Intervening Images: The Task of Non-fiction Film in a Changing World
KHC CM 104

Spring 2015
Monday/Wednesday; room tbd

Professor Roy Grundmann, Dept. of Film and Television
Office Location: 640 Commonwealth Avenue; Room 104
Office Hours:

Course Description

Introduction:
This course provides an introduction to non-fiction film. We study a selection of documentaries—the list includes classics that have historical significance but also more recent examples about highly contemporary issues—and we try to understand what documentaries are and what they “do.” The aim of the course is to teach students to develop an understanding of how non-fiction films function both as aesthetic works of art that have stories to tell and use certain rhetorical approaches to tell them and as documents of reality that ultimately seek to intervene in the very reality they depict.

Course Objectives: The course has two pedagogical objectives:
(1) It seeks to furnish students with the basic methods of how to read films in ways that go beyond the discussion of surface impressions and that link up with the critical analysis of texts in a liberal arts context. For this purpose, we attend to questions of film technology and film form, and we explore traditions of conventions of how documentaries present their stories.
(2) It seeks to introduce students to non-fiction film as an art form that documents problems and crises of various kinds and that, through its rhetorical strategies, raises social awareness, champions social justice, and aims to bring about social change. To achieve this goal, we familiarize ourselves with certain questions and debates that are specific to non-fiction films as documents and acts of intervention. Topics include: concepts of truth; reality vs. realism; the implications of aesthetic mediation; the nature of rhetoric; documentary vs. fiction; and documentary vs. propaganda. In this sense, the course combines the basic methodologies of a liberal arts mode of inquiry—What questions do I ask? How do I make judgments?—with a more closely defined agenda of analyzing films and, specifically, non-fiction films.

Course Contents:
cinematic examples for the course are taken from subject areas central to our lives: nature/ecology, labor/economy, violence/war, and art. Films in these categories will be examined with regard to their formal and aesthetic means and how they build an argument through various epistemological and rhetorical strategies.

Course Structure: The course is divided into two sessions a week. The Monday session is devoted to introducing and screening the film for the weekly topic. The Wednesday session is comprised of lecture and discussion of film and readings.
Attendance

Regular attendance at both the weekly cinemathique sessions and the lecture/discussion sessions is mandatory. While some of the film examples are also available on DVD or via streaming, the point of the course is to give students the opportunity to experience these films together in a classroom setting. Attendance will be monitored at the beginning of class. Anyone who is not present at the time when attendance is taken will be marked as absent for the day. This mark will not be changed to "late," if the student shows up a few minutes after the taking of attendance by the instructor. This needs to be taken into consideration by anyone, whose scheduling conflicts may not permit them to get to class on time! Anyone with more than two unexcused absences over the course of the semester jeopardizes the attendance part of the grade.

Additional Components:
(1) To get a grounding in the basic formal properties of documentary films and to learn about the basic outlines of a documentary tradition, the course will begin with certain classics of the genre. We will then turn to more contemporary examples of documentaries that exemplify the wealth of forms and topics exhibited by the genre today.
(2) To underscore its emphasis on documentaries' goal to address viewers in effective ways and to get them “involved,” the course asks students to slip into the role of documentarians who develop and pitch a documentary to the course, which acts as a fictional producer asked to give feedback. Presentations can be in teams of two or three. We will also attempt to invite a selection of actual documentary producers and filmmakers to class to share their experiences—this aspect is contingent on the availability of the people in question.

