



CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY FILM

DOCST 270K/AMI205K

Fall 2016

Dates / contact hours: 300 minutes per week for seven weeks
Academic Credit: 1 course
Areas of Knowledge: ALP
Modes of Inquiry: CCI, STS
Course format: lecture, discussion, documentary film screenings

Instructor's Information

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Prerequisite(s), if applicable

There are no prerequisites for this course.

Course Description

Our subject is the art, content, technology, and life of documentary film, with a decided emphasis on the American tradition. We will study contemporary filmmaking approaches that fall under broad categorization of "documentary," and show how documentary filmmakers choose and interpret their subjects, themes, and points of view. We will analyze the form, technique, and impact of documentary filmmaking. In the process of considering issues of autonomy and power, politics and public policy, we will begin to define the role of documentary art in public dialogue. We will also investigate 'the life of the documentary film' as it is distributed, featured on broadcast, and introduced in national and international film festivals. Although this course does not include instruction in film production, you may well be encouraged to try your hand at short documentary filmmaking toward the end of the class.

In addition to class lectures and screenings, the course will leave time for discussion and in-class analysis of themes and techniques of documentary filmmaking. In the final week of the class we will pay particular attention to the engagement and intersections of documentary films and filmmaking in America and in China.

While we are looking at films made primarily in the last 50 years and with a decided emphasis on the past 20 years of production, the class engages students in thinking about the role of documentary film to communicate the maker's point of view, experience, aesthetic, and aspiration. A good bit of the course focuses on fostering more critical ways to view and understand film, and how to write more penetratingly about documentary. Students do weekly writing assignments in addition to a midterm and a final.

Course Goals / Objectives

At the end of this course, students will be able to understand, discuss, and analyze:

- The origins and tradition of documentary filmmaking.
- The methods of the documentary filmmaker, from the ethnographic to the historical, from the personal to films that follow current moments/events.
- Terminology for talking and writing about documentary film and filmmaking.
- The recent proliferation of documentary with evolutions in digital technology and the impulse to tell 'local' stories in a 'global' moment.
- How documentary films and filmmakers work and engage in international contexts, and connections between film in America and in China.

Specific learning objectives will be aligned with the assignments and projects in the course. Students will receive detailed rubrics for course work so that they understand the criteria for performance and the system for assignment of points for grades.

Required Text(s)/Resources

Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd edition, Indiana University Press, 2010

Sakai or some online source for reserve readings that are reflected in draft of syllabus.

Recommended Text(s)/Resources

Additional bibliographic texts available on-line may be assigned.

Additional Materials (optional)

Students should have laptops or iPads to facilitate watching movies outside of group screenings, which will be in addition to class lecture time.

Course Requirements / Key Evidences

Attendance at weekly screenings (or demonstrated self-viewing)

Attendance at lectures

Weekly responses to films/250-400 word typed responses

Final exam.

Depending on equipment resources and logistics, the final may include some small production component that is an outgrowth of the class ideas and themes.

Technology Considerations, if applicable

The course will require a fully-equipped AV classroom, able to seat the number of students admitted. Students will ideally own or have access to laptops, perhaps also to cell phone cameras, and to programs such as MAC's Final Cut.

Screenings of some films may be open to the entire DKU community as a Film Night co-curricular event, depending on the interest of students, staff, and faculty.

Assessment Information / Grading Procedures

Weekly Responses (12 responses, 0-2 points awarded for each response, 24 points total)

NOTE: There will be no weekly response due the last week of class.

1. 50% of grade: Post a 250-300 word response to Sakai about the film(s) we viewed in class that week. Responses should not be summaries, but thoughtful and original responses to some aspect of the film(s). This is an open-ended assignment, and you should feel free to respond to what interests you, including problems or questions raised by a film, ways in which the film connects to the readings or lectures (including presentations by guest speakers), or formal techniques you found innovative/effective (narration, editing, sound, camera technique, etc.). You should also feel free to pose any questions you may have about aspects of the films/readings/lectures in these responses. Responses will be graded according to the following criteria:

2 points: Demonstrates originality of thought and a deep engagement with the issues raised by the films/lectures/readings.

1 point: Demonstrates an effort to engage with the films/lectures/readings but does not reflect original thought, or relies heavily upon summary.

0 points: Shows lack of effort or failure to complete response.

Responses are due on Sakai by 5 p.m. on Friday. One point will be deducted from responses received later than 5 p.m. Friday. Responses received after 5 p.m. Sunday will receive a zero.

2. 30% of grade: The Final Exam (short answer and essay):

Short-answers: command of information and concepts conveyed in lectures and the textbook; key filmmakers and techniques we have covered.

Essay component of final exam: Most likely a comparative essay based on particular points of view of films and filmmakers. Students will be expected to use particular references to film scenes, themes, and techniques in supporting statements in their essay. If possible, the exam may have a question based on short film clips.

A second option for the Final Exam, depending on the students' skills in writing and test-taking, would be to break this exam into two different exams (one portion scheduled for earlier in the session) so that students would receive early feed-back on their performance.

3. 20% Short film project, assuming equipment/staff support is in place. These projects will be done very close to campus and could be conceptualized, produced, and edited with modest equipment such as smartphones, tablets, or consumer grade video equipment.

