

English 374: Introduction to Documentary Cinema (Winter 2012)

Instructor: Justin Pfefferle (justin.pfefferle@mail.mcgill.ca)

Class Meeting: Monday and Wednesday, 2:30 – 4:00

Optional Screening: Tuesday, 5:00 – 6:30

Mandatory Screening: Thursday, 5:00 – 8:00

Office Hours: Thursday: 3:00 – 4:30 (Arts 340)

Description:

In his “First Principles of Documentary” (1932), John Grierson admitted that “documentary is a clumsy description,” but urged his reader to “let it stand.” Instead of accepting Grierson’s imperative, we will examine precisely what it means to describe a film as documentary. Using a variety of cinematic texts, including Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), D.A. Pennebaker’s *Dont Look Back* (1967), Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* (1982), and Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), this class will confront some of the formal, philosophical, social, and political problems unique to documentary cinema.

Students who take this class will be invited to follow a trajectory of documentary filmmaking, with a mind to understanding what visual, audio, rhetorical, and narrative codes might contribute to, or challenge, the status a cinematic work as non-fiction. Throughout the term, we will investigate whether or not documentary filmmakers have a special responsibility to “tell the truth” in their films, and, if so, what the nature and epistemic limitations of that truth might be. To answer these questions, we will pay particular attention to the close intersections between documentary and propaganda. In all instances, films will be viewed and discussed as works of art and as products of particular social and historical circumstances. Implicitly, this approach will prompt us to consider whether or not documentaries must be viewed as necessarily political, and what forces might help or hinder the kinds of interventions that they may make.

NB: Attendance at screenings constitutes an integral part of the experience of any film class. Mandatory screenings are exactly that: **mandatory**.

Texts:

Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Indiana: Indiana UP, 1991.

Coursepack.

Evaluation:

Participation: 15%

I want to foster an atmosphere of active engagement: mutual learning and mutual teaching. It is not enough to be a warm body in an already very warm room!

Screening Logs (2 X 10%): 20%

You will be responsible for writing and submitting two screening logs. The first of these will be submitted mid-way through the term; the second will be submitted two weeks before the final class. In these screening logs, you will have opportunities to workshop ideas about various films in light of the concepts discussed in class. Screening logs will be evaluated on the basis of their economy and clarity of language, precision of thought, and sophistication of analysis.

Due: Wednesday, February 8; Wednesday, April 11

Mini-Conference: 20%

You will be placed into groups of five or six; each member of the group will then be responsible for leading a short (20 minute) discussion, which should focus on issues and concepts related to the screening and critical readings for that particular week. You must meet with me as a group **at least** one week prior to the date of the mini-conference. By this point, all members of the group should have viewed the film(s), done the readings, and had at least one meeting with one another to carve out some potential terrain for discussion.

Each group will be responsible for submitting a two-page paper documenting the issues raised during the discussion and gesturing toward some conclusions that the group reached.

Essay One (4-5 pages, 1000-1200 words): 15%

The first essay will take the form of a close formal analysis, or *thick description*, of a scene or short sequence in a particular film. It may or may not build off of the screening log, and must be written in formal, polished, analytical prose.

Due: Friday, February 17

Essay Two (6-7 pages, 1500–1800 words): 30%

The second essay may or may not build on the formal analysis carried out in the first essay. It demands that students complement close, formal engagement with a film (or films) with an engagement with some of the historical, philosophical, social, and political concepts at stake in the course as a whole.

Due: Friday, April 20

Week One: Documentary, Realism, and Representation

Reading:

André Bazin: "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." *What is Cinema?* Berkeley: U of California P, 1967. 9-16.

Week Two: The Soviet School of Social Realism

Film:

Dziga Vertov, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929);

Readings:

Dziga Vertov, "We: Variant of a Manifesto" (5-9); "Kinoks: A Revolution" (11-21). Selections from *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Ed. Annette Michelson. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.

Week Three: The British Documentary Movement

Film:

Robert Flaherty, *Nanook of the North* (1922); Alberto Cavalcanti, *Coal Face* (1935); Harry Watt and Basil Wright, *Night Mail* (1936)

Readings:

John Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary." *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*. Ed. Kevin MacDonal and Mark Cousins. London: Faber and Faber, 1996. 2-11.

Paul Swann, "Introduction: The British Documentary Film Movement." *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926 – 1946*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1989. 1-20.

Bill Nichols, "The Domain of Documentary." *Representing Reality*, 3-31.

Week Four: Documentary, Propaganda, and the Second World War

Film:

Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will* (1935); Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt, *London Can Take It!* (1940)

See Also:

Humphrey Jennings, *Listen to Britain*; Frank Capra, *Why We Fight* series; Harry Watt, *Target for Tonight*

Readings:

John Grierson, "The Nature of Propaganda." *Grierson on Documentary*. Ed. Forsyth Hardy. London: Collins, 1946. 167-77.

Bill Nichols, "Telling Stories with Evidence and Arguments." *Representing Reality*, 107-33.

Week Five: American Direct Cinema

Films:

D.A. Pennebaker, *Dont Look Back* (1967)

See Also:

Robert Drew, *Primary* (1960); Albert and David Maysles, *The Beatles: The First U.S. Visit* (1964), *Salesman* (1969), *Grey Gardens* (1975);

Readings:

Dave Saunders, "Looking Forward (From an American Past to the American Modern)." *Direct Cinema: Observational Documentary and the Politics of the Sixties*. London: Wallflower, 2007. 57-83.