Summary of Course Objectives
- Students are introduced to the basic formal components of film
- Students are introduced to the specifics of non-fiction films, their various modes of production and their formal components
- Students learn to recognize and analyze the double nature of non-fiction films as documents and rhetorical constructs that present arguments
- Students are introduced to non-fiction films as tools for documenting social injustice and catalyzing social change
- Students learn to recognize and analyze a range of subcategories of non-fiction films, such as the exposé, the essay film, the autobiographical film, etc.
- Students acquire the skills to conduct research and to present their findings in clearly structured and well composed oral and written arguments

Required Text

[This is a new textbook that provides a basic introduction to non-fiction film.]
Assignments and Grading
- 1. response paper (500 words): 5%
- 2. response paper (700 words): 5%
- Midterm essay (guided essay question, take home format) (1800 words): 25%
- Pitching of documentary project (in-class presentation): 15%
- Final paper (individualized argument) (2100 words): 35%
- Class participation: 15%

Plagiarism:
"Plagiarism is the act of representing someone else's creative and/or academic work as your own, in full or in part. It can be an act of commission, in which one intentionally appropriates the words, pictures or ideas of another, or it can be an act of omission, in which one fails to acknowledge/document/give credit to the source, creator and/or the copyright owner of those words, pictures or ideas. Any fabrication of materials, quotes or sources, other than those created in a work of fiction, is also plagiarism. Plagiarism is the most serious academic offense that you can commit and can result in probation, suspension, or expulsion.”

Use of lap tops, cell phones, and other electronic devices prohibited in class:
While some of you may consider lap tops instrumental for note taking, I consider the introduction of an interface between you and me in the class room alienating and counterproductive. If lap tops are used in class, I am unable to tell whether students pay attention to lectures and class discussion or to the multiple functions of their lap tops. The use of lap tops in my classes thus violates my notion of a productive oral communication scenario that involves the attention and commitment of all students for the duration of the class. The prohibition of cell phones and i-phones should be self-explanatory.
Course Outline and Readings

Week 1: The Concept of Truth
- What is the difference between a fiction film and a non-fiction film?
- What is the relation between non-fiction film and the concepts of truth and authenticity?
- Terms: fiction, truth, reality, the unpredictability of the real, the unreliability of the camera

Screening: Grizzly Man (2005; Werner Herzog dir.)
Reading: Spence and Navarro, Crafting Truth, “Introduction,” pp. 1-8

Week 2: Documentary Authenticity, Part I
- What is the difference between actuality and its representation?
- Can a picture say more than it shows?
- Terms: rhetoric, aesthetics, construction of reality, manipulation, camera shots, camera takes, angles

Screening: From the Other Side (2002; Chantal Akerman)
Reading: Spence and Navarro, Chapter 1, “Authenticity,” pp. 11-35
Assignment: Write 1st response paper. Due Week 3 on day of class.

Week 3: Documentary Authenticity, Part II
- What is the relation between the documentary filmmaker and reality?
- How does a filmmaker negotiate the mandate for documenting truth with taking a position in relation to this truth?
- Terms: the profilmic, the filmic, the role of the documentarian, on-camera interviews; voice-over narration

Screening: Bowling for Columbine (2002; Michael Moore)
Reading: Spence and Navarro, Ch. 9, “The Profilmic,” pp. 213-238.
Week 4: Re/presenting Evidence, Part I
- What role do media and their technologies play in the presentation of evidence?
- What is the relation between a documentary’s contents, its dissemination, and its audience(s)?
- Terms: contexts for filming and showing documentary footage; organizing facts for representation; spectatorship

Screening: Control Room (2004; Jehane Noujaim)


Assignment: Write 2nd response paper. Due Week 5 on day of class.

Week 5: Re/presenting Evidence, Part II
- What is the epistemological status of photographic evidence?
- Can a documentary question its own methods?
- Terms: epistemology, evidence, methods of factfinding, doubt, critical self-reflection

Screening: Standard Operating Procedure (2008; Erroll Morris dir.)

