



photo: *Nanook of the North*

**Georgetown University
Documentary Film: History & Theory
FMST 355 – Summer 2022
Professor Sky Sitney**

Location:

Film and Media Studies Screening Room
New South – Healey Family Student Center (upper level)

Meeting Dates & Times:

June 6 – July 8, 2022
M, T, W, TH: 10:50am-12:55pm

Professor Contact Info:

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Office Hours – by appointment

Course Description: Documentary cinema is in a golden age. Once considered the margins of the film industry, nonfiction storytelling today has never been in higher demand, across every platform. This course explores the history of documentary film, from its origins in the early 1900s to its remarkable rise in popularity over the past two decades, 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 early cinematic “actualities” of the inventors of cinema – the Lumière Brothers – and progressing into contemporary works made in recent years, students will be exposed to multiple genres and filmmakers while addressing the variety of arenas in which documentary has appeared – from theaters and festivals, to public broadcasting platforms, to streaming, and even a look into new frontiers for non-fiction storytelling in virtual reality and the metaverse.

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.

Special guests, filmmakers and curators, will occasionally participate in person and/or virtually.

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;
- To deepen awareness of representational practices in film and media.

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 verité*, 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.

All reading assignments are available via Canvas

Assignments:

- Weekly “film journal” posted in Canvas “Discussions” – due 5pm every Thursday.
- Video Essay Project (5-10 min.) – Due week July 6.
- Final Reflection Paper (5-7 pages) – Due July 15.

Course Requirements:

- Attend all classes;
- Contribute to class discussions;
- Readings must be completed by the assigned due dates;
- All discussion postings submitted on time;
- Video essay project and final reflection paper due on time.

Course Assessment:

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

Class Participation & Attendance: 40%

Video Essay Project: 25%

Weekly film journals: 20%

Final Reflection Paper: 15%

Weekly Schedule:

Week 1 – June 6 - 9: What is Documentary? The Beginnings. The Construction of the Other.



Screenings (full films or excerpts):

- The First Films of the Lumière Brothers* (Auguste and Louis Lumière, France, 1895 – excerpts)
- Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, USA, 1922, 79 min.)
- Nanook Revisited* (Claude Massot and Sebastian Regnier, France/Canada, 1990 - excerpts)
- Cannibal Tours* (Dennis O'Rourke, Australia, 1988, 70 min.)

Readings:

- Patricia Aufderheide: “Defining the Documentary” and “Founders”
- Dai Vaughan: “Let There Be Lumière”
- Dennis O'Rourke: “On the Making of Cannibal Tours”
- William Rothman: “The Filmmaker as Hunter”

Week 2 – June 13 - 16: Propaganda. Advocacy. Point of View.



Screenings (full films or excerpts):

- The Plow that Broke the Plains* (Pare Lorentz, USA, 1936, 30 min.)
- The River* (Pare Lorentz, USA, 1938, 30 min.)
- Housing Problems* (John Grierson, England, 1935, 15 min.)
- Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, Germany, 1935 – excerpts)
- Listen to Britain* (Humphrey Jennings, England, 1942)
- Know Your Enemy* (Frank Capra, Japan/USA, 1944 – excerpts)
- Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, USA, 2004 124 min.)
- Blackfish* (Gabriela Cowperthwaite, USA, 2013, 90 min.)

Readings:

- Patricia Aufderheide: “Government Propaganda”
- Charlie Keil: “Persuasion and Expression in *The Plow That Broke the Plains*”
- Jim Leach: “The Poetics of Propaganda”

Week 3* – June 21 – 23: Documentary Modes. Verité, Direct Cinema, Performance and Ethics of Looking.

*No Class on Monday, June 20.



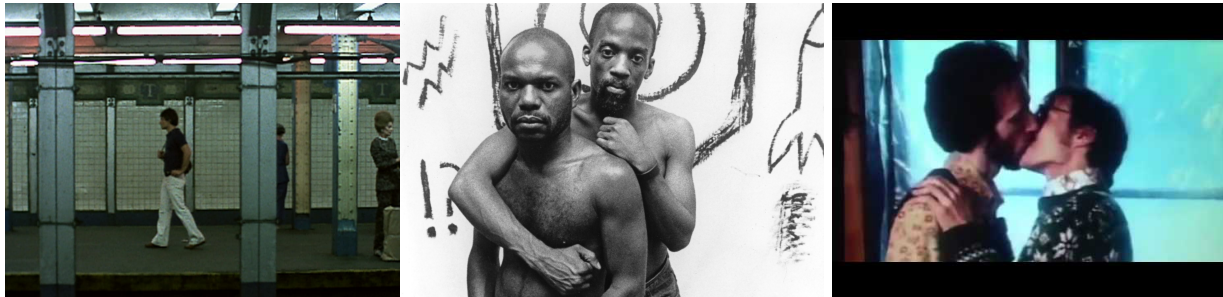
Screenings (full films or excerpts):

- Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, France, 1961)
- Primary* (Robert Drew, USA, 1960) - excerpts
- Salesman* (Albert and David Maysles, USA, 1969) - excerpts
- Gray Gardens* (Albert and David Maysles, USA, 1975)
- Welfare* (Frederick Wiseman, USA, 1975) - excerpts

Readings:

- Barbara Bruni: "Jean Rouch: Cinéma-vérité, *Chronicle of a Summer* & *The Human Pyramid*"
- Jean-Andre Fieschi: "Slippages of Fiction"
- Calvin Pryluck: "Ultimately We Are All Outsiders: The Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking"
- Jonathan Vogels: "*Looking into Grey Gardens*"

Week 4 – June 27 – 30: Framing History, Self, and Difference.



Screenings (full films or excerpts):

- News from Home* (Chantal Akerman, Belgium/USA, 1977)
- The Times of Harvey Milk* (Robert Epstein, USA, 1984) – excerpts
- Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, USA, 1989, 55 min.) – excerpts
- Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (Peter Friedman, Tom Joslin, USA, 1992, 99 min.)
- I Am Not Your Negro* (Raoul Peck, 2016) - excerpts
- O.J.: Made in America* (Ezra Edelman, USA, 2016) - excerpts

Readings:

- Ross Chambers: "An Education in Seeing: *Silverlake Life*"
- Bill Nichols: "How have Documentaries Addressed Social and Political Issues?"
- Sheila Petty: "Silence and Its Opposite: Expressions of Race in *Tongues Untied*"
- Maria Walsh: "Intervals of inner flight: Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*"

Week 5 – July 5 – 7*: The Golden Age and New Frontiers of Documentary. Documentary Ethics.

*No Class on Monday, July 4.



Screenings (full films or excerpts):

- Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, UK/Indonesia, 2012, 120 min.)
- Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, Israel, 2008, 90 min.)
- Hale County This Morning, This Evening* (RaMell Ross, USA, 2018) - excerpts
- Midnight Family* (Luke Lorentzen, USA/Mexico, 2019) - excerpts

Readings:

- Patricia Aufderheide: “Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in their Work”
- Ellen Maccarone: “Ethical Responsibilities to Subjects and Documentary Filmmaking”
- Natasha Mansfield: “Loss and Mourning: Cinema’s Language of Trauma in *Waltz with Bashir*”
- Calvin Pryluck: “Ultimately We Are All Outsiders: The Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking”

That’s a wrap!