Comm 158: Film

Documentary Film: From Nanook to YouTube

COMM 158, SAMPLE SYLLABUS
Semester + Year, Instructor: name
Section #: days and hours of meeting, building name + ##
Office Hours: time and time
Phone: ###-####
E-mail: name@stmrys-ca.edu
Course blog: www.[name].wordpress.com

Course Description
This course will look at the history of non-fiction film and media beginning with Robert Flaherty’s landmark Nanook of the North and concluding with recent developments such as reality TV, animated docs, and web-based documentary. In between, we will examine Social & Political Documentaries, the Russian Revolution and Kino-Eye, Cinéma Vérité and the rise of the Rock n’ Roll Doc, the Holocaust and representation, the essay film, and performance. Come prepared to think about how we see the “real world” of everyday life through film, television, social media, and the Internet. At the conclusion of the course, students will have a working knowledge of the theory and history of documentary media and will have completed a short documentary project that incorporates creative production and research on topics of interest in historical or contemporary contexts.

“It’s a true story. I was in my early twenties or thereabouts - and at that time, of course, being a young intellectual, I wanted desperately to get away, see something different, throw myself into something practical, something physical, in the country say, or at the sea. One day, I was on a small boat, with a few people from a family of fishermen in a small port. At that time, Brittany was not industrialized as it is now. There were no trawlers. The fisherman went out in his frail craft at his own risk. It was this risk, this danger, that I loved to share. But it wasn’t all danger and excitement - there were also fine days. One day, then, as we were waiting for the moment to pull in the nets, an individual known as Petit-Jean, that’s what we called him - like all his family, he died very young from tuberculosis, which at that time was a constant threat to the whole of that social class - this Petit-Jean pointed out to me something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small can, a sardine can. It floated there in the sun, a witness to the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me - You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you!”

-Jacques Lacan. 1964
Required Texts

1. *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd Edition by Bill Nichols (Indiana UP, 2001)
5. *Night Mail* by Scott Anthony (BFI Film Classics, 2007)
6. *Civilisation* by Jonathan Conlin (BFI TV Classics, 2009)
7. *Shoah* by Sue Vice (BFI Film Classics, 2011)

Recommended Texts


Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course students will be able to:

- Understand and discuss the key works and ideas that have developed within the field of documentary media studies.
- Critique film and media texts by artists and makers using critical, historical, and theoretical frameworks drawn from class readings, discussions, and screenings.
- Apply critical, historical, and theoretical frameworks examined throughout the course to film and media texts not covered in class.
- Demonstrate an ability to read critically, write clearly, and research and argue effectively as the foundational skills upon which documentary media studies depend.
- Use creative production techniques at an introductory level of proficiency to write, shoot, and edit a documentary video or new media project.

Course Requirements

**Class/Screening Attendance.** Students are required to attend all class/screening sessions. Absences due to sickness must be documented in writing. More than two unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the course.

**Discussion Questions.** Students are expected to complete each reading assignment prior to class time and to formulate one substantive question for presentation during class discussion.

**Blog.** Students must check the course blog – comm158.org – between class sessions for new information pertaining to class discussion and readings.
Midterm Critical Essay. Students will complete a take-home midterm exam in the form of a critical essay responding to a topic in documentary media studies (determined by the instructor) drawn from class lectures, discussions, readings, assignments, handouts, and screenings.

Critique Session. Students will present their final project as a work-in-progress in class. Feedback from the critique sessions should provide students with ideas and techniques for improving their projects. Included in these sessions will be more general discussion of advanced techniques in production and the artistic and creative base from which documentary gains the title given it by John Grierson, “the creative treatment of reality.”

Final Project and Write-up. Students will complete a documentary video or new media project addressing concepts and media covered in the course that focuses on documentary media history, theory, or practice in relation to a topic of current interest to the field.

Grade Breakdown
Attendance/Blog (20%), Midterm Essay Exam (25%), Critique Session Presentation (20%), Final Project (35%).

Grading Standards
“C” indicates an adequate command of the substantive material of the course as demonstrated through class participation and satisfactory completion of class assignments and papers.

“B” indicates significantly above average engagement with the course and its requirements.

