

Department of English & Writing Studies
Film Studies Program

Documentary Film
Film 2275G (001)
Winter 2018

Instructor: Professor Chris Gittings

Course Date/Time: Monday 12:30pm-3:30pm

Course Location: 3B04 Arts & Humanities
Building

Screenings: Tuesday 3:30pm-5:30pm

Prerequisites: At least 60% in Film Studies 1020E or Film Studies 1022 or permission of the Department.

Course Description

“Non-fiction contains any number of ‘fictive’ elements, moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention.”
Michael Renov in *Theorizing Documentary: 2*

Historically, the dominant perception of documentary or non-fiction cinemas is that they teach us about the ‘real’ world by documenting truth transparently. However, this course will consider documentary as a form of representation and as such, trouble its relationship to the ‘objective reality’ it seeks to represent. What is at stake in representing the ‘historical real’? What issues of selection and mediation intrude between the reality unfolding in front of the lens and the projection of that reality on a screen? As theorists such as Michael Renov and Bill Nichols argue, although a documentary film references the historical world and actual people, it also constructs an audience’s understanding of this world and its inhabitants through point of view and the post-production process.

Early practitioners and theorists of documentary were well aware of this contradiction; John Grierson, the so-called ‘father’ of documentary film and one of its first theorists describes documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality,” but audiences were frequently unaware of this creative element, often reading documentary film as ‘true’. To begin to answer the questions posed above, the course will examine the theoretical and historical development of non-fiction filmmaking from the work of early pioneers like the Lumières in late 19th-century France and **John Grierson** in early 20th-century United Kingdom and Canada to more contemporary and innovative filmmakers who complicate and innovate documentary’s basic conventions by questioning notions of objectivity, reality and verisimilitude.

Collectively we will pose the following questions:

- What is documentary?
- How did documentary filmmaking get started?
- Why are ethical issues central to documentary filmmaking?
- What makes documentaries engaging and persuasive?
- How have documentaries addressed political and social issues?
- How can we differentiate between documentary modes and models?

A provisional list of course screenings in documentary:

Actualités and Attractions—Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory (1895), *Arrival of a Train*, 1895) (AAVV, c. 1895 – 1910)
F for Fake (Orson Welles, 1973)
In the Land of the Head Hunters (Edward S. Curtis, 1914)
Nanook of the North (Robert Flaherty, 1922)
Man with a Movie Camera (Tziga Vertov, 1929)
Song of Ceylon (Basil Wright, 1934)
Triumph of the Will (Leni Riefenstahl, Germany, 1935, 110 min)
Listen to Britain (Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAllister, 1942)
Night and Fog (Alain Resnais, 1960)
Shoah (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) excerpts
Now (Santiago Álvarez, 1965) 5m
LBJ (Santiago Álvarez, 1968) 18m
Ryan (Chris Landreth, 2004)
Cocalero (Alejandro Landes, 2006)
Fig Trees (John Greyson, 2009)
Gasland (Josh Fox, 2010)
The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, & Christine Cynn, 2012)
Trick or Treaty? (Alanis Obomsawin, 2014)
Citizenfour (Laura Poitras, 2014)
My Prairie Home (Chelsea McMullan, 2014)
Trumpland (Michael Moore, 2016)
Fahrenheit 9/11 (Michael Moore, 2004) excerpts
I Am Not Your Negro (Raoul Peck, 2016)
Do Not Resist (Craig Atkinson, 2016)

Course Materials

Required Text: Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* 3rd Edition (Indiana UP, 2017)
Available from the Bookstore. Plus additional readings to be posted on OWL.