

DRAFT

**Wesleyan University  
Graduate Liberal Studies Program**

**Documenting Reality: The History and Aesthetics of  
Non-Fiction Film**  
Fall 2015

**Instructor: Julian Cornell  
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## ***Course Objective and Description:***

The focus of this course is historical and contemporary film documentary practice, theory and aesthetics. The emphasis of this class will be how cinematic artists working with non-fiction narrative forms have constructed and depicted reality, history and truth. Students will be challenged to consider the nature and assumptions of the genre and the underlying theories of film and culture that have informed documentary practice. In this course students will be asked to reflect on the conceptual issues intrinsic to documentary, including such notions as the aesthetics of Realism as ideological position and creative method, the ethical responsibility of the filmmaker to the subjects being filmed, the film artist as socially engaged activist/advocate, the role of reflexivity in cinema and the way in which the documentary genre provides a unique way for an artist to represent their own, personal experiences. Three aesthetic modes in particular will be examined: documentary as genre, documentary as the representation of "reality," and documentary as a mode of reception. We will also examine the relationship between historical reality and historical event, and the way in which these films construct narratives of history and memory. In particular, the course will interrogate how documentary films position themselves in relation to the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. While there will be some discussion of film technique and form, the primary focus is on theories of film, narrative and non-fiction practice.

## ***Reading Assignments:***

The reading load for this course is quite heavy, though the number of reading assignments will vary from week to week. Even though lectures may not draw on the reading directly, it is imperative that you complete the readings in a timely manner. The variety and range of readings are deliberately designed to enhance your understanding of the films and the topic of each weekly class. Readings due for a given week are to be done *before* the class meets.

## ***Grading Policies:***

15% Attendance and Participation (Incl. On-Line Component, participation in Discussion Forum) 5% of Participation Grade includes In-Class Presentation.

15% Informal Short Essays

15% First Short Formal Essay

20% Second Short Formal Essay

35% Term Paper

## ***Required Texts:***

Stella Bruzzi *The New Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition New York: Routledge, 2006.

Barry Keith Grant *Documenting the Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2014

Betsy McLane *A New History of the Documentary Film: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* Bloomsbury

Academic, 2012. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ.

Press, 2001

Michael Renov (ed.), *Theorizing Documentary* New York: Routledge, 1993

Articles via Course Moodle Site (Links to articles from journals will be posted on the Moodle).

### *Recommended Texts:*

Erik Barnouw *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film: 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised Edition* New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993. Timothy Corrigan *A Short Guide to Writing About Film 9<sup>th</sup> Edition* New York: Longman 2014

## **Written Requirements:**

There will be two formal short essays and one longer analytic term paper. In addition, there will be informal brief papers assigned weekly. The student is responsible for completing four of twelve assignments.

### **Formal Essays:**

**3 – 4** page short paper on a “classic” documentary film. An assignment prompt will be provided by the instructor. Students will be provided with a list of ten films and will have the opportunity to choose one of three questions to answer regarding their chosen title. The short essay will be due in class **Week 4**.

**4 – 5** page short essay on an influential feature length documentary film. As with the first short paper students will be required to answer one of three questions from an assignment prompt provided by the instructor. Students may choose to write about any feature length animated documentary. The second short essay will be due **Week 7**.

**10 - 15** page term paper on a recent documentary (one released after 1990) on a topic of the student’s choosing. This longer essay will require an explicitly developed and stated thesis, bibliographic research, close analysis of the text(s) and an engagement with the theoretical background of documentary and realism as delineated in one or more of the assigned readings. While students will select their own topic and film(s), the thesis must engage the larger themes of the class.

### **Informal Essays:**

In addition to the formal essays, students will be asked to submit a series of informal “response” essays. These papers are to be at least **two, but no more than four, pages** in length. A separate hand out sheet will be distributed the first day of class and posted on the course’s Moodle site. These papers will be collected each week at the beginning of class. These are not meant to be scholarly essays or research papers – they are merely your personal reactions to the instructor’s question or suggestion. In other words, these are informal responses to issues raised by well-known documentary films. You may write in a casual, conversational voice if you choose. **They will not be graded. In order to receive full credit, you need only to complete each one in a conscientious and timely**

**manner.** It is your responsibility to keep up with the number of informal essays that you have completed.

**Students will be given twelve questions, from which they must choose five.** Which ones you select is entirely up to you, but you will **not** be allowed to make up any entries that you miss. Papers submitted late will not be accepted. They are due **only** on the date indicated on the hand out. Please plan accordingly. Each journal entry will be worth **19 points** towards the informal essay grade. Partial credit for inadequately completed papers will be awarded at the discretion of the instructor.

### **Individual Presentation:**

As part of the course requirements, you are obligated to present to the class an analysis of a documentary that you would consider to be significant, whether recent or released in the past. **This is not optional.** Beginning **Week 5** students will be asked to give a brief (10 minute) presentation on a film not screened in class and to explain how it exemplifies some aspect of documentary practice. If Student chooses to do so, the presentation may be related to their term paper research. Students will be asked to follow instructions provided on a presentation assignment prompt. In addition, **each student must provide a handout to the class that summarizes the main points** of your discussion.

### **Weekly Schedule:**

Week One:

#### **True Stories: An Introduction to Documentary**

Screening:

*True Stories* (David Byrne, 1986)

*Bob Roberts* (Tim Robbins, 1993)

Week Two:

#### **Ethnography**

Screening:

*Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty 1922) 79 min.

