SYLLABUS
TFM 462 Documentary: History and Theory
Wednesday 4—6:40
Spring 2014

FLAHERTY, VÉRITÉ and BEYOND

Ralph Waldo Emerson: "No man can quite emancipate himself from his age and country, or produce a model in which the education, the religion, the politics, messages and the arts of his time shall have no share."

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Explorations
Courses that fulfill the 9-unit requirement for Explorations in General Education take the goals and skills of GE Foundations courses to a more advanced level. Your three upper division courses in Explorations will provide greater interdisciplinary, more complex and in-depth theory, deeper investigation of local problems, and wider awareness of global challenges. More extensive reading, written analysis involving complex comparisons, well-developed arguments, considerable bibliography, and use of technology are appropriate in many Explorations courses.

This is an Explorations course in the Humanities and Fine Arts. Completing this course will help you to do the following in greater depth: 1) analyze written, visual, or performed texts in the humanities and fine arts with sensitivity to their diverse cultural contexts and historical moments; 2) describe various aesthetic and other value systems and the ways they are communicated across time and cultures; 3) identify issues in the humanities that have personal and global relevance; 4) demonstrate the ability to approach complex problems and ask complex questions drawing upon knowledge of the humanities.

COURSE DESCRIPTION
Is fact stranger than fiction? Can we tell the difference? The goal of this course is to familiarize students with documentary history, theory, criticism and practice. The ability of the cinema to simulate reality has stimulated the creative energies of filmmakers for over one hundred years. From the simple "actuality" of the Lumiere Brothers (Workers Leaving the Factory) to the theatrical "reality" of Errol Morris (The Thin Blue Line) documentaries challenge audiences to re-envision the world. What are the techniques and tools of documentary expression? Are documentaries art? Propaganda? This course challenges students to develop a critical eye, and to deepen their appreciation of the documentary vision. Works screened survey the range of documentary expression including the classics, as well as examples of challenging work by independent film and videomakers. We will consider the documentary as an art form; as a cultural artifact; as political expression; and as an economic enterprise.
Add/Drop
Students must add/drop/change grading basis or withdraw from the university by the announced deadline. Criteria for dropping a class will be approved only when there are "verified serious and compelling circumstances." Approval will be made by Registrar's Office.

METHOD OF INSTRUCTION
This is a writing intensive course. It requires closes attention to and analysis of Screenings, Readings, Lectures and Discussions.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
After completing this course students should be able to:

* Identify and explain the formal elements and grammar of the documentary.

* Accurately describe the development of documentary practices.

* Write a critical analysis of documentary and nonfiction films.

EVALUATION
Weekly Reports 35%
Each week's film must be discussed in terms of the Readings and lectures. (2 -3 double-spaced typed pages.) 14 reports total. Be sure to make reference to all the of readings and all of the films screened. You are encouraged to use the index in Nichols to add to your understanding of specific films.

Mid-Term Examination 30% This is a take home exam.

Final Paper 5%
Thesis Statement, Sentence Outline, Draft Works Cited

Research paper. A 5-8 page (double spaced, typed) footnoted critical study of a specific documentary film. See attached rubric.

All due dates are final. Late work will not be accepted. Work is not accepted by email. All work is due at the beginning of the class specified below.

Students are expected to attend the SDSU Filmmakers Showcase in the Don Powell Theater at the end of the term.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Films screened in this class may contain sexually graphic scenes and/or violent subject matter.
PLAGIARISM
Students should be especially careful to avoid “borrowing” from internet sources and each other. There will be “zero-tolerance” for plagiarism. Cheating or plagiarism will result in an “F” for the course and a report to the office of Student Rights and Responsibilities. Be sure to cite all of your sources with page numbers and url’s as appropriate.