“A” indicates mastery of course material and represents a sophisticated analysis or creative treatment of the ideas and materials covered in the course.

“D” indicates that less than satisfactory work has been accomplished.

“F” indicates a failure to meet the minimum requirements for the course.

Course Logistics
Incompletes or Missing Papers/Projects. No late assignments or projects will be accepted for any reason except for a documented medical emergency. Incompletes will be determined on a case-by-case basis. Midterm exam essays and final papers/projects are due at the beginning of class on the due date.

Academic Integrity. Saint Mary’s College expects the highest standards of academic excellence and ethical performance from students. It is particularly important that you are aware of and avoid plagiarism, cheating on exams, submitting a paper to more than one instructor, or submitting a paper authored by anyone other than yourself. Violations of this policy will result in a failing grade and be reported to the Office of Advising. If you have any doubts or questions about these policies, consult the student handbook and/or confer with the professor. The MLA Handbook provides concise advice on how to avoid plagiarism – read chapter 2.

Student Disability Services. Student Disability Services extends reasonable and appropriate accommodations that take into account the context of the course and its essential elements for individuals with qualifying disabilities. Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the Student Disability Services Office at (925) 631-4358 to set up a confidential appointment to discuss accommodation, policies, guidelines and available services. Additional information
regarding the services available may be found at the following address on the Saint Mary’s website: http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/sds

Class Schedule

UNIT I: HISTORY AND THEORY OF THE DOCUMENTARY

Week 1

31 August: What is Documentary?
View: Short Films, Lumiere Brothers, 1896-1897 (France)
      Rain, Joris Ivens, 1929 (Belgium)
      The Fog of War, Errol Morris, 2003 (USA)

Week 2

7 September: Documentary Genres and History
View: Nanook of the North, Robert Flaherty, 1922 (USA)
      Man with a Movie Camera, Dziga Vertov, 1929 (USSR)
Read: Patricia Aufderheide, Documentary Film
      Anthony Q. Artis, Shut Up and Shoot, chapter 1
Lab: Preproduction

Week 3

14 September: Representation, Indexicality, and the Real
View: Waltz with Bashir, Ari Folman, 2008 (Israel)
Read: Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida
      Anthony Q. Artis, Shut Up and Shoot, chapter 2
Lab: Location Planning

Week 4

21 September: Questions of Documentary I - Definitions, Ethics, and Voice
View: Triumph of the Will, Leni Riefenstahl, 1935 (Germany)
      Grizzly Man, Werner Herzog, 2005 (USA)
Read: Bill Nichols, Introduction to Documentary, introduction, chapters 1 through 3
      Anthony Q. Artis, Shut Up and Shoot, chapter 3
Lab: Image Control and Camera Work

Week 5

28 September: Questions of Documentary II - Persuasion, Origins, and Modes I
View: Lonely Boy, Wolf Koenig & Roman Kroitor, 1962 (Canada)
      Harlan County USA, Barbara Kopple, 1976 (USA)
Read: Bill Nichols, Introduction to Documentary, chapters 4 through 6
      Anthony Q. Artis, Shut Up and Shoot, chapter 4
Lab: Lighting

Week 6

5 October: Questions of Documentary III - Modes II and Social/Political Issues
View: Painters Painting, Emile de Antonio, 1972 (USA)
      Exit through the Gift Shop, Banksy, 2010 (UK)
Read: Bill Nichols, Introduction to Documentary, chapters 7 through 9
Anthony Q. Artis, *Shut Up and Shoot*, chapter 5

Lab: Sound Recording

Due: TAKE-HOME MIDTERM ESSAY PROMPT

UNIT II: DOCUMENTARY CASE STUDIES

**Week 7**

12 October: *Night Mail and the British Documentary Movement*

View: *Night Mail*, Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1935 (UK)
*Listen to Britain*, Humphrey Jennings, 1942 (UK)
*The Up Series*, Michael Apted, 1964-2005 (UK)

Read: Scott Anthony, *Night Mail*
Anthony Q. Artis, *Shut Up and Shoot*, chapter 6

Lab: Composition and Coverage
Due: MIDTERM CRITICAL ESSAY (submitted electronically via email)

