



photo: *Nanook of the North*

**Georgetown University
Documentary Film: History & Theory
FMST 355 – Summer 2018
Professor Sky Sitney**

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Main First Session: June 4 – July 6

Classes: M/T/W/TH: 10:45am – 12:45pm

General Information:

This course surveys the history of documentary film (technological, stylistic, thematic, etc.), while taking up the theoretical debates around cinematic claims to truth and representations of reality. Students will examine how the documentary genre differs from other kinds of filmmaking, how documentaries make ‘truth claims’, and how these claims influence the ways in which these films are received and circulated. Beginning with the actualities of the Lumière Brothers, students will be exposed to multiple genres (e.g. ethnographic, cinéma vérité, experimental, self-reflexive) and filmmakers (e.g. Robert Flaherty, Frederick Wiseman, Albert Maysles, Errol Morris, Chantal Akerman, Agnes Varda, Laura Poitras) while addressing the variety of arenas (e.g. scientific, civic, commercial) in which documentary has appeared.

An overarching theme in this course will be that of documentary and social change. Because the documentary is preoccupied with the historical world, it frequently functions to bear witness to trauma, abuse, or injustice in the past or present – often with the expectation that calling attention to these cases can instigate change.

Objectives:

- To introduce key movements and moments in documentary film history;
- To cultivate familiarity with styles, types and genres of documentary expression;
- To develop knowledge of theoretical concepts and issues in the study of documentary (e.g. indexicality, reflexivity, ethics, etc.).

Learning Outcomes:

- Students will develop an understanding of the issues related to the history and theory of one of the major types of filmmaking;
- Students will become familiar with a range of documentary films from the genre’s origin to the present day;
- Students will be exposed to a variety of types of documentary expression and movements (ethnographic film, poetic and experimental documentaries, direct cinema, cinéma vérité, civic documentaries, and propaganda);
- Students will learn to correlate developments in documentary history in national and international contexts;
- Students will learn to correlate developments in documentary and feature film in cinematic history;
- Students will become familiar with issues of documentary and the film industry.

***All reading assignments are available via Bb and Canvas**



photo: *Stories We Tell*

Assignments:

1. Weekly 2-3 paragraph “film journal” posted via Canvas on screening(s) and assigned texts – due by 10:30am the morning of each Wednesday class, starting June 6.
2. Mid-Term Take Home Exam– June 20.
3. Final Paper on assigned question/prompt, 5-7pages – Due July 13.

Course Requirements:

1. Attend all classes;
2. Readings must be completed by the assigned class dates;
3. All written work must be submitted on time (including mid-term and final papers and weekly film journals).

Course Assessment:

The course assessment will be based in the three assignments as well as attendance and class participation.

Class Participation & Attendance	40%
Weekly “film journals”	15%
Mid-Term Paper	20%
Final Paper	25%



Photo: *Man with a Movie Camera*

Week 1 – Origins of Documentary / Documenting the “Other” / Documenting the Nation / The Poetics of Propaganda

Class 1 (M June 4): Introduction – Origins of Documentary / What is Truth?

Screening (excerpts):

-*Early travelogues* (Lumière Brothers, France, 1895-1905)

Readings:

Patricia Aufderheide: “Defining the Documentary”

Dai Vaughan: “Let There Be Lumière”

Class 2 (T June 5): Documenting the “Other”

Screening (excerpts):

-*Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, US, 1922)

Reading: William Rothman: “The Filmmaker as Hunter”

Class 3 (W June 6): Documenting the Nation / City Symphonies

Screening (excerpts):

-*Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, Russia, 1929)

-*Manhatta* (Paul Strand, US, 1929)

-*Night Mail* (Henry Watt & Basil Wright, UK, 1936)

-*The Plow that Broke the Plains* (Pare Lorentz, US, 1936)

Readings:

John Grierson “First Principles of Documentary”

Margaret Moore “The Ethics of Nationalism”

Class 4 (TH June 7): The Poetics of Propaganda

Screening (excerpts):

-*Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, Germany, 1935)

-*Listen to Britain* (Humphrey Jennings, UK, 1942)

Reading: Patricia Aufderheide: “Government Propaganda”



photo: *Grey Gardens*

Week 2 – Cinema Vérité / Direct Cinema / Avant-Doc

Class 5 (M June 11): Cinema Vérité and the Origins of Direct Cinema

Screening (excerpts):

- Chronicle of a Summer* (Edgar Morin & Jean Rouch, France, 1960)
- Primary* (Robert Drew, US, 1960)

Readings: Erik Barnouw: “Observer”

Class 6 (T June 12): Direct Cinema: Wiseman and the American Institution

Screening (excerpts):

- High School* (Frederick Wiseman, US, 1968)
- Welfare* (Frederick Wiseman, US, 1975)

Readings: Barry Keith Grant: “American Madness: *High School*”

