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MART 455.01: Visions of Documentary Film - Art of the Documentary

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MART 455 Visions of Documentary Film: Art of the Documentary

Spring 2016 -- Thursdays 10:10 AM – 1:00 PM
The Roxy Theater -- 718 S Higgins Ave.

Professor Talena Sanders -- talena.sanders@umontana.edu
Office: McGill Hall 230
Office Hours/Open Studio: Fridays 10:00 – 1:00 or by appointment

Graduate Teaching Assistant and Projectionist: Amie Shea
amy.shea@umconnect.umt.edu



Film still from *The Look of Silence*, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, 2015

Course Description

This course begins with a provocation: **Documentary cinema can and should be as expressive an art form as narrative cinema.** Documentary filmmakers create aesthetic objects – films - while also navigating ethics, their own subjectivity, and the wide range of challenges in working with material from the real. In this course, we will explore the documentary film as an art form and examine the relationship between formal choices and meaning making in non-fiction cinema. We will discuss expansive possibilities for reflecting lived experience in documentary film, and by extension, develop a broad understanding of the nature of documentary film form. We will analyze the constructed nature of documentaries, and problematic notions of “truth” and “unbiased” representations. Most significantly, we will explore the possibilities in formal experimentation to influence authenticity in the expression of actuality. In addition to practical concerns, we will analyze films made throughout the history of non-fiction cinema in cultural contexts, considering the ways that power, privilege, ethics, and the filmmaker’s own identity and subjectivity impact their representation of realities.

Deep curiosity, willingness to experiment, and working outside your comfort zone as a filmmaker are key to your experience in this course. This course will demand your full participation, engagement and considerable dedicated time. Students are expected to engage their critical analysis skills to consider how the films and readings we study might influence their own creative practice.

The first 6 weeks of the course will primarily be an intensive period of film studies. Each week in class, we will watch 1 – 3 full films together; you will take detailed notes, and participate in discussions about films and assigned readings. Homework will consist of assigned readings, structured notes on readings, and short response papers. Beginning in week 7, in addition to our continued film studies, you will start the production process on your final project. Drawing upon influences from the films and readings we discuss in the course, you will create a short documentary film. Working with a small production team of classmates, you will write a film proposal and craft a pitch for your project. You will ultimately produce and present a fine cut of a short documentary film.

Required Materials

-2 external hard drives for storing footage/audio (one drive for working, the other for backing up your work).

-Sketchbook/journal/binder for your viewing notes and notes on reading assignments

Required Text

Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning*, Rutgers University Press, 2011

*Additional readings will be provided on Moodle or in class

Recommended Texts

Wilma de Jong, *Creative Documentary: Theory and Practice*, Routledge, 2011

Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, 2001

Tim Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, Longman, 2007

Moodle

You will turn in assignments on Moodle unless otherwise directed, and can also refer to Moodle for assignment details and materials. Check the Moodle shell each week to be sure you don't miss part of an assignment and are aware of all assignment details.

Attendance Policy

One free pass absence allowed, after that there will be a 2-point deduction to overall attendance/participation grade per absence. Students who accrue 4 or more absences will receive a failing grade in the course.

Tardiness: Arriving to class on time demonstrates your respect for your fellow students and the instructor. If you are more than 15 minutes late, you will be marked absent. Excessive tardiness (4 or more) will result in absences.

Plan to stay for the entirety of the scheduled class meeting time. Leaving class early during our scheduled class time will result in being marked absent for the class.

PLEASE NOTE if you will be absent, you must arrange to turn in material prior to the class in which assignment is due. Contact a classmate as soon as possible to find out what you missed, get notes, and also refer to Moodle for assignment information. **It is your responsibility to catch up on missed work.** Many films we watch in class are not widely available, so you will often not be able to access work that you miss due to absences. Make your best efforts to attend the course.

Contact me as soon as possible if you will be absent and feel that you might qualify for an excused absence.

Excused absence terms include, but are not limited to: documented or contagious sickness, death or emergency in family, absence due to disability status, artistic opportunities.

For artistic opportunities: If you have an artistic opportunity that can only possibly occur during a class meeting, you may potentially be excused from class. Examples include screenings in film festivals, exhibitions of work, one time events that you will be recording for projects, access to a subject that is only possible at a certain time, travel for shooting a project, or other professional development opportunities. **Do not schedule shoots or group meetings for other classes' projects during our class meeting time.** Anything that could be scheduled at another time will not qualify for an excused absence. Be sure to discuss with me in advance if you will miss class for an artistic opportunity.

