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COM 325-003: Introduction to Documentary Film and Media

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Introduction to Documentary Film and Media

Description

This course is designed as an introduction to a broad genre of media we’ve come to call “documentary.” Ostensibly positioned in opposition to fiction film, documentary or non-fiction film in fact has many faces, modes, operations and purposes. We will start by taking a look at the origins of documentary filmmaking, considering the first moving image works that sought to capture some aspect of ‘actuality.’ As we delve deeper, investigating a range of mostly contemporary work, we will look critically at the truth-promises of documentary. As we consider complex questions of ethics, propaganda, performance and witnessing, we will also interrogate our own responses: what does it mean to be a spectator of non-fiction media? How can we use the models offered by a range of media practitioners and artists to inspire and prod us to think and write in new ways, to conceptualize and imagine our own non-fiction experiments? And how can we speak back to non-fiction media in ways that trouble and enrich the films themselves?
Learning Objectives

• Engage in critical thinking pertaining to key discourses in documentary film theory and history
• Acquire or improve the fundamentals of film/media literacy and the ability to analyze and evaluate a range of non-fiction moving image forms
• Produce nuanced close-readings and intertextual analyses of non-fiction media works
• Apply theoretical models to the production of new forms of creative, conceptual and experimental work
• Acquire the skills to effectively critique peer-produced writing and productively participate in writing workshops

Format

This hybrid course combines online discussion and analysis of assigned readings and moving image works with weekly in-class meetings that will extend and deepen these online conversations and integrate (in the second part of the semester) the workshopping of student writing.

Your success in the class depends on your capacity to work independently with consistency, engagement and discipline.

The online portion of the class consists of weekly responses to assigned texts and films/videos. Each week you will find a “guide” posted on the Moodle that introduces the assigned texts and/or films. It is crucial that you read this short introductory text first, as it will both offer a framework to guide your reading/screening and provide details about your required weekly posts.

Requirements

1. Online writing

Each week, students compose and post two short texts online:
• a response to a query I will pose about the assigned material (minimum 250 words; you may post these at any time but no later than noon on the Monday before we meet in person)
• a response to one of your classmate’s responses to that same query (minimum 125 words; you may post these at any time but no later than noon on the Tuesday before we meet in person)

Please note: Late Moodle posts are not accepted; you must post by the above times to receive credit. If you miss a week, please turn your attentions toward the next week’s posts!

These online responses will be evaluated according to the following criteria: originality, depth and rigor of thought, and quality of writing. The posts are interpretive rather than summative: they will showcase your active thinking-through of the assigned texts and films, and they should cite specific details in order to back up and strengthen your insights. For this reason, you will need to take notes as you watch/read films/videos and texts as a means of keeping track of your thinking and curiosities. Please compose online posts in complete and, to the very best of your abilities, grammatically correct and proofread sentences.

2. Three short writing assignments

Each student will produce three two-page texts. All writing assignments are due in class on the designated day in hard copy. I will provide instigating prompts for these assignments that spring from the themes and
formal experiments we encounter in our assigned films/videos; these assignments will incrementally pave
the way for your final projects.

Each assignment should be double-spaced with one-inch margins and should include a title.

If you know in advance that you are having trouble completing an assignment, please see me as soon as
possible. Extensions need 24 hours’ notice. Technology difficulties are not an excuse for late work: please
back up your work frequently: save copies in email, on flash drives, on networks, etc.

3. Participation

Thorough reading/screening of the selected texts/films is essential for engaged discussion (both on and
offline) and thoughtful workshop participation.

Writing workshops: During the second part of the semester, two or three students will workshop their texts
during our Wednesday meetings. These texts must be emailed to the class any time but no later than the
Monday before our class meeting at 5pm. To prepare for the workshops, you will need to print the student
texts, read each carefully and mark the texts/make written comments according to provided guidelines.

4. Group Presentation

Students will participate in group presentations that integrate and demonstrate mastery of the material
covered in the first five weeks of the course through a detailed clip analysis.

5. Final projects

Each student will submit a detailed project proposal that we will discuss; final projects may take the form
of a film-essay or an essay-film. We will discuss the distinction!

The above are weighted as follows:
Online reading and screening responses - 25%
Participation - 15%
Group Presentation - 10%
Short Essays - 25%
Final Project - 25%

Grading

Evaluation will follow the university’s grading scale:

A = 100-90 (superior)  B = 86-80 (very good)  C = 76-70 (acceptable)  D = 69-60 (minimum)
B+ = 89-87 (excellent)  C+ = 79-77 (good)      F = 59-0 (inadequate)
**Attendance Policy**

I expect every student to attend every class and to be on time.

If you miss a class, you are responsible for catching up (please contact me to inquire about missed material) as well as for submitting assignments due on the missed day (before our class meeting time); missed in-class group exercises and workshops cannot be made up.

Every unexcused absence after the second one will reduce your participation grade. More than four unexcused absences (4 weeks of the curriculum) can result in automatic failure of the course; excessive unexcused lateness of 15 minutes or more throughout the course will be considered as one absence. According to university policy, students who expect to miss classes or exams because of religious observance must submit to their instructors, by the end of the second week of classes, a written list of dates that will be missed. Similarly, athletes should submit a list of events. If you can’t make a class—due to illness, an academic commitment, an interview, or a major extracurricular event—and you wish to have the absence excused, ask the Dean of Students to review the request.

