



MFA, Documentary Studies
Advanced Seminar, Fall Semester 2022/2023, Mondays 10:00-14:00

New Theoretical Perspectives on Documentary Cinema

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This seminar deals with a variety of theoretical issues pertaining to documentary cinema. It puts a special emphasis on the ways in which transformations in documentary practice invite us to reconsider early theoretical issues or create a need for new perspectives. The seminar is divided into four different sections. The first section is focused on the new position the viewer holds in documentary cinema, emphasizing her contribution: what is the role she holds in defining a documentary, and what is she expected to do after watching the film? The second section focuses on the central presence the documentarist holds today. How does her personal prism allow for a thorough investigation of the political and social realms? The third section focuses on epistemological issues on truth and knowledge in documentaries as a result of working with archive material, narration and performance. How did narration turn from being a source of authority and objectivity to providing a testimony of skepticism and doubt? In what ways can we represent the unattainable past and why have fictional elements turn so dominant today in documentary cinema? The fourth and last section examines questions that pertain to the contemporary meeting between new technologies and documentary cinema: how should we understand the place of digital sound and observational in documentary anthropology? Does digital technology challenge or maintain the earlier promises of 16mm cameras? How can renewed thinking on animated documentaries light the ways in which nonfiction rhetoric is developed in the digital age? By thoroughly reading new academic sources that focus on these questions, and watching contemporary world-wide documentaries (e.g., *The Act of Killing*, *Grizzly Man* or *The Thin Blue Line*), this seminar offers new ways for thinking theoretically on a filmmaking practice that keeps reinventing itself time and again.

Course Requirements:

1. Thoroughly reading the course material and actively participating in class discussions.
 2. Participating in the Moodle discussions on the screenings (every week).
 3. Writing a critical report on one of the seminar readings and presenting it in class.
 4. Writing a seminar proposal and presenting it in class.
 5. Writing a seminar paper.
 6. Attending all sessions (no more than 3 absences).
- The course will take place on campus. Attending all sessions in person is mandatory. No final grade will be given in the case of more than three unjustified absences. Students who cannot enter campus because they need to stay in quarantine need to provide a medical approval to support their absence, and need to participate online in the class by opening a microphone and a camera.

The Final Grade:

- 20% Critical Intervention (in class and in Moodle discussions)
 - 20% Critical Reports on Readings and a Seminar Proposal
 - 60% Seminar Paper
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Session 1:

New Documentary Cinema and the Notion of Documentary Truth:

No required readings or screenings

Clips from: ***Phantom Limb*** (Jay Rosenblatt, 2005); ***Songbirds*** (Brian Hill, 2007); ***El Palacio*** (Nicolás Pereda, 2013)

Session 2:

Activism and the Challenge for Change: Can Documentaries Change Reality?

Full Screenings (watch in advance):

The Thin Blue Line (Errol Morris, 1988, USA, 106m)

Clips in class: ***Now*** (Santiago Alvarez, 1965, Cuba, 5m); ***Bowling for Columbine*** (Michael Moore, 2002); ***Why We Fight*** (Frank Capra, 1942)

Required Reading:

Williams, Linda. "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History and *The Thin Blue Line*" *Film Quarterly* Vol. 46, No. 3, Spring 1993.

Optional Reading:

Gaines, Jane. "Political Mimesis", *Collecting Visible Evidence*, (eds. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov), Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999, pp. 84-103

Session 3:

How Can We Define a Documentary Film? Moving from a Textual Definition to a Viewer-Based Model

Full Screening (watch in advance):

Fraud (Dean Fleischer-Camp, 2016, USA, 52m)

Clips in class:

Nanook of the North (Robert Flaherty, 1922); ***Ford Transit*** (Hany Abu-Assad, 2002); ***United 93*** (Paul Greengrass, 2006)

Required Readings:

Sobchack, Vivian. "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Experience." *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Eds. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 241-254.

Optional Reading:

Nichols, Bill. "How Can We Define Documentary Film?" *Introduction to Documentary*, Second Edition. Indiana University Press, 2010. pp. 1-42.

Session 4:

"The New Subjectivity" and the Personal/National Diary: Is the Personal Always Political?

Full Screening (watch in advance):

This is Not a Film (Jafar Panahi, 2011, Iran, 75m)

Clips in class: ***Sherman's March*** (Ross McElwee, 1985); ***Diary*** (David Perlov, 1973-1983); ***Nobody's Business*** (Alan Berliner, 1996)

Required Reading:

Renov, Michael. "The Subject in History: The New Autobiography in Film and Video." *The Subject of Documentary*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004: 104-119.

Optional Readings:

Russell, Catherine. "Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self". *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. pp. 275-314.

Session 5:

Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Documentaries: How Can We Represent (and Re-Present) the Past?