Communication

All communications for the course must take place in person (strongly preferred!) or via your University of Montana email address only. I do not accept assignments via email, ever.

Email turnaround time is 24 hours for all emails sent between 9 AM– 5PM, and emails sent after 5PM on Fridays may not receive a response until the following Monday afternoon.

Please respect common courtesies in communication with your instructors. This is good practice for your quickly approaching professional future, where email tone can be very important. All email correspondences must begin with some form of salutation ('Hi Prof. Sanders', 'Hello Amie', etc.) and sign-off ('Best, Student', 'See you soon, Student', etc.).

Time & Effort

Students are expected to put forth an appropriate effort to earn upper division coursework credits. When you successfully complete the course, you will earn 3 university credits. The time & effort it takes each of you to complete your assignments will vary. You may find that some weeks require more effort, but if you put in that effort, it will be noticed and rewarded.

Assignments & Projects

-Viewing Notes: During each class meeting, we will watch full films together. You will be required to take detailed notes on formal and conceptual aspects of the films. These notes will be checked every 3 – 4 weeks, and the note checks will comprise part of your participation grade. Be sure to keep all of your viewing notes throughout the semester.

-Readings & Reading Notes: Each week you will be assigned readings on various aspects of documentary arts. These readings will be key to your engagement with the films we study in the course. You will take notes on these readings utilizing Ann Lauterbach's QCQ (Quotation-Comment-Question) format. You must bring these notes to the following class, so you have them on hand for participation during the in-class discussions. The QCQ notes will be collected weekly in class, and will comprise part of your participation grade. Be sure to keep all of your reading notes throughout the semester.

-Participation in discussions: During each class meeting, we will discuss assigned readings and the films we watch together. Your active participation in these discussions will comprise part of your participation grade. I understand that some students are more reserved, and thus my definition of participation is broad – taking active notes, watching films/listening to discussions with your full attention, and your respectful, alert presence will also contribute to your participation grade.

-Reflection Papers: Throughout the semester (see schedule for dates) you will write 1 – 2 page reflection papers on a variety of topics relating to the documentary arts, from examining your personal values to theoretical discourse. These papers must be single space, in size 12 serif font, utilize Chicago Style citations, no images included, no tricks for taking up space (I know them all from teaching freshmen). These should be academic papers, written with an appropriate academic tone. Please remember to utilize the Writing Center for support on writing – a major part of your university experience should be devoted to sharpening your writing capabilities. As media artists, so much of our success in this field depends upon the ability to express information about our ideas in writing.

-Production Project: You will work in a small production group to produce a short documentary film or content for an interactive documentary project over the course of 9 weeks during the semester. There will be several assigned deadlines throughout your production process.

-Project Pitches: Each group is required to produce an 8 -10 minute project pitch, with a short Q & A session to follow. We will attend the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival pitch competition in February, and model the pitches based on that format. Grades will be based on both student and instructor evaluations of the pitches.

-Project Proposals: Each group is required to produce a written proposal of their project. Students will be provided with examples of proposals and guidelines for writing about their project.

-Work-In-Progress presentations: Throughout the production period, groups will present a selection of clips from their projects in production, a rough cut and a fine cut of their film for critique.

Grading

Participation & Attendance – *32% of overall grade*

-QCQ/reading completion: 3 points each (39 points total)

-in-class participation & attendance – 2 points per class (28 points)

Total points participation: 64 points

Reflection Papers – *28% of overall grade*

-7 papers (8 points each)

Total points papers: 56 points

Production Process – *40% of overall grade*

-Pitch: 15 points

-Treatment: 15 points

-Clip presentation: 10 points

-Rough cut presentation: 15 points

-Fine cut presentation: 25 points

Total points production: 80 points

Total = 200 points

Late Submission Policy

Don't plan to turn in late assignments, as there is no guarantee late assignments will be accepted. In fairness to those students who meet deadlines, if you turn in an assignment late, 1 letter grade will be deducted per week that the assignment is late. If you will be absent the day an assignment is due, make arrangements to submit the assignment before you will be absent.