READINGS
Required
Readings: Packet
Nichols, Bill *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, 2011
Grant and Sloniowski, eds. *Documenting the Documentary*, Wayne State 1998

Recommended

Research Guides and web resources
http://library.sdsu.edu/guides/sub.php?id=37
www.documentary.org  IDA Magazine Archive
Jumpcut  http://www.ejumpcut.org/
Studies in Documentary Film  http://csusdsu.library.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/sdf
Cineaste http://www.cineaste.com/archives
http://www3.nfb.ca/webextension/capturing-reality/
http://www.der.org/resources/

INTRODUCTION: HISTORY, TECHNIQUE AND THEORY
All great fiction films tend toward documentary, just as all great documentaries tend toward fiction."  Godard

Week 1
"What is Nonfiction Film? What do documentaries have in common with fiction films? How are the conventions and "language" of film used to create meaning in documentary productions?

Readings:
(RP) Freeman Intro: The Documentary from Flaherty to Vérité and Beyond
(RP) Samsara
(G) Synthetic Vision
(N) Introduction and Chapter 1 How Can We Define Documentary Film

E resources
Samsara
http://www.brunofilms.com/samsara.html
http://edwebproject.org/sideshow/index.html
Screening: (Note dates for all films are release dates.)

Land without Bread Luis Buñuel  Spain 1932 27 minutes VTC-2284
Samsara  Ellen Bruno  US  29 minutes 1989  VTC-4431

Discussion Questions:
What is uniquely cinematic in these films? What forms of expression are used that are unavailable to other art forms? What do these films say about (your notion of) reality? How do these films tell their stories? In whose voice(s)? From what point of view? What techniques do these films employ to get your attention? To persuade you? To convince you of the credibility of the stories they tell. Which film(s)/techniques are the most successful in persuading and convincing you? Why?

IN THE BEGINNING
Week 2
The invention of the motion picture is in many ways a part of the western, scientific obsession with observing nature, analyzing the phenomenal world and replicating experimental results. Cinema with its apparent mastery of time and motion was considered an objective observer ----a transparent window on the world.

Readings:
(RP) What Is Documentary?
(N) Chapter 5 How Did Documentary Filmmaking Get Started? Also pp 217-219 Vertov
(G) “Peace Between Man and Machine

Screenings:
Lumiere shorts  France 1895 excerpts VTC-291 (40:00)
The Man with the Movie Camera  68 minutes Dziga Vertov  USSR  1929 DVD-2410 Alloy Orchestra

Discussion Questions:
How are the Lumieres’s films limited in their “documentation” of events? What formal or technical limitations are there in this work? Despite their limited “film grammar,” what might have been the impact on audiences 100 years ago? Do the films offer us anything today? What?

Is Vertov passively recording reality? Is he a "monomaniacal formalist?" Is the film manipulated technically to make story points? How? In what way does this film confirm or challenge your notions of “documentary filmmaking?”

Week 3
Since Flaherty the exotic, the other has held a special fascination for documentarians. Visual anthropologists have used film to document their work and "subjects." Questions regarding authorship and the (inherent) power discrepancy between observers and observed are critical to the
consideration of these films. The ethics of documentary making ----the multiple responsibilities to participants, audiences and to the filmmaker him or herself---are raised here.

Readings:

(RP) Nanook of the North
(G) The Filmmaker as Hunter
(N) Chapter 6 ….Expository and Poetic

Screenings:
Nanook of the North Robert Flaherty 1922 79 min DVD-865
Nanook Revisited 1990  60 minutes VTC-4308
(See The Fast Runner, Zacharias Kunuk 2001 for a fictional Inuit film made by an Inuit director.)

Discussion Questions:
What did you make of the film?  How do you think audiences would have reacted to it in 1922?   In what ways does it still seem fresh. (I think the easy affection among Nanook’s family is appealing in a timeless way.)   How did you evaluate the "truth" of the images you were presented with?

Flaherty claimed that it was necessary to "lie" in order to tell a "higher truth." What do you think he meant by this? Give examples from the film that seem to be reconstructions? How can you tell? How do you evaluate Flaherty's attitude toward the Inuit? Give examples from the film supporting your point of view.  What did Nanook Revisited add to your understanding of Nanook?

