

# The Museum of Modern Art

## Public Imaginations: A Survey of Documentary Form December 12- 30, 2019

### Cityscapes: A Short Trip

These city portraits, representing avant-garde, experimental, and ethnographic styles, create a particular sense of place, even a sensation. Animated by the filmmakers' close relationships to their respective locales, these films reveal cities as characters come to life.

**Daybreak Express.** 1953. USA. Directed by D. A. Pennebaker. 35mm print courtesy of Pennebaker Hegedus Films. 5 min. Pennebaker's outstanding first documentary, a hypnotic montage of the now defunct Third Avenue subway shot economically on a single roll of Kodachrome film, evokes the simultaneous madness and tranquility of a New York City morning commute.

**À propos de Nice.** 1930. France. Directed by Jean Vigo, Boris Kaufman. DCP. Digital restoration courtesy Janus Films. 24 min. A shining gem of Jean Vigo's tragically short career, codirected with esteemed cinematographer Boris Kaufman, *À propos de Nice* is a playful, sinister time capsule of 1930s Nice. With frequently contorting, whimsical camera work framing the town's eccentric residents, the film captures the full range of life in Nice, from the glamorous to the gritty.

**Kyoto.** 1968. Japan. Directed by Kon Ichikawa. 16mm. 37 min. Describing *Kyoto*, Ichikawa once wrote, "What I attempt to visualize through concrete forms are not simply eye-catching scenes, but more importantly, the character of human nature itself." Featuring the narration of Shuntaro Tanikawa's poetic script, the film neatly unearths the treasures of Kyoto, including monasteries, gardens, and temples. Measured in pace and shot with a trained, steady eye, *Kyoto* seems to unfold in real time.

Program 66 min.

**Thu. Dec. 12, 4:30 T2, Sun. Dec. 29, 1:30 T2.**

**Amazone.** 1952. France. Directed by Nicole Vedrès. 35mm. 4 min. A compilation of archival material, Vedrès's dreamlike short explores the multiple meanings of the word "Amazon," particularly its etymological and cultural ties to femininity. While a French version restored from the nitrate negative that screened at the 2017 *Il Cinema Ritrovato* features narration by a woman, MoMA's 35mm print is narrated by a man, in English, potentially convoluting some of the inherent significance of a woman evaluating the historical implications of "Amazon."

**La vie commence demain (Life Begins Tomorrow).** 1950. France. Directed by Nicole Vedrès. 35mm. Courtesy the BFI. 87 min. An early practitioner of archive-based, essayistic filmmaking, Vedrès made a significant impact on successors and former students Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. She conceived of cinema as a direct encapsulation of intelligence—a unique medium for thought, discussion, and evidence. In this hybrid docu-fiction film, a journalist inspires a young man visiting Paris, intent on enjoying its historical landmarks, to uproot his stodgy plans. As the journalist guides the naive visitor, the young man encounters the age's most important thinkers (Jean-Paul Sartre, Le Corbusier, and Pablo Picasso, among

others) and is soon convinced that life is best lived thinking of the future. Incredibly profound discussions unfold, including ruminations on the potential of atomic energy and the ethics of cellular manipulation, along with an impressive collage of archival photographs and film footage. Illustrating Vedrès's commitment to threading together the past, the present, and the future, *La vie commence demain* affirms that it is a task perhaps best achieved through cinema.

**Thurs. Dec. 12, 6:30 T2, Sat. Dec. 28, 4:00 T2**

**Primary.** 1960. USA. Directed by Robert Drew. DCP. Digital restoration courtesy Janus Films. 53 min. The tangible intimacy of cinéma vérité ushered in not only a new era of filmmaking but, notably, a new era of American politics. With a journalistic intent to abide by the fairness doctrine, Robert Drew and his associates made a point to feature senators Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy equally in the lead-up to the Wisconsin Democratic primary election of 1960. This simple devotion to equivalent screen time, combined with a seemingly objective narrator, effortlessly reveals the contrast between the two candidates: Humphrey's traditional formality with Kennedy's progressive familiarity, the heightened visibility and speaking role of Jackie Kennedy with Muriel Humphrey's mostly silent support for her husband. Drew and his legendary band of associates, Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, and Albert Maysles (all represented by other films in this series), disrupted traditional documentary practices to create an evergreen document of American politics whose impact still resonates in media today.

**Showman.** 1963. USA. Directed by Albert Maysles, David Maysles. 35mm. 53 min. A pseudo campaign-trail sibling to *Primary*, David and Albert Maysles's *Showman* focuses on self-made movie mogul Joseph Levine and his quest to secure Sophia Loren an Academy Award for her performance in *Two Women*. Acting as "servants to the subject," as the brothers once described it in a television interview discussing the film, the Maysles were "depending on something to happen that is more interesting than anything we could think up." They struck gold in Levine, a larger-than-life movie man whose boisterous antics are calculated and methodical, yet the camera reveals his delicate vulnerabilities as it follows him from Cannes to Hollywood to a gathering of childhood school friends in Boston.