**Week 8**

19 October: *Civilisation and the Documentary Episteme*

View: *Civilisation*, Kenneth Clark, BBC, 1969 (UK)
*The Ascent of Man*, Jacob Bronowski, BBC, 1972 (UK)
*Connections*, James Burke, BBC, 1976 (UK)

Read: Jonathan Conlin, *Civilisation*
Anthony Q. Artis, *Shut Up and Shoot*, chapter 7

Lab: Interview Preparation
Due: SIGN UP FOR CRITIQUE SESSIONS + PROJECT PROPOSALS

**Week 9**

26 October: *Shoah and Representations of the Holocaust*

View: *Night and Fog*, Alain Resnais, 1955 (France)
*Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann, 1985 (France)
*A Film Unfinished*, Yael Hersonski, 2011 (Israel)

Read: Sue Vice, *Shoah*
Anthony Q. Artis, *Shut Up and Shoot*, chapter 8

Lab: Conducting Interviews

UNIT III: THE ESSAY FILM

**Week 10**

2 November: *From Montaigne, After Marker*

View: *Sans Soleil*, Chris Marker, 1984 (France)
*The Gleaners and I*, Agnes Varda, 2000 (France)

Read: Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, introduction, chapters 1 and 2
Anthony Q. Artis, *Shut Up and Shoot*, chapter 9

Lab: Postproduction

**Week 11**

9 November: *Interview, Travel, Diary*

View: *Forest of Bliss*, Robert Gardner, 1985 (USA)
*I Love $*, Johan van der Keuken, 1986 (Holland)
Read: Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, chapters 3 through 5
Due: CRITIQUE SESSION 1

**Week 12**

16 November: Events and Refractive Cinema
View: *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies under America*, Craig Baldwin, 1991 (USA)
*Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, Johan Grimonprez, 1997 (Belgium)
Read: Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, chapters 6 and 7
Due: CRITIQUE SESSION 2

**Week 13**

23 November: NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY

UNIT IV: REALITY TV, DIGITAL DOCS, AND CONTEMPORARY NON-FICTION MEDIA

**Week 14**

30 November: Reality TV
View: *Bus 174*, José Padilha & Felipe Lacerda, 2002 (Brazil)
Read: B. Ruby Rich, “Documentary Disciplines” (pdf)
Amy Villarejo, “Bus 174” (pdf)
Patricia White, “Cinema Solidarity” (pdf)
Due: CRITIQUE SESSION 3

**Week 15**

7 December: Digital Docs
View: *Bumming in Beijing – The Last Dreamers*, Wu Wenguang, 1990 (China)
Read: Faye Ginsburg “Rethinking Documentary” (pdf)
Chris Berry “Wu Wenguang” (pdf)
Wu Wenguang “DV” (pdf)
Due: CRITIQUE SESSION 4

**Week 16**

14 December: Final Exam Session – 6:00 PM
Due: FINAL PROJECTS + WRITE-UPS
Guides to Research, Writing, and Production in Media Studies

(Preferred editions are listed, but any edition will work – earlier editions of many of these books can be found cheap as used copies on Amazon).

Research and Writing

A Short Guide to Writing about Film, 8th Ed. by Timothy Corrigan (Pearson, 2012)

How to Do Media and Cultural Studies, 2nd Ed. by Jane Stokes (Sage, 2012)

Film and Video Production

Video Basics by Herb Zettl (Cengage/Wadsworth, 2012)


Lighting and Editing

Painting With Light by John Alton (University of California Press, 2013)

The Technique of Film Editing, 2nd Ed. by Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar (Focal, 2009)

In the Blink of an Eye, 2nd Ed. by Walter Murch (Silman-James, 2001)

Screenwriting

Writing in Pictures: Screenwriting Made (Mostly) Painless by Joseph McBride (Vintage, 2012)

Screenplay by Syd Field (Delta, 2005)

Design and New Media

The Non-Designer’s Design Book, 3rd Ed. by Robin Williams (Peachpit Press, 2008)

Visual Quickstart Guides (Peachpit Press) [on specific software applications and hardware]

Lynda.com (available through SMC) [on specific software applications and hardware]