

Fall 2024

COM 341-001: Documentary Film and Media

Rebekah Rutkoff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.njit.edu/hum-syllabi>

Recommended Citation

Rutkoff, Rebekah, "COM 341-001: Documentary Film and Media" (2024). *Humanities Syllabi*. 886.
<https://digitalcommons.njit.edu/hum-syllabi/886>

This Syllabus is brought to you for free and open access by the NJIT Syllabi at Digital Commons @ NJIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Humanities Syllabi by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ NJIT. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@njit.edu.

DOCUMENTARY FILM & MEDIA



Madeline Anderson, *Integration Report 1* (1960); Jafar Pahani, *This is Not a Film* (2012)

DESCRIPTION

This course is an introduction to a broad genre of media we've come to call 'documentary.' Ostensibly positioned in opposition to fiction film/media, documentary or non-fiction film/media in fact has multiple faces, modes, operations and purposes. We'll begin by taking a look at the origins of documentary filmmaking, considering the first moving image works that sought to capture 'actuality.' As we delve deeper, investigating a range of mostly contemporary work, we will look critically at the truth-promises and reality-expectations that surround documentary. We will engage with complex questions of aesthetics, ethics, propaganda, and performance while simultaneously interrogating our own responses: what does it mean to be a spectator of non-fiction media? How can we speak back to documentary moving image works in ways that trouble, enrich and extend them? And how might the models offered by media practitioners prod us not only to think and write in new ways but to conceptualize and produce our own documentary experiments?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Engage in critical thinking pertaining to key discourses in documentary 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 work
- Apply theoretical and creative models to the production of new forms of writing and media

MATERIALS

Most course materials are available on Canvas. You'll have to buy or rent several films, but do not purchase them all at the start of the semester—the later weeks of the syllabus might change. If you don't already have one, please sign up for a Newark Public Library card (available to all NJIT students) so that you can access films via Kanopy.

PREREQUISITES

HUM102 (grade of C or higher) + one HIST and HUM GER 200-level course (grade of C or higher).

REQUIREMENTS

Participation

Thorough reading/screening of the assigned texts/films is essential for engaged, informed and thoughtful discussion. Please come to class ready to discuss what you've read and watched; bring your reading/screening notes and the assigned text(s). Each week you will find a "guide" posted on Canvas that introduces the assigned material. It is crucial that you read this short introductory text first, as it offers a contextualizing framework for your reading/screening and provides details about how to prepare for our subsequent meeting. As the syllabus includes materials that I will introduce into our in-class meetings (such as film clips), please consult the weekly guide for the most precise information on what you're expected to have read/watched before we meet. Participation also includes various forms of low-stakes writing (in-class writing, group work, forum posts and pop quizzes). Unless otherwise noted, assigned materials are to be completed by our Monday sessions.

If you encounter issues that limit your capacity to participate fully in our course, please communicate with me in a timely manner so that we can design solutions together. I am available to meet face-to-face as well as via Zoom and phone.

Group Presentations/Pre-presentation Papers

Students will collaborate on group projects that use detailed clip analysis to integrate and demonstrate mastery of the material covered in the first five weeks of the course. Project presentations will be preceded by short individual essays.

Final Projects

Each student will produce a research-based documentary project. Students submitting media projects will also submit a short accompanying essay. Projects will be preceded by proposals.

The above are weighted as follows:

Participation - 35%

Presentation/Paper - 25%

Final Project Proposal - 10%

Final Project - 30%

FINAL EXAM

There is no final exam in this course.

GRADING

Evaluation will follow the university's grading scale:

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

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Every unexcused absence after the second one will reduce your participation grade. More than six unexcused absences 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, please ask the Dean of Students to review the request.

NJIT SUPPORT SERVICES

You will find links to NJIT services for students, including technical support, [here](#).

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Academic Integrity is the cornerstone of higher education and is central to the ideals of this course and the university. Cheating is strictly prohibited and devalues the degree that you are working on. As a member of the NJIT community, it is your responsibility to protect your educational investment by knowing and following the academic code of integrity policy that is found at: <http://www5.njit.edu/policies/sites/policies/files/academic-integrity-code.pdf>.

Please note that it is my professional obligation and responsibility to report any academic misconduct to the Dean of Students Office. Any student found in violation of the code by cheating, plagiarizing or using any online software inappropriately will result in disciplinary action. This may include a failing grade of F, and/or suspension or dismissal from the university. If you have any questions about the code of Academic Integrity, please contact the Dean of Students Office at dos@njit.edu.

If your work uses the idea or language of any other person—in a paper, forum post, video essay or any other work—make that use immediately clear to your reader/viewer. Unacknowledged use of ChatGPT or similar generative artificial software to produce writing is a violation of academic integrity.