**Sun. Dec. 22 6:30 T1, Sat. Dec. 28, 6:30 T2**

**Point of Order!** 1964. USA. Directed by Emile de Antonio. 35mm. 97 min. This compilation of kinescope recordings from the CBS television archives of the 36-day-long broadcast of the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings begins with the narration, "Everything you are about to see actually happened." This statement is factually correct—these hearings were nationally televised in full—yet this is a 97-minute compilation from over 180 hours of footage. Illustrating the power of editing, *Point of Order!* endures as a separate entity from its source material—it actively confronts American democracy by crafting a narrative out of it simply "at work." In an interview heralding the film as his most impactful work, Emile de Antonio stated, "There is something about the immediacy of a film image that enables the viewer himself to perceive something about the nature of process and the nature of character in a way that words could never do." The film was first screened at MoMA as part of the inaugural 1963 New York Film Festival.

**Fri. Dec. 27, 7:00 T2, Mon. Dec. 30, 4:30 T2**

**“Look, Mom!” Three Shorts on Motherhood**

***Happy Mother’s Day***. 1963. USA. Directed by Richard Leacock, Joyce Chopra. 16mm. 26 min. Assigned by the *Saturday Evening Post* and ABC News to cover the first surviving quintuplets born in the United States, Richard Leacock and Joyce Chopra traveled to Aberdeen, South Dakota, to capture the newly 10-child Fisher family. With a noticeably sarcastic narrator, *Happy Mother’s Day* mostly focuses not on the recent mother of five, nor the quintuplets, but on the tourism and celebratory opportunities the birth brought to Aberdeen. Remarkable for becoming a film it was not intended to be (ABC eventually aired a different edit of the film that was deemed more appropriate), Leacock and Chopra inject subjectivity into a document intended for mainstream news broadcast, affording knowing gazes to Mrs. Fisher and highlighting the absurdity of American capitalism.

***Joyce at 34***. 1972. USA. Directed by Joyce Chopra. 16mm. 28 min. Just nine years after codirecting *Happy Mother’s Day* with Richard Leacock, Joyce Chopra turned the camera on herself during her first pregnancy. An incredible document of second-wave American feminism, *Joyce at 34* juxtaposes Joyce’s desire to be a mother and a filmmaker at once with the somewhat traditional expectations of her family and, most revealing, her husband. Originally showcased in MoMA’s experimental and avant-garde Cineprobe series, *Joyce at 34* is a candid document of personal cinema that reveals the distinctive subjectivity made possible by documentary form.

***Nana, Mom, and Me***. 1975. Directed by Amalie R. Rothschild. DCP. Digital restoration courtesy IndieCollect. 47 min. In a sort of filmed oral-history project, Rothschild combed her family’s archive for photographs and home movies as she interviewed her grandmother and mother. What results is a portrait of three generations of women, each with their own philosophies on life, womanhood, and motherhood. Indicative of how radical this sophisticated, unapologetic approach to discussing and criticizing societal pressures on women is, the film was shown at MoMA in 1974’s edition of *What’s Happening*, a film series co-organized by MoMA and the New York Public Library, conceived as a “weekly program of highly controversial film essays on current social and political issues.”  
Program 101 min.

**Weds. Dec. 18, 4:00 T1, Sun. Dec. 29, 4:00 T2**

***The Thin Blue Line***. 1988. USA. Directed by Errol Morris. 35mm. 103 min. Arguably one of the most influential films of the last 50 years, *The Thin Blue Line* is a seminal true-crime document. Formal and stylistic inventiveness pulse through the film, which investigates the circumstances around the murder of Dallas police officer Robert Wood and the subsequent sentencing of two men for their alleged involvement. For the film’s screening in Morris’s 1999 MoMA retrospective, curator Josh Siegel wrote, “The film marked a significant advance in Morris’s distinctive style: letting people tell their sides of the story, and artfully illustrating their accounts with dramatic reenactments, fetishistic close-ups of the telling detail, old movie clips, a hypnotic musical soundtrack by Philip Glass, forensic photographs, family-album snapshots, newspaper clippings, and court documents.”

**Fri. Dec. 13, 7:00 T2, Thurs. Dec. 26, 4:30 T2**

***Surname Viet, Given Name Nam.*** 1989. USA. Directed by Trinh T. Minh-ha. 35mm. 108 min. The New Directors/New Films closing-night selection of 1989, Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* is a richly layered, formally complex collage of the experiences of multiple generations of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American women, enriched by archival footage, folk songs, and poetry excerpts. This confluence of voices refuses to choose a single, dominant narrative, giving equal weight to the subjective experience of each woman, yet tying them together through various cultural signifiers. The interviewees reckon with the meaning of their own appearance in the film, and its significance as a simultaneously collective and personal act of expression.