**Technology**

Please silence your cell phone completely, and don’t have it out in class. Open your laptop only when needed for class work.

**Plagiarism and Cheating**

The NJIT University Code on Academic Integrity defines plagiarism as using or attempting to use written, oral, or graphic work which was authored or prepared by another and submitting it as one’s own. The full Code can be found at https://www5.njit.edu/policies/sites/policies/files/academic-integrity-code.pdf.

If your work uses the idea or language of any other person, make that use clear to your reader by citing clearly and thoroughly. If I find plagiarized work, even if it seems to stem from carelessness, I’m required to report it to the Dean of Students.

**Documented Disabilities**

If you are a student with a documented disability, please see me at the beginning of the semester to discuss accommodations. You may also contact Student Disability Services at (973) 596-3420.

**Writing Center**

The NJIT Writing Center, located in Central King Building G17, offers one-on-one appointments to help with your written assignments. They are equipped to work with both creative and scholarly forms of writing. Please visit: https://www.njit.edu/writingcenter/
COURSE SCHEDULE
Please note: the syllabus is subject to change. Any email or in-class announcements take precedence.

ORIGIN STORIES: THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER

Sept. 5
Course Introduction

Sept. 12
Screen: The 13th, Ava DuVernay (100 min., 2016)
Read: “How Can We Define Documentary Film?” Bill Nichols

Sept. 19
[please note: YOM KIPPUR. — no in-class meeting — class meets entirely online this week]
Screen: Nanook of the North, Robert Flaherty (69 min., 1922)
Night Mail, Harry Watt and Basil Wright (25 min., 1936)
Read: “Nanook of the North,” Patricia R. Zimmermann and Sean Zimmermann Auyash
“Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North,” Fatimah Tobing Rony
“First Principles of Documentary,” John Grierson

Sept. 26
Screen: Let There Be Light, John Huston (59 min., 1946)
Read: “Let There Be Light (1946) and Its Restoration,” Scott Simmon
“The Eventual Viewer,” John Ellis

CINÉMA VÉRITÉ

Oct. 3
Screen: Don’t Look Back, D. A. Pennebaker (96 min., 1967)
Read: “‘Don’t You Ever Just Watch?’: American Cinema Verité and Don’t Look Back,” Jeanne Hall
“Cinéma Vérité, Direct Cinema,” Betsy McLane

RE-ENACTMENT

Oct. 10
Screen: The Act of Killing, Joshua Oppenheimer (122 min., 2012)

>>>>>Group Presentations: Close Readings
SUBJECTS + OBJECTS

Oct. 17
Screen: *Paris is Burning*, Jennie Livingston (78 min., 1990)
Read: “Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?” Bill Nichols
“Is Paris Burning?” bell hooks

>>>assignment 1 due

PORTRAITURE: PERSONAL + POLITICAL

Oct. 24
Screen: *Grizzly Man*, Werner Herzog (104 min., 2005)
Read: “‘You Must Never Listen to This’: Lessons of Sound, Cinema and Mortality from Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man*,” David Johnson

EXPECTATION + SUBVERSION

Oct. 31
Screen: *The Prison in 12 Landscapes*, Brett Story (90 min., 2016)
Read: “Prisons Without Crimes: An Interview with Brett Story,” Astra Taylor
“Kill the Documentary as We Know It,” Jill Godmilow

BINDING FRAGMENTS

Nov. 7
Read: “The Gleaners and ‘Us’: The Radical Modesty of Agnès Varda’s *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*,” Virginia Bonner

>>>assignment 2 due

NON-FICTION THRILLS

Nov. 14
Screen: *The Thin Blue Line*, Errol Morris (106 min., 1988)
Read: “What Errol Morris Thinks of *Making a Murderer*,” Isaac Butler
“Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and *The Thin Blue Line*,” Linda Williams
**EXPERIMENTS + EDGES**

**Nov. 21**

*please note: NJIT Follows Friday Schedule; no in-class meeting. Only the online portion of the class meets this week.*

Screen: Videos by Claudia Rankine and John Lucas
Read: excerpt, *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine

**COSMIC COLLISIONS: MEMORY + MOURNING**

**Nov. 28**
Screen: *Nostalgia for the Light*, Patricio Guzmán (107 min., 2010)
Read: “After-Effects: Interview with Patricio Guzmán,” Rob White

**FOUND FOOTAGE**

**Dec. 5**
Screen: *Dawson City: Frozen Time*, Bill Morrison (120 min., 2017)
Read: “Claiming the Found: Archive Footage and Documentary Practice,” Rebecca Swender

>>> assignment 3 due

**FAMILY TIES + KNOTS**

**Dec. 12**
Screen: *Strong Island*, Yance Ford (107 min., 2017)
Read: “Yance Ford’s ‘Strong Island’ Is a Form of Justice,” Darryl Pinckney
Listen: “‘Strong Island’ Director Yance Ford Makes Oscars History,” NPR

++ FINAL PROJECTS DUE DECEMBER 14