Class 7 (W June 13): Direct Cinema: The Maysles and the Non-Conforming Subject

Screening (excerpts):

- Gray Gardens* (Albert & David Maysles, US, 1968)
- Sandy Passage* (Alex Buono & Rhys Thomas, US, 2015)

Readings: Jonathan Vogels: “*Looking into Grey Gardens*”

Class 8 (TH June 14): Avant-Doc / First Person Singular

Screening (excerpts):

- News from Home* (Chantal Akerman, US, 1977)

Reading: Maria Walsh: “Intervals of Inner Flight: Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*”



photo: *The Thin Blue Line*

Week 3 – Docu-Evidence / Docu-Activism

Class 9 (M June 18): Documentary Evidence & the Aesthetics of Docu-Drama

Screening (excerpts):

-*The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988)

Reading:

Linda Williams: “Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History and *The Thin Blue Line*”

Class 10 (T June 19): Docu-Activism / Promoting Change

Screening (excerpts):

-*Blackfish* (Gabriela Cowperthwaite, US, 2013)

-*Central Park Five* (Ken Burns, Sarah Burns & David McMahon, US, 2012)

Reading: Bill Nichols “How Have Documentaries Addressed Social and Political Issues?”

Class 11 (W June 20): The Emergence of Video

Screening (excerpts):

-*Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, US, 1989)

-*Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (Peter Friedman & Tom Joslin, US, 1992)

Reading: Ross Chambers: “An Education in Seeing: *Silverlake Life*”

Class 12 (TH June 21): Media Activism – Three Case Studies

Screening (excerpts):

-*A Healthy Baby Girl* (Judith Helfand, US, 1997)

-*Escape Fire: The Fight to Rescue American Healthcare* (Matt Heineman, US, 2012)

-*The Waiting Room* (Pete Nicks, US, 2013)

Readings: Jill Godmillow: “Kill the Documentary as We Know It”



photo: *Waltz with Bashir*

Week 4 – Docu-Aesthetics / Re-enactment / Docu-Animation

Class 13 (M June 25): Dual Authorship & Poetic Realism

Screening (excerpts):

- Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, US, 2004)
- Point and Shoot* (Marshall Curry, 2014)

Reading: David Johnson: “You Must Never Listen to This”

Class 14 (T June 26): Participatory & Reflexive Documentary

Screening (excerpts):

- The Gleaners and I* (Agnes Varda, France, 2000)
- Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley, Canada, 2012)

Readings: Richard Porton: “Family Viewing: An Interview with Sarah Polley”

Class 15 (W June 27): Documentary Animation

Screening (excerpts):

- Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, Israel, 2008)
- Persepolis* (Marjan Satrapi, Iran/France, 2008)

Readings: Jorem ten Brink: “Animating Trauma: *Waltz with Bashir*”

Class 16 (TH June 28): The Edge of Re-Enactment

Screening (excerpts):

- The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, UK, 2012)

Readings:

Melis Behlil: “An Interview with Joshua Oppenheimer”

Thomas Pringle “Documentary Animism: Material Politics and Sensory Ethics”

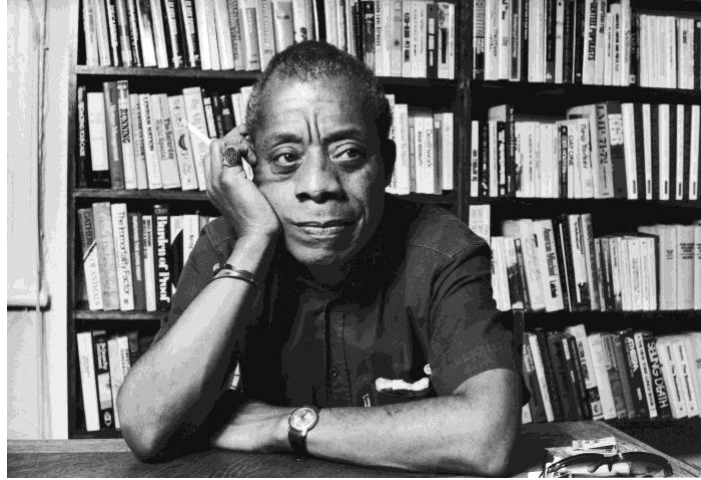


photo: *I am Not Your Negro*

Week 5 – Documentary in the Present Age

Class 17 (M July 2): Making News

Screening (excerpts):

-*Citizen Four* (Laura Poitras, 2014)

Readings:

John Durham Peters “Witnessing”

Martha Cutter “Witnessing, Testifying, and History”

Class 18 (T July 3): The Shadows of History in the Present

Screening (excerpts):

-*I am Not Your Negro* (Raoul Peck, 2017)

Reading: Warren Crichlow: “Baldwin's Rendezvous with the Twenty-First Century”

NO CLASS WEDNESDAY, JULY 4

Class 19 (TH July 5): Putting it All Together – FINAL CLASS

Screening & Readings:

-TBD