

CFV 372

History of Documentary

Fall 2017



Instructor: Professor Roxanne Samer

Office Hours: Mondays, 3-4:30; Tuesdays, 2:30-4, and Thursdays, 4:30-5:30
214 LSH; samerrox@gvsu.edu

**Class Times
& Location:** Mondays & Wednesdays, 1:00-2:50pm, 154 LSH

Required Books: Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd Edition (Indiana University Press, 2010).

Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, editors, *Documenting the Documentary* (Wayne State University Press, 2014).

Greg Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011).

Other required reading will be posted on Blackboard.

Course Description: This course offers an historical survey of documentary film with a focus on the United States. We will work to understand the emergence of documentary as a distinct mode of filmmaking that nonetheless interacts freely with other modes of production. We will explore the varied social and political functions of documentary, its many modes, and how it has adapted to changes in technology and historical contexts.

Learning objectives:

This course offers student the opportunity to learn and/or practice:

1. The history of documentary production and reception.
2. The theoretical and ethical issues related to documentary production, notably truth claims and ethics associated with representing the lives of real people.
3. How documentary technique evolved as technology changed.
4. The economic determinants of documentary production, distribution and exhibition.
5. The constructed nature of reality-based production including docudrama and reality television.
6. Critical viewing, writing and speaking skills.

Course Requirements: Course assignments will include an oral presentation, a midterm essay exam, a proposal for a documentary, and a final paper. The class format consists of lecture, student presentations, screenings, and discussions. Students are responsible for everything that goes on in the class. Late assignments will be marked down one third of a letter grade for each day late. Your grades are weighted as follows.

Presentation (20%): Working in pairs, you will give a presentation (approximately 15 to 20 minutes) on an assigned article. Presentations will include a concise PowerPoint and a handout for the class that summarizes the main points of the assigned article. A filmic example that exemplifies a main point of the article is also required.

Midterm Exam (20%): On October 4th you will complete an in-class essay exam. It will cover the films and readings from the first six weeks of class. More details forthcoming.

Documentary Proposal (25%): On November 20th you will submit a proposal of 1500-2000 words for the making of a documentary film, series, or online project. In addition to creating a vision for a documentary through the writing of all typical components of a documentary proposal, you will be asked to demonstrate your understanding of course content by delineating what documentary mode you will be working in and why.

Final Paper (25%): On December 12th you will submit a 1500-word paper on a documentary film of the last few years, its historical lineages, and its contribution to contemporary documentary filmmaking. We will democratically select a list of possible films as a class that you can choose to write about for this final paper.

Attendance and Participation (10%): You are expected to attend every class meeting on time. Please come prepared to discuss the assigned readings. Good class participation involves contributing to the ongoing discussion in an informed manner, being attentive to that conversation, and being respectful of the participants in it. Your grade will be lowered after two absences. Three tardies equals one absence.

Grading: In general, my criteria for grading are: A represents outstanding writing including original thought, ability to synthesize from diverse sources and familiarity with course material. B represents good writing with ability to synthesize and familiarity with course material. C represents adequate writing and familiarity with course material.

While I am happy to discuss your grade, my policy is that you must wait 24 hours after receiving a graded assignment back before approaching me with questions or concerns.

Classroom etiquette: Common courtesies are expected. Be punctual. Do not enter the room when an oral presentation is in progress. Do not leave the classroom while class is in session. Students may use laptop computers and tablets to take notes. However, all phones must be put away for the duration of the class. Should students begin to abuse their laptop privileges, I will ban all devices from the classroom. Finally, participate in classroom discussion in ways that are productive and respectful to others.

Academic Honesty: You are responsible for your own learning, which includes your commitment to values such as individual integrity and respect for the work of others in the learning community. All of the work you turn in for a grade in CFV 372 must be your own work, unique to you, prepared for this class. Academic dishonesty (including cheating and plagiarism) will not be tolerated and will result in failure on the assignment as the minimum penalty. Please see me if you have any questions about how to cite your sources using MLA or Chicago style *before* you submit your papers.

DSR: Students who have special needs because of learning, physical or other disability should contact Disability Support Resources (DSR) at 616-331-2490 at the beginning of the semester to make the necessary arrangements. Furthermore, if you have a disability and think you will need assistance evacuating this classroom and/or building in an emergency situation, please make me aware so I can develop a plan to assist you.

In case of fire, immediately proceed to the nearest exit during a fire alarm. Do not use elevators. More information is available on the University's emergency website located at <http://www.gvsu.edu/emergency>. **Additional student resources:**

LGBT Resource Center
1161 Kirkhof Center
616-331-2530; lgbtcenter@gvsu.edu
<https://www.gvsu.edu/lgbtrc/>

Counseling Center
204 Student Services Building (STU)
616-331-3266; gvcounsel@gvsu.edu
<http://www.gvsu.edu/counsel/>

Proposed Schedule:

I reserve the right to make changes as needed.