Excused Late Submissions

In some rare cases, late work will be accepted without penalty. Email me as soon as possible and provide documentation associated with your reasoning for requesting an excused late submission. **Broken computers and lost project files are never an excuse for a pass on late submission – always back up your work!**

Policy on Electronic Devices, Food and Drink

No electronic devices of any kind are permitted in the classroom at any time. If you must bring them with you, they must be turned off and stored in your bag. They must not be visible at any point during our course meeting time, including during breaks. I am happy to discuss accommodating any accessibility needs for electronic devices in the classroom.

Eat before (or after) you come to class, or very quickly during a break. Drinks allowed in lidded bottles. Please respect the Roxy Theater's willingness to host our class by cleaning up any trash or spills.

After a first warning, any student who violates these policies will be marked absent for the class meeting and lose points on their attendance/participation grade.

How to Earn the Grade That You Want

- Arrive to class on time, and don't miss class.
- Arrive to class ready to watch and listen with your full attention.
- Take notes during class and during films, participate in discussions.
- Schedule regular time to work on the course throughout the week.
- Thoroughly read all assignment info and be sure to meet all requirements.
- Turn your assignments in on time.
- Start your work early so you can ask questions before the deadline.
- Communicate with the professor. Ask for clarifications, ask for help. Come to office hours.
- Read all assigned readings, every week. Research other writing about the films.
- Read and know the information on this syllabus! Refer back throughout the course.

Other Course Policies

Plagiarism, Cheating and Academic Dishonesty

I take academic dishonesty very seriously. Plagiarism means using any text, in whole or in part, that you did not write. This means – do not copy and paste anything, from anywhere, into your written assignments. Any written work I suspect may contain plagiarized material will be scanned with a plagiarism detection application. Any plagiarized work, in whole or in part, will result in a 0 grade with no option to make up those points. On second offense, the student will be reported to the Dean of Students for violation of the conduct code. The repercussions are serious – don't risk it.

Sensitive Subject Matter & Censorship

This course operates under a no censorship policy, and you should feel free to experiment with challenging topics in your projects. That said - if you submit work with violent or sexually explicit themes, containing hate speech, racial slurs or other sensitive subject matter, I might contact you to request more background information on your choices.

Be Kind

Be respectful to each other, help each other, and be considerate in your communications with everyone involved in the course. No trolling shared work and ideas. Be constructive with any critical feedback you give. Interact with Roxy Theater staff members in a respectful manner.

Academic Misconduct and Student Conduct Code

All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or disciplinary sanction by the University.

All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The code is available online at http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php

Accessibility

I am happy to work with you and provide reasonable accommodations for any accessibility concern. Be in touch with me as soon as possible.

Schedule

Week 1: 1/28 What is a Documentary?

- New Assignments: QCQ
- Assigned Reading: Crafting Truth – “Introduction” chapter, “Documentary Modes” excerpt by Bill Nichols, “First Principles of Documentary” by John Grierson

Week 2: 2/4 Rendering the Real

- Assignments Due Today: QCQ
- New Assignments: Reflection paper #1 due 2/11, QCQ, 1st note check is next week
- Assigned Reading: Crafting Truth – “Authenticity” chapter, “I Walk the Line” article by Kent Jones (Moodle)

Week 3: 2/11 Constructions of Truth

- Assignments Due Today: Reflection paper #1, notes, QCQ
- New Assignments: QCQ
- Assigned Reading: Crafting Truth – “Evidence” chapter, “Relational Filmmaking: A Manifesto” by Julie Perini (Moodle)

Week 4: 2/18 Authority: Radical Representations

- Assignments Due Today: QCQ
- New Assignments: QCQ, Reflection paper #2 due 2/25;
- Big Sky Documentary Film Festival 2/19 – 2/28:** You will choose a film from a list of selected films to attend, and report on that film in a short response paper (Reflection paper #3, due 3/10).
- Assigned Reading: Crafting Truth – “Authority” chapter, “Kill the Documentary As We Know It” Jill Godmillow (Moodle)

Week 5: 2/25 Big Sky Documentary Film Festival

- Class will attend Big Sky Documentary Film Festival Pitch competition
- Be sure to take notes during pitches – you will be doing a pitch later in the class

- Assignments Due Today: QCQ, Reflection paper #2
- New Assignments: QCQ, Reminder: Reflection paper #3 on Big Sky Doc FF due 3/10
- Assigned Reading: Crafting Truth – “Camerawork” chapter, “How to Create a Documentary Character” from the British Film Institute (Moodle)