Full Screening (watch in advance):

The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer and Anonymous, 2012, Indonesia, 117m)

Clips in class:

I Think This is the Closest to How the Footage Looked (Yuval Ha'meiri, Israel, 9m); ***Gelem*** (Alon Sahar, Israel, 13m); ***The Inextinguishable Fire*** (Harun Farocki, 1969); ***What Farocki Taught*** (Jill Godmilow, 1998); ***Close-up*** (Abbas Kiarostami, 1990)

Required Readings:

Nichols, Bill. "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject," *Critical Inquiry* 35:1 (Autumn 2008): 72–89.

Session 6:

**New Theories of Sound in Documentary Cinema, Part I:
Rethinking Narration and Authority in Documentary**

Full Screening (watch in advance):

Grizzly Man (Werner Herzog, 2005, USA, 103m)

Clips in class: **The Girl Chewing Gum** (John Smith, 1976); **Waltz with Bashir** (Ari Folman, 2008); **Suitcase of Love and Shame** (Jane Gillooly, 2013)

Required Readings:

Nichols, Bill. "The Voice of Documentary." *New Challenges for Documentary*. 48-63.

Optional Readings:

Johnson, David. "'You Must Never Listen to This'": Lessons on Sound, Cinema, and Mortality from Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*." *Documenting the Documentary*. 507-521.

Wolfe, Charles. "Historicizing the 'Voice of God': The Place of Voice-Over Commentary in Classical Documentary." (1997). *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*. Ed. Jonathan Kahana. London: Oxford University Press, 2016. 264-280.

Session 7:

New Perspectives on Archive and Personal Memory

Full Screening (watch in advance):

Cameraperson (Kirsten Johnson, 2016, USA, 102m)

A Story for the Modlins (Sergio Oksman, 2012, Spain, 26m)

Clips in class: **Even if She Had Been a Criminal** (Jean-Gabriel Périot, 2006); **The Maelstrom: A Family Chronicle** (Péter Forgács, 1997); **Phantom Limb** (Jay Rosenblatt, 2005); **Tarnation** (Jonathan Caouette, 2003, USA, 100m)

Required Reading:

Baron, Jaimie. "Introduction: History, The Archive, and the Appropriation of the Indexical Document," *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*. London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 1-15.

Optional Reading:

Orgeron, Marsha and Devin Orgeron. "Familial Pursuits, Editorial Acts: Documentaries after the Age of Home Video," *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 60 (Fall 2007), pp. 47-62.

Session 8:

The Assimilation of 16mm Cameras and the Illusion of 'Being There' in the 1960s

Full Screenings (watch in advance):

Primary (Robert Drew, USA, 1960, 60m)

Bob Dylan: Dont Look Back (D.A. Pennebaker, 1967, USA, 96m)

Required Reading:

Hall, Jeanne. "Realism as a Style in Cinema Verite: A Critical Analysis of 'Primary.'" *Cinema Journal* 30:4 (Summer 1991): 24-50.

Optional Readings:

Leacock, Richard. *A Search for the Feeling of Being There*. May 20, 1997.

Geiger, Jeffrey. "'Uncontrolled' Situations: Direct Cinema." In *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation*, 154-85. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2011.

Session 9:

New Theories of Sound in Documentary Cinema, Part 2:

Digital Sound and Observation at the Service of Documentary Anthropology

Full Screening (watch in advance):

Leviathan (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel, 2012, France and USA, 87m)

Clips in class: **Sweetgrass** (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash, 2009); **Manakamana** (Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, 2013); **El Mar La Mar** (Joshua Bonnetta and J.P. Sniadecki, 2017)

Required Readings:

Landesman, Ohad. "Here, There and Everywhere: *Leviathan* and the Digital Future of Observational Ethnography." *Visual Anthropology Review* 31.1, 2015: 12-19.

Optional Readings:

Kara, Selmin and Alanna Thain. "Sonic Ethnographies: *Leviathan* and New Materialisms in Documentary". In *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*. Holly Rogers, ed. London: Informa UK. 2014: 186-198.

MacDougall, David. "Beyond Observational Cinema" (1975). *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*. Ed. Jonathan Kahana. London: Oxford University Press, 2016. 565-570.

Session 10:

Advanced Thinking on the Animated Documentary:

From Resolving a Paradox Toward an Epistemological Expansion of Documentary Cinema

Full Screening (in advance):

Is the Man Who is Tall Happy? An Animated Conversation with Noam Chomsky (Michel Gondry, 2013, France, 88m)

Required Reading:

Honess Roe, Annabelle. "Absence, Excess and Epistemological Expansion: Towards a Framework for the Study of Animated Documentary." In *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6:3 (2011): 215 – 231.

Optional Reading:

Ehrlich, Nea. "Conflicting Realisms: Animated Documentaries in the Post-Truth Era," *Studies in Documentary Film* 15.1 (2021), pp. 20-40.

Sessions 11-13:

Will be devoted for class presentations and discussions.