
filmmaker, *MAKERS: Once and  
For All*; *LennoNYC*

**Micah Fink**  
filmmaker, *The Abominable  
Crime*; *Mann v. Ford*

**Richard Hankin**  
editor, *The Jinx*

**Tom Hurwitz, ASC**  
cinematographer,  
*Queen of Versailles*;  
*Wild Man Blues*

**Amitabh Joshi**  
director, *Tashi's Turbine*

**Ross Kauffman**  
filmmaker, *Born into Brothels*

**Beth Levison**  
producer, *32 Pills*;  
*My Sister's Suicide*

**Mark Mandler**  
production sound,  
*Going Clear: Scientology  
and the Prison of Belief*

**Kat Patterson**  
cinematographer,  
*12th and Delaware*

**Samuel D. Pollard**  
filmmaker, *4 Little Girls*;  
*When the Levees Broke*

**Thom Powers**  
programmer, Toronto  
International Film Festival;  
artistic director, DOC NYC

**Robert Richman**  
cinematographer,  
*The September Issue*;  
*Paradise Lost*

**Jerry Risius**  
cinematographer, *The Devil  
Came on Horseback*; *Anthony  
Bourdain: No Reservations*

**Amy Schewel**  
producer, archival researcher  
*Soundtracks: Songs that  
Defined History*

**E. Donna Shepherd**  
editor, *Soundbreaking*  
(CNN Films)

**Toby Shimin**  
editor, *Buck*;  
*My So-Called Enemy*

**Erik Spink**  
producer, *Tashi's Turbine*

**J. T. Takagi**  
sound recordist,  
*Strong Island*

“ Documentary film  
is like a perfect  
marriage between  
my love for images and  
my passion for social  
issues. So this program  
seemed perfect.”

—Bao Nguyen, MFA 2011

# Lecturers

Below is just a sample of guest lecturers who have spoken with our students.

**Robyn Hutt**  
truTV

**Michael Kantor & Susan Lacy (retired)**  
PBS *American Masters*

**Simon Kilmurry**  
International Documentary Association

**Christine Le Goff**  
ZED (France)

**Sheila Nevins (retired) & Nancy Abraham**  
HBO Documentary

**Molly Thompson**  
A&E IndieFilms

## FILMMAKERS

**Natalia Almada**  
*El General*

**Joe Berlinger**  
*Paradise Lost*

**Doug Block**  
*51 Birch Street*

**Marshall Curry**  
*If a Tree Falls*

**Abigail Disney**  
Fork Films

**Yance Ford**  
*Strong Island*

**Alex Gibney**  
*Taxi to the Dark Side*

**Julie Goldman**  
*Life, Animated*

**Lauren Greenfield**  
*The Queen of Versailles*

**Zachary Heinzerling**  
*Cutie and the Boxer*

**Kirsten Johnson**  
cinematographer

**Ellen Kuras**  
cinematographer

**Zhao Liang**  
*Behemoth*

**Ross McElwee**  
*Sherman's March*

**Muffie Meyer**  
*Grey Gardens*

**Brett Morgen**  
*Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck*

**D. A. Pennebaker & Chris Hegedus**  
*Dont Look Back*

**Yoruba Richen**  
*The New Black*

**Nanfu Wang**  
*Hooligan Sparrow*

**Frederick Wiseman**  
*Titicut Follies*

**Pamela Yates**  
*Granito*

# Application Process

## APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

For detailed instructions, visit: [sva.edu/grad/howtoapply](https://sva.edu/grad/howtoapply)

- Online Application and \$80 Application Fee: [sva.edu/apply](https://sva.edu/apply)
- Statement of Intent/Personal Statement
- Résumé
- Letters of Recommendation
- Official College Transcript

Some international applicants may be required to submit the following:

- Proof of English Proficiency
- Copy of Permanent Residency Card
- Declaration of Finances
- Verification of Finances
- Foreign Transcript Evaluation

## DEPARTMENTAL REQUIREMENTS

For specific guidelines about these requirements, visit: [sva.edu/grad/deptreq](https://sva.edu/grad/deptreq)

- Portfolio (video sample up to 10 minutes)—accepted at [svagrad.slideroom.com](https://svagrad.slideroom.com)
- Writing Sample (documentary treatment)

## DEADLINES

For information on application deadlines, visit: [sva.edu/grad/timeline](https://sva.edu/grad/timeline)

## IMPORTANT LINKS

- FAQ: [sva.edu/grad/faq](https://sva.edu/grad/faq)
- International students: [sva.edu/grad/intl](https://sva.edu/grad/intl)
- Tuition and fees: [sva.edu/tuition](https://sva.edu/tuition)
- Visit SVA: [sva.edu/grad/visit](https://sva.edu/grad/visit)

## FILM INDUSTRY

**Vee Bravo & José Rodriguez**  
Tribeca Film Institute

**Tamara Gould**  
ITVS

**Judith Helfand**  
Chicken & Egg Pictures

**Beth Hoppe**  
ABC News

# Contact Us

We encourage applicants to visit our department. Contact us directly to schedule a department tour or sign up to attend an Information Session. For more information and to register, go to: [sva.edu/grad/visit](http://sva.edu/grad/visit).

If you have any questions about the application process, contact Graduate Admissions at 212.592.2107 or email: [gradadmissions@sva.edu](mailto:gradadmissions@sva.edu).

**Maro Chermayeff**, chair  
**Rose Vincelli Gustine**, director of operations  
**Timothy Doyle**, assistant to the chair  
**Kristian Gonzales**, senior systems administrator  
**Joseph Eisenstein**, video production manager

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**Department site:** [mfasocdoc.sva.edu](http://mfasocdoc.sva.edu)

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“To be in close proximity

and receive feedback from so many accomplished faculty members really helps you find your voice as a filmmaker.”

—Amitabh Joshi, MFA 2013

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The School of Visual Arts is an accredited institutional member of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design ([nasad.arts-accredit.org](http://nasad.arts-accredit.org)).

The Interior Design program leading to the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Interior Design is accredited by the Council for Interior Design Accreditation ([accredit-id.org](http://accredit-id.org)), 206 Grandville Avenue, Suite 305, Grand Rapids, MI, 49503-4014.

The Master of Arts in Teaching in Art Education program is accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

The Master of Professional Studies in Art Therapy degree program is approved by the American Art Therapy Association, Inc., and as such meets the Education Standards of the art therapy profession.

## CREDITS

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# School of Visual Arts

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