

OLLI@Berkeley Spring 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, many of which have not been shown in the U.S., 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 course will introduce and discuss four contemporary international documentary films, screened in their entirety in class.

Dates/Times: Tuesdays, 10am-noon, April 7, 14, 21, 28

Location: Golden Bear Center Suite #202-204, 1995 University Avenue, Berkeley

Instructor: Karen Davis (contact: kdavis@csumb.edu)

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 University of California at Santa Cruz.

International Co-Instructor and Discussant: Niels-Ole Rasmussen

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-Ole likes coffee and likes deliberating where the current state of affairs will take humanity. He will join via Zoom from Europe as his availability permits.

Films to be screened and discussed include:

APRIL 7:

IN THE REAR VIEW 84min. (dir. Maciek Hamela, Poland, 2023)

The first days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. People caught by time and in space, facing an uncertain here and now, choose to abandon what they hold most precious as they climb straight into the dusty van with foreign plates. It traverses tens of thousands of kilometers serving various functions: waiting room, hospital, shelter, zone for confidences and confessions, which are shared among travelers thrown together by chance. In the Rearview is a collective portrait composed of experiences of those who have a single goal: finding a safe haven. In the van, the temporary asylum for all of them, their differences in gender, age, skin tone, physical condition, origin, identity drop away. *(film description courtesy of IMDB.com)*

APRIL 14:

LIFE AND DEATH IN GAZA 88min. (dir. Natasha Cox, UK, 2024)

A powerful documentary following four Palestinians—Khalid, Aya, Adam, and Aseel—as they film their daily lives during the war, documenting evacuations, loss, moments of joy, and extraordinary resilience amidst bombings, destroyed homes, and a severe humanitarian crisis, capturing life's continuation, even births, alongside death and immense struggle. The film focuses on human stories, showing ordinary people like physiotherapist Khalid performing surgery without anesthesia and women's advocate Aya finding hope in a UN school, highlighting resilience and defiance. *(film description courtesy of IMDB.com)*

APRIL 21:

MANKIND'S FOLLY 83min. (dir. Yorgos Avgeropoulos, Greece, 2025)

On opposite sides of the Bering Strait, Nikita in Eastern Siberia and Martha in Northern Alaska witness their world collapse: the Arctic permafrost that has sealed in the era of mammoths is now thawing, destabilizing not only their homes and lives, but the whole planet. Ambitious climate pledges have faded amid global turmoil. Energy security now dominates national agendas. Across the Arctic drilling accelerates, despite scientists' dire warnings that the region is warming four times faster than the rest of the world. Nikita and Martha's stories are a final alarm from the far north - to all of us. *(film description courtesy of IMDB.com)*

APRIL 28:

THE ISOLADO RE-EMERGE: UNKNOWN DEPTHS OF THE AMAZON 49min. (dir. Suzuki Shuntaro, 2025)

Deep in the Amazon rain forest live the Isolado — indigenous people who have never had contact with modern civilization. After the last reported sighting 10 years ago, they were believed by some to have disappeared. Then, last year, they suddenly reappeared in a large group near a settlement on the opposite side of the river. Compared with a decade ago, the Isolado had clearly changed. A series of attacks on a local community followed. What, exactly, was happening in the depths of the Amazon?

An NHK (Japanese) film crew that has documented the Isolado for nearly 20 years returned once more to the Amazon. A year of research and filming in Peru uncovered a hidden struggle unfolding in the depths of the forest. This documentary serves as a quiet indictment of the relentless expansion of modern society and the reality it leaves in its wake.
(film description courtesy of NHK)