Excerpts:

*King Kong* (Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, 1933)

*Dead Birds* (Robert Gardner, 1965)

Readings:

1. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* Chapter One.
2. Ellis and McLane *New History of Documentary* p. 1 – 27
3. David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson “Form and Meaning” in *Film Art: 6<sup>th</sup> Edition* New York: McGraw Hill, 2001, p. 46 – 49
4. William Rothman “Filmmaker as Hunter” in Barry Keith Grant *Documenting the Documentary*, pp. 23 – 39.
5. Michael Renov “Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction Film” in Renov, Chapter One, p. 1 – 11.

Week Three:

**Mediating Reality**

Screening:

*Man With A Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929) 54 min.

Excerpt:

*Cinema Vérité: Defining the Moment* (Ron Wintonick, 1999)

Readings:

1. Nichols, Chapter Two
2. Seth Feldman "Peace Between Man and Machine" in Grant, p. 40 – 54.
3. Ellis and McLane, p. 27 – 44.
4. Michael Renov "Towards a Poetics of the Documentary" in Renov, Chapter Two, p. 12 - 36
5. Bruzzi, Part One, p. 1 - 72.

Week Four:

**Direct Cinema**

Screening:

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

Excerpt:

*Primary* (Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, 1960)

*A Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1960)

Readings:

1. Nichols, Chapter Three.
2. Ellis & McLane, p. 208 - 227.
3. Jeanne Hall "Don't You Ever Just Watch" in Grant, p. 223 – 238.
4. Barry Keith Grant "Ethnography in the First Person" in Grant, p. 238 – 253.
5. Bruzzi, Part Two, p. 73 - 120.

Week Five:

**Social Justice**

Screening:

*Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris 1987) 105 min.

Readings:

1. Nichols, Chapter Seven
2. Linda Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary," in Grant, p. 379 – 396.
3. Ellis & McLane, p. 258 – 292.
4. Bruzzi, Part Two, p. 120 - 152.

Week Six:

**Compilation Films**

Screening:

*The Atomic Café* (Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty, 1982) 92 min.

Readings:

1. Nichols Chapter Six
2. Ellis & McLane, p. 293 – 325.

3. Jim Leach "Poetics of Propaganda" in Grant, p. 154 – 170.
4. Bruzzi, Part Three, p. 153 - 185.

Week Seven:

**Poetic Monologues**

Screening:

*Baraka* (Ron Fricke, 1992)

Excerpt:

*Koyaanisqatsi* (Godfrey Reggio, 1983)

Readings:

1. Ellis & McLane, p. 326 – 341.
2. Michael Dempsey, "Quatsi Means Life: The Films of Godfrey Reggio," *Film Quarterly*, 42 (Spring 1989): p. 2-12
3. Bart Testa "Seeing With Experimental Eyes" in Grant, p. 269 – 285.
4. Trinh T. Minh – Ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning," in Renov, Chapter Five, p. 90 – 107.

Week Eight:

**History, Memory, Mourning**

Screening:

*4 Little Girls* (Spike Lee, 1997) 102 min.

*Night and Fog* (Alain Renais, 1955)

Readings:

1. Ellis & McLane, p. 77 – 104.
2. Sally Flitterman Lewis "Documenting The Ineffable" in Grant, p. 204 – 222.
3. Sheila Petty "Silence and It's Opposite" in Grant, p. 416 – 428.
4. Philip Rosen, "Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of some Historical Concepts," in Renov, Chapter Four p. 58 - 89

Week Nine:

**Satire**

Screening:

*Roger and Me* (Michael Moore, 1989) 91 min.

*Supersize Me* (Morgan Spurlock, 2005)

Readings:

1. Nichols, Chapter Four and Five
2. Matthew Bernstein "Documentaphobia and Mixed Modes" in Grant, p. 397 – 415.
3. Paul Arthur "Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)," in Renov, Chapter Six, p. 108-134.
4. Bruzzi, Part Three, p. 185 - 218.

Week Ten:

**Political Films**

Screening:

*The Trials of Henry Kissinger* (Eugene Jarecki, 2002) 89 min.

Readings:

1. Ellis & McLane, p. 105 – 119.

2. Thomas Waugh "Men Cannot Act Before the Camera..." in Grant, p.136 – 153.
3. Lucy Fisher "Documentary Film and the Discourse of Hysterical/Historical Narrative" in Grant, p. 333 – 343.
4. Robert Stam "The Two Avant-Gardes" in Grant, p. 254 – 269.

Week Eleven: November 18<sup>th</sup>

**Concert & Performance Films**

Screening:

*U2: Rattle and Hum* (Phil Joanou, 1988) 99 min.

Readings:

1. Ellis & McLane, p. 227 – 258.
2. Ann-Louise Shapiro and Jill Godmilow "How Real is the Real in Documentary Film" available on-line at:  
<http://www.nd.edu/~jgodmilo/reality.html>
3. Dirk Eitzen, "When Is a Documentary? Documentary as a Mode of Reception," *Cinema Journal*, 35: 1 (1995), pp. 81-102
4. Caryl Flinn "Containing Fire" in Grant, p. 429 – 445.
5. Bruzzi, Part Four, p. 219 - 251.

Week Twelve:

**Essay Films**

Screening:

*Sans Soleil* (Chris Marker, 1982) 100 min.

Readings:

1. Joanne Hershfeld "Paradise Regained" in Grant, p. 55 – 69.
2. Dianne Scheinman "The Dialogic Imagination of Jean Rouch" in Grant, p.188 – 203.
3. Scott MacDonald "The Filmmaker as Global Circumnavigator" in Grant, p. 360 – 378.
4. William Guynn "The Art of National Projection" in Grant, p. 83 – 98.
5. Jeffrey Ruoff "A Bastard Union of Several Forms" in Grant, p. 286 – 301.