REPORTS FOR WEEKS 1 AND 2 DUE

DOCUMENTARIES AND PROPAGANDA
The classics of nonfiction filmmaking defined the techniques of documentary as filmmakers were mobilized for total war.

Week 4
What is Propaganda?

Readings:
(RP) Freeman and others
(N) Chapter 4 What Makes Documentaries Engaging and Persuasive?
(G) The Mass Psychology of Fascist Cinema and Documenting the Ineffable

Screenings:
Toons at War (Excerpt) Warner Bros 1941-1943  90 minutes TV8347VR

Triumph of the Will  (Excerpt) 1935 Leni Riefenstahl 122 minutes DVD-176
Why We Fight The Nazis Strike (Excerpt) 1943 Frank Capra, Anatole Litvak  VTC-1601 tape 2
Night and Fog  Alain Resais, 1955  30 minutes   DVD-953
Discussion Questions:
What is the period and setting of these films? How is this signaled? Describe the use of sound effects and music. How is language used? Consider tone, volume, delivery, pacing etc. Is the language credible and persuasive or not? How would you describe it? What's the dramatic effect of the way language is used here?

All of these films except *Night and Fog* are propaganda. Explain and discuss this distinction. Does a strong point view in itself make a film propaganda? Is it always necessary to tell “both sides?” Do you imagine that these films would have been effective in persuading audiences at the time they were first produced? Why/why not? Identify contemporary examples of propaganda in nonfiction and fiction. How are they similar to and/or different from these films? What makes contemporary propaganda effective in persuading today’s audiences? (Be sure to reference the definition of propaganda in the reader.)

**PEFORMATIVE DOCUMENTARY**
Week 5

Readings:
(RP) Handouts and Riggs
(RP) Coco Fusco, “The Other History of Intercultural Performance.”
(N) Chapter 3 What Gives Documentary Films a Voice of Their Own?
(G) Silence and Its Opposite

Screenings:
*Tongues Untied*  Marlon Riggs 1989 55 min VTC-1782
*The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey*  Coco Fusco and Paula Herdia  32 min  DVD-5676

Discussion Questions:
*Tongues Untied* presents a point-of-view not typically seen. Did you learn new factual information? Does the film express attitudes or values unfamiliar to you? Were your values confirmed, challenged, offended? Describe your own emotional reaction to the film. Give examples. Describe the technical and filmic devices used in the film. Were they effective? Why? How? In what sense is this very personal film political? What is the relationship between personal identity and political movements?

Compare and contrast the presentation of the “other” in *The Couple in the Cage* and in the *Lumiere Shorts* screened in Class 2. In what ways are the similar or different? Has 100 years of film experience changed the way audiences respond to these images? Discuss the range of reactions of audiences portrayed in *Couple* and your own reactions.

**REPORTS FOR WEEKS 3 AND 4 DUE**
HISTORY AND COMPILATION FILMS

Week 6 FILMS, TELEVISION AND WAR

Readings:
(RP) “We Aren’t on the Wrong Side, We Are the Wrong Side”
“How TV Covers War”
Clippings

Screening: Hearts and Minds Peter Davis 1974 112 minutes DVD 699

Discussion Questions:
Summarize the argument (not the “plot”) of Hearts and Minds. How does the filmmaker assert a point-of-view? What it is it? How does Davis structure the film for maximum emotional impact on the viewer? Give examples. What was the most effective/convincing sequence? Why? The least effective? Discuss the relationship of sound and image; the camera angle; and the juxtaposition of shots, etc. Are the techniques and arguments of the film persuasive to you? Why or why not? Give examples and discuss the use of propaganda in the war against terrorism and/or the war in Iraq. How is this similar to other war films we’ve screened?