Week 1 Aug. 28, 30	Introduction: Documenting Reality Screening: <i>Grizzly Man</i> (Herzog, 2005) Reading: Nichols, Chapter 3, and Johnson, "You Must Never
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Listen to This: Lessons on Sound, Cinema, and Mortality from Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*"(G&S, Chapter 30)

Sept. 4

No Class – Labor Day

Week 2
September 6

In the Beginning
Screening: Lumière actualities
Reading: Nichols, Chapters 4 & 5

Week 3
Sept. 11, 13

Defining Documentary
Screening: *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922), *Rain* (Ivens, 1929)
Reading: Nichols, Chapter 1, and Rothman, "The Filmmaker as Hunter: Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (G&S, Chapter 1)

Week 4
Sept. 18, 20

European Avant-Garde
Screening: *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929)
Reading: Vertov, "WE: A Variant on a Manifesto" (Blackboard); and Feldman, "'Peace Between Man and Machine': Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*" (G&S, Chapter 2)

Week 5
Sept. 25, 27

Fascism, Sound, and Government Sponsored Documentary
Screening: *Triumph of the Will* (Riefenstahl, 1935)
Reading: Tomasulo, "The Mass Psychology of Fascist Cinema: Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*" (G&S, Chapter 6)

Week 6
October 2

World War II Documentary
Screening: *Listen to Britain* (Jennings, 1942), *Night and Fog* (Resnais, 1955)
Reading: Leach, "The Poetics of Propaganda: Humphrey Jennings and *Listen to Britain*," and Flitterman-Lewis, "Documenting the Ineffable: Terror and Memory in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*" (G&S Chapters 9 & 12)

October 4

Midterm Exam October 4 – exam book required

Week 7
Oct. 9, 11

Cinema Verité & Direct Cinema
Screening: *Don't Look Back* (Pennebaker, 1967)
Reading: Hall, "'Don't You Ever Just Watch?': American Cinema Verité and *Don't Look Back*" (G&S, Chapter 14)

Week 8
Oct. 16, 18

Observational Documentary
Screening: *Grey Gardens* (Albert and David Maysles, 1975)
Reading: Nichols, Chapters 2 & 7, and Rosenthal, "Ellen Hovde: An Interview" (Blackboard)

- Week 9
Oct. 23, 25
- Avant-Garde Documentary Birth Films
Screening: *The Private Life of a Cat* (Deren and Hammid, 1944), *Window Water Baby Moving* (Brakhage, 1959), and *Misconception* (Keller, 1977)
Reading: Nichols, Chapter 6; Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality" (Blackboard); and Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision" (Blackboard)
- October 27
- Last day to withdraw with "W"**
- Week 10
Oct. 30, Nov. 1
- Advocacy Documentary in Women's and Gay Liberation
Screening: *Word Is Out* (Mariposa Film Group, 1977) and *Inside Women Inside* (Christine Choy and Cynthia Maurizio, 1978)
Reading: Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic*
- Week 11
November 6
- Performative Documentary
Screening: *Tongues Untied* (Riggs, 1989)
Reading: Mercer, "Black Is...Black Ain't" (Blackboard), and Petty, "Silence and Its Opposite: Expressions of Race in *Tongues Untied*" (G&S, Chapter 25)
- November 8
- No Class – Professor Samer Travelling to American Studies Association Conference in Chicago**
- Week 12
Nov. 13, 15
- Reflexive Documentary
Screening: *The Ties That Bind* (Friedrich, 1984) and *Rules of the Road* (Friedrich, 1993)
Reading: Friedrich, "Does Radical Content Deserve Radical Form?" (Blackboard), and MacDonald, "Su Friedrich: *The Ties That Bind*" (Blackboard)
- Week 13
November 20
- Docudrama
Screening: Episode 4 of *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story* (2016)
Reading: Sobchack, "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience" (Blackboard)
Documentary Proposal Due November 20
- November 22
- No Class – Thanksgiving Recess**

Week 14
Nov. 27, 29 Mockumentary
Screening: *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye, 1996)
Reading: Reid-Pharr, "Makes Me Feel Mighty Real: *The Watermelon Woman* and the Critique of Black Visuality" (Blackboard), and Lebow, "Faking What? Making a Mockery of Documentary" (Blackboard)

Week 15
Dec. 4, 6 YouTube
Screening: YouTube selections
Reading: Horak, "Trans on YouTube" (Blackboard), and Malkowski, "Streaming Death: The Politics of Dying on YouTube" (Blackboard)

December 12 **Final Paper Due December 12 at 2pm**

Some Rules for Writing about Film:

1. Italicize film titles. The first time only that you mention a film, identify the director and year of release using the following format: *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942). You may ignore this rule if the director or date is part of your sentence: "In *Casablanca* (1942), Michael Curtiz..."
2. Use the present tense to describe events in a film. Cinematic events don't have a past they exist in a "perpetual present."
3. Use character names, not actor names. Make sure the character names are accurate and spelled correctly. If you want to include the actor's name, you may incorporate it in the sentence, typically in parenthesis. "Rick (played by Humphrey Bogart) is the reluctant hero of the story."
4. Do not review the film. Remember that you are providing filmic evidence to demonstrate your thesis, not reviewing the film. Avoid plot synopsis unless it is essential to your point.
5. Be direct in your descriptions using proper film terminology. Write about the film itself rather than your reaction to it. Avoid using first person and generalizations, such as, "I thought this was a really great scene." Instead, describe why it is effective: "The scene reflects the inner state of the heroine through its use of low camera angles and jarring sound effects."
6. Use MLA or Chicago style for any citations and include the film as the primary text under Works Cited.

Visit the Meijer Center for Writing & Michigan Authors (120 Lake Ontario Hall) for additional assistance with your writing assignments; www.gvsu.edu/wc.