[Diversity and Intercultural Learning \(see Principles of DKU Liberal Arts Education\)](#)

This course will be of interest to students of various backgrounds. Each may come with her or his own personal interests and objectives but the course fosters deep exchanges among these students to help them consider the art, content, technology, and life of documentary film. Guidance on group work and class participation will be provided for students not accustomed to an open discussion style of pedagogy.

[Course Policies and Guidelines](#)

- **COURSE POLICIES AND GUIDELINES:**

Instructors' expectations for all assignments and activities will be made as explicitly as possible, given the likelihood of a wide range of background conventions and habits among the students. The Duke Kunshan University Community Standard will be discussed and adhered to.

- **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:**

Each student is bound by the academic honesty standard of Duke Kunshan University. Its Community Standard states: "Duke Kunshan University is a community composed of individuals of diverse cultures and backgrounds. We are dedicated to scholarship, leadership, and service and to the principles of honesty, fairness, respect, and accountability. Members of this community commit to reflect upon and uphold these principles in all academic and non-academic endeavors, and to protect and promote a culture of integrity." Violations of the DKU academic honesty standard will not be tolerated. Cheating, lying, falsification, or plagiarism in any practice will be considered as an inexcusable behavior and will result in zero points for the activity.

- **CLASS ATTENDANCE:**
Students are responsible for all the information presented in class. Class attendance and participation are important components of the learning experience. All students are expected to participate during class time.
- **POLICY ON MAKE-UP WORK/EXAMS:**
Students are allowed to make up work only if missed as a result of illness or other unanticipated circumstances warranting a medical excuse, consistent with DKU policy. You must notify the instructor in advance if you will miss an exam or project deadline. Project extensions requested for medical reasons must be negotiated at the time of illness.

The use of mobile phones, tablets, and laptops is not permitted during the class, except when approved by the instructor.

Tentative Course Outline or Schedule

Week One

The Problems and Ethics of Representation: Cinema Verite and Whose Story Is It?

Films: *A Happy Mother's Day* (Richard Leacock with Joyce Chopra, 1963, 26 min) *Quints* (ABC, 1963, 26 min)

Stranger with a Camera (Elizabeth Barret, 2000, 62 min); *Harlan County USA* (Barbara Kopple,)

Reading: Nichols, Introduction and Ch. 1, "How Can We Define Documentary Film?"

"Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?"

Roger Ebert, "Film Depicts strike and way of life."
www.cabincreekfilms.com/press_hc_ebert.html

Week Two

Place and the Documentary Tradition

Films: *Sud* (Chantal Ackerman, 1999, 71 mins.); *Two Towns of Jasper* (Whitney Dow and Marco Williams, 2002, 90 mins.)

Reading: Report from the Road: Two Towns of Jasper, Working Films and Two Tone Productions, October 2003.

Barbara Zheutlin, "The Politics of Documentary," Rosenthal and Corner: 150-166.

Nichols, chap. 8, "How Have Documentaries Addressed Social and Political Issues?"

Rankin, "Through Segregated Lenses," An Interview with Whitney Dow and Marco Williams, *Document*, 2002.

Week Three

Story and Land: The Environmental Tradition: Floods, Louisiana, and the Gulf Coast

Films: *The Axe in the Attic* (Pincus and Small); *Trouble the Water* (Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, 2008); *The Great Invisible* (Margaret Brown, 2014)

Week Four

Memory and Being There: Filmmaking and the Recovery of History/Acts of Remembrance

Films: *Always for Pleasure* and *Sprout Wings and Fly* (Les Blank, 1978 and 1983); *Unforgivable Blackness* (Ken Burns, 2005)

Week Five

Art of Seeing: Poetics and the Documentary Film

Films: *Vernon, Florida* (Errol Morris, 1981); *Kudzu* (Josh Gibson, 2011)

Week Six

Documentary Turns Personal: First-Person Filmmaking

Films: *Bright Leaves* (Ross McElwee, 2003, 107 min.); *Healthy Baby Girl* (Judith Helfand, 1997); *Time Indefinite* (Ross McElwee, 1993, 114 min.)

Reading: Nichols, chap. 7, "How Can We Describe the Observational, Participatory, Reflexive, and Performative Modes of Documentary Film?"

"Ross McElwee at Work: Southern Exposure," *Film Quarterly* (Summer 1998): 1-16.

"Ross McElwee: Personal Journeyman," in Stubbs, 93-103

hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2012aprjun/pincus.html

www.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2007/10/06/refocused/

www.nytimes.com/2008/08/22/movies/22trou.html

Nichols, chap. 3, "What Gives Documentary Films a Voice of Their Own?"

Week Seven

Here and Now: Documentary Film Today

A chance for summation and but also to connect what we've been seeing/thinking about with Kunshan, Asia, the larger experience. If he is available, this would be the appropriate time to try to bring Wu Wenguang into class with the China Memory Project.

Film: *Bumming in Beijing* (1990), Wu Wenguang
“*Huamulin, Boy Xiaoqiang*” (2013, 76 mins.) by Li Xinmin
“*Self-portrait*” (2013, 77 mins.) by Zhang Mengqi.

<http://www.npr.org/2012/11/11/164801546/recording-the-untold-stories-of-chinas-great-famine>

<http://blogs.library.duke.edu/blog/2014/09/12/memory-project-duke/>

(Version for DKU Ad Hoc Committee)