LATE WORK

If you know in advance that you are having trouble completing a formal assignment, contact me as soon as possible. Extensions require 24 hr. notice; without an extension, the grade of late work will go down by five points per day. Late Canvas posts will receive partial credit for two weeks after the due date.

ACCOMMODATIONS

If you need an accommodation due to a disability, please contact the [Office of Accessibility Resources and Services](#) to discuss your specific needs or to request a Letter of Accommodation Eligibility.

WRITING CENTER

The NJIT Writing Center offers one-on-one online 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; changes will be announced in advance.

ORIGIN STORIES: FROM ACTUALITY TO VÉRITÉ

Sept. 4

Course Introduction

Sept. 9/11

13th, Ava DuVernay (100 min., 2016)

“How Can We Define Documentary Film?” Bill Nichols *Nanook of the North*, Robert Flaherty (69 min., 1922)

Short films by Jean Painlevé, Auguste and Louis Lumière

Sept. 16/18

“*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

Night Mail, Harry Watt and Basil Wright (25 min., 1936)

Sept. 23/25

Let There Be Light, John Huston (59 min., 1946)

“*Let There Be Light* (1946) and Its Restoration,” Scott Simmon

“The Eventual Viewer,” John Ellis

“War Neurosis” archival shorts

Sept. 30/Oct. 2

Don’t Look Back, D. A. Pennebaker (96 min., 1967)

“Cinéma Vérité, Direct Cinema,” Betsy McLane

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One, William Greaves (75 min., 1968)

“*Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*: Director’s Early Notes,” William Greaves

RE-ENACTMENT

Oct. 7/9

The Casting, Omer Fast (14 min., 2017)

The Act of Killing, Joshua Oppenheimer (122 min., 2012)

“Born Free? Repetition and Fantasy in *The Act of Killing*,” Homay King

“Tracing Frictions in *The Act of Killing*,” Intan Paramaditha

> [pre-presentation papers due](#)

PRESENTATIONS

Oct. 14/16

INTO THE THE FIELD: DOC ART IN NEWARK

Oct. 21/23

STRUCTURAL SCHISMS

Oct. 28/30

The Prison in 12 Landscapes, Brett Story (90 min., 2016)

“Prisons Without Crimes: An Interview with Brett Story,” Astra Taylor

Long Story Short, Natalie Bookchin (45 min., 2016)

Uncanny Terrain, Ed M. Koziarski and Junko Kajino (excerpts from series, 2012-2017)

ESSAY FILMS I

Nov. 4/6

Tongues Untied, Marlon Riggs (55 min., 1989)

The Gleaners & I, Agnès Varda (82 min., 2000)

Fainting Spells, Sky Hopinka (10 min., 2018)

“Beyond Story: an Online, Community-Based Manifesto,” Alexandra Juhasz & Alisa Lebow

“In Search of the Essay Film,” Philip Lopate

from *How the Essay Film Thinks*, Laura Rascarolli

ESSAY FILMS II

Nov. 11/13

Strong Island, Yance Ford (107 min., 2017)

How Not To Be Seen, Hito Steyerl (14 min., 2013)

Love is the Message, The Message is Death Arthur Jafa (7 min., 2016)

“The Messenger: How a Video by Arthur Jafa Became a Worldwide Sensation—and Described America to Itself,” Nate Freeman

“The Essay Film: Some Thoughts of Discontent,” Kevin B. Lee

> [Final project proposals due](#)

PORTRAITURE + IMMORTALITY

Nov. 18/20

I Am Somebody, Madeline Anderson (30 min., 1960)

A Tribute to Malcolm X, Madeline Anderson (14 min., 1967)

“Madeline Anderson in Conversation: Pioneering an African American Documentary Tradition,”

Michael T. Martin

Grizzly Man, Werner Herzog (104 min., 2005)

“‘You Must Never Listen to This’: Lessons of Sound, Cinema and Mortality from Werner Herzog’s

Grizzly Man,” David Johnson

LOOKING AT LABOR

Nov. 25

Finally Got the News, Peter Gessner, Rene Lichtman, Stewart Bird (55 min., 1970)

American Factory, Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar (115 min., 2019)

Sound That, Kevin Everson (12 min., 2013)

“Finally Got the News: Urban Insurgency, Counterinsurgency, and the Crisis of Hegemony in Detroit,”

Jordan Camp

> Nov. 27 - NJIT Friday classes meet

HYBRID INTERVENTIONS

Dec. 2/4

The Infiltrators, Cristina Ibarra and Alex Rivera (95 min., 2019)

This is Not a Film, Jafar Panahi (76 min., 2011)

“By Radical Means Necessary: Interview with Cristina Ibarra and Alex Rivera,” Diana Flores Ruiz

FINAL PROJECT WORKSHOP

Dec. 9/11

Final Projects due Dec. 14 by 11.59pm