Reading: same as last week

Week 6: The Concept of Authority, Part I
- The status of photographic evidence revisited
- What happens when documentary subjects become participants?
- Terms: directorial control; the sharing of authority; improvisation; the hand-held camera; subtitling

Screening: Born into Brothels (2004; Zana Briski, Ross Kauffman)


Assignment: Midterm essay questions handed out in class. Essays due week 7 on day of class.
Week 7:  The Concept of Authority, Part II
- How do documentaries achieve narrative authority?
- How can documentaries place current issues in larger historical and political frameworks?
- Terms: found footage, camera movement, logical coherence, rhetorical power, psychological effectiveness

Screening: When the Levees Broke, Part I (2006; Spike Lee)
(Assignment: View Part II individually at Media Center)


Week 8:  The Concept of Responsibility, Part I
- What is the relation between the filmmaker and his/her subjects?
- What are the various ways in which sound can function in documentaries?
  Terms: sound, speech, music, noise; the long take; static shots; directed vs. “directionless” documentation

Screening: Sweetgrass (2009; Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Ilisa Barbash dirs.)
The Profit Motif and the Whispering Wind (2010, John Gianvito)

Reading: Spence and Navarro, Chapter 10, “Sounds” (Co-authored with Carl Lewis), pp. 239-264.

Week 9:  The Concept of Responsibility, Part II
- How does the documentary form serve interest groups as a tool to present their position?
- What is the difference between a documentary and a non-fiction essay?
- What constitutes the performative dimension of the filmmaker/video artist?
  Terms: poetry; poetic/associative presentation; voice-over narration; subjectivity, partisanship

Screening: United in Anger (2012; Jim Hubbard/Sarah Schulman)
Tongues Untied (1990; Marlon Riggs)


Assignment: Pitch a Documentary Project. Presentations in Weeks 10/11 of class.
Week 10: The Concept of Responsibility, Part III
- How can a documentary probe traumatic incidents?
- How should a documentary handle interviewing and representing victims who have suffered traumatic injury?
Terms: trauma, talking-head interview; close-up

Screening: The Invisible War (2012; Kirby Dick dir.)
Reading: same as last week

Presentations: Students Pitch Documentary Projects

Week 11: Document and Argument, Part I
- What are the specific challenges for documentaries aiming to represent large scale historical trauma?
- What should be shown and what should not be shown?
- What are the possibilities and limitations of talking head interviews?
Terms: history; historical archives; history as narrative; the Holocaust

Screening: Night and Fog (1955; Alain Resnais dir.)
Shoah (1985; Claude Lanzman) (excerpt)

Reading: Spence and Navarro, Chapter 5, “Argument,” pp. 113-134.

Presentations (II): Students Pitch Documentary Projects

Preparation: Students begin to formulate ideas for final paper (individual argument), discuss them with me via email and in office hours.

Week 12: Document and Argument, Part II
- How do documentaries achieve complexity through balance?
Terms: talking-head interviews; narrative coherence; historical argument

Screening: The Sorrow and the Pity (1969; Marcel Ophuls)
(Assignment: view second half of the film individually at Media Center)

Reading: Same as last week

Preparation: Students finalize proposals for final paper (individual argument) with me via email. Final papers due Week 15 on day of class.
Week 13: Argument and Propaganda
- What is a propaganda film?
- Can argument and propaganda coexist?
  Terms: the cut; editing; construction of meaning; propaganda; developing a political point of view

Screening: *The Hour of the Furnaces*, Part I (1968; Octavio Getino/Fernando Solanas)
*Man With a Movie Camera* (1929; Dziga Vertov) (excerpt)
*Triumph of the Will* (1934, Leni Riefenstahl) (excerpt)


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Week 14: Documentary, Art, and Performance, Part I
- Can documentaries be art and/or acquire qualities characteristic of other arts?
- What is the relation between film, movement, and music?
  Terms: reality and art; film as art; aesthetics; beauty

Screening: *Pina* (2011; Wim Wenders dir.)
*Berlin—Symphony of a Great City* (1925; Walter Ruttmann) (excerpt)


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Week 15: Documentary, Art, and Performance, Part II
- What is the role of art and the artist in society?
- Can documentaries and art share the same purpose and objectives?
- What are the documentary conventions for representing artists?
  Terms: on-camera performance; charisma; film music

Screening: *Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry* (2012; Alison Klayman dir.)
*Don’t Look Back* (1969; D. A. Pennebaker)

Reading: no reading

Final: Final papers due in class today. No extensions!