Bill Nichols, "Documentary Modes of Representation." *Representing Reality*, 32-75.

Week Six: Documentary, the Institution, and the Clinical Gaze

Films:

Forough Farrokhzad, *The House is Black* (1962); Frederick Wiseman, *Titicut Follies* (1967)

See Also:

Frederick Wiseman, *High School*; Stan Brackhage, *Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*; Georges Franju, *Blood of the Beasts* (1949); Michael Rubbo, *Daisy: A Story of a Facelift*;

Readings:

S. Zeydabadi-Nejad, "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. December 2007, 34(3). 375-98.

Barry Keith Grant, "Ethnography in the First Person: Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies*." *Documenting the Documentary*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998. 238-53.

Bill Nichols, "Axiographics: Ethical Space in Documentary Film." *Representing Reality*, 76-103.

Week Seven: Rockumentary

Film:

Albert and David Maysles, *Gimme Shelter* (1970)

See Also:

Alek Keshishian, *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991); Martin Scorsese, *The Last Waltz*; *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*; *Anvik, I'm Your Man*; *Ladies and Gentlemen . . . Mr. Leonard Cohen* (); Michael Wadleigh, *Woodstock*; D.A. Pennebaker, *Monterey Pop*

Readings:

Keith Beattie, "Direct Cinema and Performance: It's Not Only Rock and Roll." *Documentary Display*. London and New York: Wallflower, 2008. 59-81.

"Circumstantial Evidence: An Interview with David and Albert Maysles." *Albert and David Maysles: Interviews*. Ed. Keith Beattie. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2010. 55-64.

Mary Anne Doane, "Dead Time, or the Concept of the Event." *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*.

Week Eight: Mockumentary

Film:

Rob Reiner, *This is Spinal Tap* (1984)

See Also:

Gus Van Sant, *Elephant* (2003); Christopher Guest, *Best in Show* (2000); Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999); Hirokazu Koreeda, *After Life* (1999); Michelle Citron, *Daughter Rite* (1979); Remy Belvaux, Andre Bonzel, and Benoit Poelvoorde, *Man Bites Dog* (1993); Woody Allen, *Take the Money and Run* (1969), *Zelig* (1983); *Mondo Cane*

Readings:

Lipkin, Paget, and Roscoe, "Docudrama and Mock-Documentary: Defining Terms, Proposing Canons." *Docufictions: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fiction Filmmaking*. 11-26.

Gerd Bayer, "Artifice and Artificiality in Mockumentaries." *Docufictions*. 164-78.

Bill Nichols, "The Fact of Realism and the Fiction of Objectivity," *Representing Reality*, 165-198.

Week Nine: Crises of Documentary Representation: The Work of Trinh T. Minh-ha

Films:

Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Reassemblage* (1982); *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989);

Readings:

Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Difference: A Special Third World Women Issue." *Feminist Review*, 25 (Spring 1987). 5-22.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Documentary Is/Not a Name." *October*, 52 (Spring 1990), 76-98.

Week Ten: Documentary, Reconstruction, Re-presentation

Film:

Errol Morris, *The Thin Blue Line*

Readings:

Paul Cronin, "It Could All Be Wrong: An Unfinished Interview with Errol Morris. 144-209.

Carl Plantinga, "The Philosophy of Errol Morris: Ten Lessons." *Three Documentary Filmmakers: Errol Morris, Ross McElwee, Jean Rouch*. Ed. William Rothman. Albany: State U of New York P, 2009. 43-59.

Week Eleven: Documentary, Subculture, and the New (?) Ethnography

Film:

Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning* (1990)

See Also:

Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski, *Born into Brothels* (2004); Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied* (1989); Banksy, *Exit through the Gift Shop*;

Readings:

Judith Butler, "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion." *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sue Thornham. New York: New York UP, 1999. 336-49.

bell hooks. "Is Paris Burning?" *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992. 145-56.

Bill Nichols, "Pornography, Ethnography, and the Discourses of Power." *Representing Reality*, 201-28.

Week Twelve: Documentary in the Community

Film:

Daniel Cross, *S.P.I.T.: Squeegee Punks in Traffic* (2001)

See Also:

Daniel Cross, *The Street: A Film With the Homeless*.

Readings:

"The Safe Streets Act"

Week Thirteen: The Documentarian as Star: The Body of Michael Moore

Film:

Michael Moore, *Bowling for Columbine* (2002)

Readings:

Louise Spence, "Working-class Hero: Michael Moore's Authorial Voice and Persona." *Journal of Popular Culture*. 43.2 (April 2010), 368-80.

Nicholas Ruddick, "Living in Fictitious Times: Michael Moore's Awful Truth about America." *I Sing the Body Politic: History as Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature*. Ed. Peter Swirski. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2009. 149-81.

Bill Nichols, "Representing the Body: Questions of Meaning and Magnitude." *Representing Reality*, 229-266.

Late Policy:

Please let me know well in advance (**at least one week!**) if you are not going to be able to submit your work on time. I am a reasonable person; all I require is that you communicate with me.

Without such communication, late work will receive a penalty of 10% per day late.

Academic Integrity:

Senate on January 29, 2003 approved the following resolution on academic integrity, which requires that a reminder to students be printed on every course outline:

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).