Week 6: 3/3 Camera-Eye

- Assignments Due Today: QCQ
- New Assignments: QCQ, Reflection paper #3 BSDFF due 3/10
- Assigned Reading: Crafting Truth – “Responsibility” chapter, other short reading TBA (Moodle)

Week 7: 3/10 Ethics & Responsibility

*Start productions – Pre-production, idea generation

- Assignments Due Today: Reflection paper #3
- New Assignments: QCQ, pre-production – brainstorming projects, generate project ideas list and pitching project ideas to each other next class or before,
- Assigned Reading: Crafting Truth – “The Profilmic” chapter, other short article TBA (Moodle)

Week 8: 3/17 Documentary Scenes

*Pre-production continues

- Assignments Due Today: QCQ, Project ideas
- New Assignments: Group project pitches (8 – 10 mins per group, timed, + short Q&A and feedback notes from peers)
- Assigned Reading: Crafting Truth – “Sounds” chapter, example doc film proposals (Moodle), “What’s Real Gets More Creative” Larry Rohter (Moodle)

Week 9: 3/24 Sonic Realities

*Production – Pitches in class

- Assignments Due Today: QCQ, Pitches
- New Assignments: QCQ, Reminder- Reflection paper #4 due 3/31
- Assigned Reading: Crafting Truth – “Argument” chapter, filmmaker interview TBA (Moodle),

Week 10: 3/31 Shaping the Real, Part 1

*Production continues

- Assignments Due Today: Reflection paper #4
- New Assignments: Reflection paper #5 due 4/14, productions continue over break, be

ready to present 5 min clips on 4/14, QCQ

-Assigned Reading: Crafting Truth – “Editing” chapter, other short reading TBA (Moodle)

Week 11: 4/7 Spring Break

**Productions continue*

Week 12: 4/14 Shaping the Real Part 2

**Post-Production begins*

**Present initial clips, 5 min or less*

-Assignments Due Today: 5 min clip selection presentation, Reflection paper #5, QCQ

-New Assignments: QCQ, post-production continues

-Assigned Reading: Crafting Truth – “Dramatic Stories, Poetic and Essay Documentaries” chapter

Week 13: 4/21 Telling Personal Stories

**Post-production continues*

-Assignments Due Today: QCQ

-New Assignments: Rough cut critiques next week, Reflection paper #6 due 5/5

-Assigned Reading: Filmmaker interview TBA (Moodle)

Week 14: 4/28 Rough Cut Critiques

**Post-production continues*

**Rough cut critiques*

-Assignments Due Today: Rough cuts

-New Assignments: reminder Reflection paper #6 due 5/5

-Assigned Reading: short reading TBA (Moodle)

Week 15: 5/5 Endings and Revisions

**Last regular class meeting*

**Post-production continues*

-Assignments Due Today: Reflection paper #6

-New Assignments: Finish films, self-reflection and group evaluation

Final: 5/12, Time TBD

Our university scheduled final exam time is 8:00AM – 10:10AM. Ouch. I would like us to meet at our regularly scheduled course meeting time of 10:10AM – 1:00PM. Please

check with your other courses to ensure there is not a conflict in the final exam schedule ASAP.

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Some Rules for Students and Teachers

By John Cage

RULE ONE: Find a place you trust, and then try trusting it for a while.

RULE TWO: General duties of a student - pull everything out of your teacher; pull everything out of your fellow students.

RULE THREE: General duties of a teacher - pull everything out of your students.

RULE FOUR: Consider everything an experiment.

RULE FIVE: be self-disciplined - this means finding someone wise or smart and choosing to follow them. To be disciplined is to follow in a good way. To be self-disciplined is to follow in a better way.

RULE SIX: Nothing is a mistake. There's no win and no fail, there's only make.

RULE SEVEN: The only rule is work. If you work it will lead to something. It's the people who do all of the work all of the time who eventually catch on to things.

RULE EIGHT: Don't try to create and analyze at the same time. They're different processes.

RULE NINE: Be happy whenever you can manage it. Enjoy yourself. It's lighter than you think.

RULE TEN: "We're breaking all the rules. Even our own rules. And how do we do that? By leaving plenty of room for X quantities." (John Cage)

HINTS: Always be around. Come or go to everything. Always go to classes. Read anything you can get your hands on. Look at movies carefully, often. Save everything - it might come in handy later.