TAKE HOME MIDTERM AVAILABLE DUE IN 2 WEEKS

Week 7 (RE)SCREENING: HISTORY

Readings:
(RP) Freeman Atomic Café The Archives Project
(N) Chapter 7 ….Modes of Documentary Film

Screening:
Atomic Cafe Kevin Raferty, Jayne Loader, Pierce Rafferty 1982 88 min. VTC-2762

Discussion Questions:
The Atomic Cafe is a compilation film. How does it create new meanings from pre-existing films? What techniques and devices are used? Were the original materials propaganda? Is Atomic Cafe propaganda? Explain. In what way(s) is film history?

REPORTS FOR WEEKS 5 AND 6 DUE

THE OBSERVER AND THE OBSERVED
Week 8
MIDTERM DUE
Readings:
(RP) Freeman Titicut Follies
Ethnography in the First Person

Chapter 2 Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?

Screening: Titicut Follies Frederick Wiseman and John Marshall US 1967 84 minutes VTC-4321

Cinema Vérité: The Defining Moment Wiseman Clip DV 0105

Discussion Questions:
What were the technical innovations that made cinema vérité and direct cinema possible? Give examples of these techniques and their effects in this film. Include specific examples. How would you evaluate Wiseman’s response to multiple ethical responsibilities --- to the subjects, the audience and himself? How would a filmmaker not limited to a strictly observational mode approach the topic of mental illness? Would a more balanced treatment be preferable? More objective? Why or why not?

Week 9
Readings:
(RP) Daressa and Turner
(RP) Stranger with a Camera

Screenings:
No Lies Mitchell W. Block, 1973 16 minutes DVD-6928
Stranger with a Camera Elizabeth Barrett 2001 62 minutes VTC 4369

Discussion Questions:
Discuss cinema vérité’s claim to use the camera to provoke and reveal truth. If you were unaware of the fictional nature of No Lies, how did you have feel when it was revealed to you? Looking back, what clues within the film might have given it away as fiction? Is it ethical for a filmmaker to manipulate audience expectations in this way? Do you see any positive or negative impacts of this “deception?” How are we as viewers able to evaluate the “truth” of any particular documentary? In particular consider Sobchack’s “3 rapes” and Nichol’s “A Constituency of Viewers” (page 35).

Examine and discuss the issues and ethics of representation raised in these films. Discuss the differences in documentary approach as an “insider” and as an “outsider.” What are the advantages and disadvantages of each perspective? Is either perspective inherently more credible? Why or why not?

REPORTS FOR WEEKS 7 AND 8 DUE

Week 10
Reading:
(G) “Don’t You Ever Just Watch”

Screening:
Dont Look Back 96 minutes 1967 D. A. Pennebaker DVD-16
See 65 Revisited for an update of Dont Look Back.
For a fictional treatment, which borrows from this documentary see *I'm Not There*.

Discussion Questions: Describe and analyze the camera, sound and editing techniques used in this film. How are they different than a traditional journalistic approach to documentary? How is the film similar to or different from current portraits of “bands on the road?” Do you think this style was influential? Why or why not? (Feel free to compare it to other music portrait documentaries you are familiar with, or even a mockumentary like *This Is Spinal Tap*.)

Discuss and analyze the reading’s argument that Pennebaker had a disguised agenda? Do you agree? If the assertion is true, does it change the significance of the film? Your understanding and appreciation of it?

Week 11
Spring Break

**BIOGRAPHIES AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES (REFLEXIVITY)**

Week 12
Readings:
(RP) Freeman Biography, Interview with Alan Berliner and Journal

Recommended:
*Short Guide to Writing about Film* and
(N) Chapter 9 How Can We Write Effectively about Documentary?
(It is not necessary to cite this chapter or the *Short Guide* in the report about these films.)

Screenings:
*Nobody’s Business* Alan Berliner 1996 60 minutes VTC-4294 Clips from *My Architect: A Son’s Journey* and *Tell Them Who You Are*, (and if time permits) *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*

Discussion Questions:
What happens when the filmmaker is the ostensible subject of the film? Is it more or less credible? Compare and contrast the personas of the filmmakers and the style and approach taken in the 3 “Father Films.” (How is the mother daughter film similar to them or different from them?) Which of the films is most effective? Why? *Nobody’s Business* reveals (some of) the process of filmmaking. What is left out? What is revealed? Why? What is the effect of this self-consciousness on you as a viewer? On the subjects of the film? How does the filmmaker create a “persona” for himself? Do you find it appealing, convincing? Why or why not?