**Sun. Dec. 15, 6:30 T1, Mon. Dec. 30, 7:30 T2**

***Color Adjustment.*** 1991. USA. Directed by Marlon Riggs. 80 min. (This will actually be on a Beta tape, possible to keep as digital projection?) courtesy of California Newsreel. An extension of Marlon Riggs's first documentary, *Ethnic Notions*, which charted the prejudicial depictions of African Americans from the 1820s to the Civil Rights Era, *Color Adjustment* narrows the focus to portrayals of African Americans on television, examining how the medium is an instrument for oppression, assimilation, and expression. Ruby Dee narrates this history, illustrated by archival footage of *Amos and Andy*, *Good Times*, and *The Cosby Show*, and enriched by testimonials from media and sociology scholars. The result is an incisive intellectual analysis of how black life in America was portrayed on the small screen, and its lasting significance. The film's deceptively conventional form (talking heads, narration, archival material) feels radical here, for its centering of black voices describing what blackness on television meant to them.

**Sun. Dec. 15, 4:00 T1, Sun. Dec. 22, 4:00 T1**

***Aspen.*** 1991. USA. Directed by Frederick Wiseman. 16mm. 146 min. On the occasion of MoMA's acquisition of 36 of Frederick Wiseman's films in 2010, a nearly yearlong [retrospective of his work](#) was organized. Among the highlights was *Aspen*, Wiseman's observational portrait of the general boundary of the elite vacation destination and former mining town in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. Wiseman weaves from mountainside silhouettes to bourgeois painting lessons in elaborate lodges to working-class social gatherings. As with many of Wiseman's films, his camera seems to effortlessly reveal the complex nuances of its subjects and the spaces they exist in. At the dawn of the Clinton era, the emerging post-Reagan wealth disparity is palpable between Aspen's working-class year-round residents and the wealthy winter vacationers. Wiseman captures telling moments and spontaneous debates regarding national topics like race, sex, class, and religion in a majestic Western setting that at times feels divorced from the rest of the country.

**Sun. Dec. 15, 1:00 T1, Mon. Dec. 23, 4:00 T1**

***Sisters in Law.*** 2005. Cameroon/USA. Directed by Kim Longinotto, Florence Ayisi. 35mm. 104 min. In the series description for Kim Longinotto's 2009 MoMA retrospective, Sally Berger wrote, "By seeking out, observing, and following the untold stories of women's daily lives, she has created cinéma vérité portraits of the larger society and cultural customs." This

suitable description of Longintto's career-long commitment to lesser-known women's stories is exemplified by *Sisters in Law*, a co-directorial effort with Cameroonian filmmaker and professor Florence Ayisi. A confident observational documentary, the film follows prosecutor Vera Ngassa and court president Beatrice Ntuba as they defend women and children in cases of abuse in Kumba, Cameroon. An effortless tonal balance is struck between the women's righteous determination for legal justice and the clear compassion with which they perform their work, resulting in a vital profile of women working to help other women.

**Mon. Dec. 16, 4:00 T1, Thurs. Dec. 26, 7:30 T2**

***The Moon and the Son: An Imagined Conversation.*** 2005. USA. Directed by John Canemaker. 16mm. 28 min. In this "imagined conversation," master animator John Canemaker (voiced by John Turturro) talks with his departed father (voiced by Eli Wallach). Intensely personal, the film combines Canemaker's animation, family photos, and home movies to create a disarmingly intimate exploration of memory, abuse, and aging between a father and son. A truly one-of-a-kind exercise in autobiographical filmmaking, *The Moon and the Son* may feel just as cathartic for the viewer as it likely was for Canemaker. Awarded the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 2005.

***Santiago.*** 2006. Brazil. Directed by João Moreira Salles. 35mm . 80 min. In Portuguese; English subtitles. Revisiting footage he shot in 1992, Portuguese filmmaker João Moreira Salles constructs a portrait of his family's longtime butler, Santiago. Chronicling Santiago's impressive autodidactic nature and capturing his eccentric charm, the film also lays bare the intrinsic class divide between Santiago and Salles, born to a wealthy family. Decades after Salles has left home and the butler's watchful care, Santiago remains obsequious to Salles's requests during their interviews, demonstrating the complicated nature of Santiago's identity, particularly under Salles's gaze. Primarily an archival documentary, the reevaluation and compilation of this material is an attempt to reconcile Salles's own relationship to filmmaking, memory, and a dearly departed friend.

**Sat. Dec. 14, 6:30 T2, Fri. Dec. 27, 4:00 T2**

***Leviathan.*** 2012. USA/France/Great Britain. Directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Véréna Paravel. DCP. 87 min. Without dialogue, and composed of visuals captured by a camera without boundaries, *Leviathan* is a completely immersive experience. Upon a fishing boat that has departed the port of New Bedford, Massachusetts, directors Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel accompany a group of men—who remain nameless—out to sea. The rhythm of the film reflects that of the sea and the routine of the men on board the ship; days and nights become almost indistinguishable, as the punctuation of time passing becomes the suggestion of a man dozing off on his meal break or the brief respite of a cigarette in between slicing extraneous fins from the catch. The camera accompanies fish stolen from the sea in large nets, sloshes on deck with waste accumulated from the ocean, and careens to the heights at the top of the boat. An experimental style, combined with sheer technological inventiveness, results in a manipulation of the documentary form that inverts our very conceptions of what it can be.

**Thu. Dec. 19, 4:00, T1, Sat. Dec. 28, 1:30, T2**