**PAPER TOPICS AND OUTLINES DUE**

**REPORTS FOR WEEK 9 AND 10 DUE**
**POINT-OF-VIEW and COMMITTED DOCUMENTARIES**
Week 13
Readings:
(RP) Harlan County and Blue Collar Blues and Resources for Teaching Documentary Film
(N) Chapter 8 How Have Documentaries Addressed Social and Political Issues?

Screening:
Harlan County USA Barbara Kopple 1976 104 minutes DVD-2520

Discussion Questions:
A politically committed film like Harlan makes no pretense of neutrality or objectivity. Is this an advantage or disadvantage -- for the filmmaker? For audiences? To a concern for truth? Does a story have to tell both sides in order to be truthful? Is balance a choice or a requirement for an effective documentary? Is the film too emotional? Does it romanticize, idealize the miners and their wives? Why are working class stories like Harlan seldom seen on film or television?

BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES: Documentaries, Animation, and Pseudo Documentaries

Week 14
Reading:
(RP) Cineaste

Screening:
Waltz with Bashir Folman Israel 2008 87 min DVD-5703

Discussion Questions: Was the film successful informing you about the history of Israel’s 1982 war in Lebanon? Are there additional history, facts or context that you need to appreciate and evaluate this film? Do you think that this film is documentary? Why/Why not? What is the impact of the animation? Why do you think the director chose this approach? What is your reaction to the animation? How is the impact of the film changed by this technique? Would the film affect you differently if it told the story with re-enactments or with just interviews without the use of animation? Why did the filmmaker end the film with historical footage? What if the film ended instead with an animated sequence at a bar, similar to the opening? Do you think the filmmaker met his responsibilities to his subjects (Israeli, Palestinian, Lebanese)? To the audience? How would you describe the overall impact of the film including the relationship of form and content?
REPORTS FOR WEEKS 12 AND 13 DUE

Week 15
Screening:
*Thin Blue Line* Errol Morris  US  1988 101 min  DVD-3626

Reading:
*(G)* Mirrors without Memories

Discussion Questions:
Is this a documentary? Why? Why not? How is it different from "traditional documentaries?" Is objectivity an important concern of this film? Truth? Is the filmmaker fair to his subjects? Why or Why not? What is the impact of the re-enactments on you? What techniques are used? Discuss the implications of the use of fictional techniques in a "serious" documentary.

WHAT’S NEW IS OLD AND ….

Week 16
Readings:
**(RP)** Freeman Koyaanisqatsi and Resources for Teaching Documentary Film

Screening:
*Koyaanisqatsi* Godfrey Reggio 87 minutes 1983 DVD 351

Discussion Questions
How is the film manipulated technically to make story points? In what way do the techniques used enhance or distort our understanding of the processes of modern life? Are the techniques of the film effective in grabbing our attention? Or has their power been dulled by time and the development of even more eye-catching graphics and special effects? What is the role of "eye-candy” in a documentary? Compare the techniques and point of view of Koyaanisqatsi and The Man with the Movie Camera. In what ways are they similar? Different?

REPORT FOR WEEKS 14 and 15

FINAL PAPER  DUE May 7, 2014

Students are expected to attend the Filmmakers Showcase in the Don Powell Theater May 15, 2014.
**SUGGESTIONS OF ADDITIONAL FILMS AND FILMMAKERS**

http://freedocumentaries.org/  
http://www.snagfilms.com/films/  
netflix.com

**Available in the Media Center at the Library**

http://libpac.sdsu.edu/search/X

Enter Documentary or the name of the film you are looking for in “Any Field”
Under “Location” Pull Down and choose “Media Center”

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