

Course Syllabus

VPAS 6360 - Spring 2026

Classroom: JO 4.708

Thursday 1-3:45pm

Dr. Shilyh Warren

Office hours: Thursday after class and by appointment.

VPAS 6360 – Documentary Cinema

Expectations: Keep up with the assigned materials & submit all assignments on time. When in doubt, email me or connect with me on Teams.

The Living Syllabus: The google version of this syllabus will always be the most up-to-date. I will make you aware of changes well in advance, and usually, changes are minor and meant to make success easier rather than harder. However, I strongly recommend that you **not** print out a hard copy of this syllabus, which is subject to change at the professor's discretion.

<https://go.utdallas.edu/syllabus-policies>

Course description: Is it the golden age of documentary, or is all that glitters not quite gold? Without a doubt, documentaries are enjoying massive popularity around the globe and over a variety of media platforms. In this class, we focus on documentary films produced after the massive technological and aesthetic shifts of the 1960s, when mobile cameras changed documentaries for good. Our goal is to survey the range of themes, techniques, stories, and desires that make up contemporary documentary films. In an age of fake news and accepted media bias, what truths or forms of authenticity -- if any -- do documentary films produce? What do we do with the knowledge and emotional experiences we glean from documentaries? What forms of engagement and interactivity can we produce in response to contemporary documentaries? And finally, what has the marketplace done to shape documentaries around narrative and story, and at what cost?

Learning Outcomes

After taking this class, students will be able to:

- Identify and describe major trends in contemporary documentary in terms of industry, form, themes, and both critical and popular reception
- Analyze and interpret the cinematic strategies in a range of documentary films
- Write analytical essays about films, using the disciplinary approaches and the critical vocabulary of film studies
- Understand and synthesize academic scholarship about contemporary documentary
- Use creative approaches to respond to themes and ideas in contemporary documentary

Required Course Materials:

- Most readings are either hyperlinked to this syllabus or available through our Library Course Reserves on e-learning.

Accessing the films: Many of our films are available on Kanopy, which you can access through the UTD Library website. You may also need to rent a few films online.

Class Recordings: The instructor may record meetings of this course. Any recordings will be available to all students registered for this class as they are intended to supplement the classroom experience. Students are expected to follow appropriate University policies and maintain the security of passwords used to access recorded lectures. Unless the Office of Student AccessAbility has approved the student to record the instruction, students are expressly prohibited from recording any part of this course. Recordings may not be published, reproduced, or shared with those not in the class, or uploaded to other online environments except to implement an approved Office of Student AccessAbility accommodation. If the instructor or a UTD school/department/office plans any other uses for the recordings, consent of the students identifiable in the recordings is required prior to such use unless an exception is allowed by law. Failure to comply with these University requirements is a violation of the [Student Code of Conduct](#).

Class Materials: The Instructor may provide class materials that will be made available to all students registered for this class as they are intended to supplement the classroom experience. These materials may be downloaded during the course; however, these materials are for registered students' use only. Classroom materials may not be reproduced or shared with those not in class, or uploaded to other online environments except to implement an approved Office of Student AccessAbility accommodation. Failure to comply with these University requirements is a violation of the [Student Code of Conduct](#).

Success: Are you nervous about succeeding in this class or your other classes? Maybe you're not sure how to manage your time or write solid papers, or give presentations. Whatever it is, please get in touch with me and let's find a solution.

Late work: I accept late work as long as you submit a request for approval at least 24 hours before the deadline.

Attendance: Attendance is expected at all class sessions. If you're unable to attend class, please let me know in advance.

Assignments and Evaluation:

Please submit every assignment to the appropriate forum in e-learning.

1. Discussion Sheet = 15 points
2. Aysynchronous *Response Essay* (2) = 30 points (15 x 2)
3. Short Analysis Papers (2) = 30 points (15 x 2)
4. Final Paper = 25 points

1. Discussion Sheet

***Due 24 hours before the class you've signed up for.**

Each student should sign up to provide discussion materials for one class session this semester. You sign up by adding a comment with your name to the week you would like to claim.

Please prepare a one-page discussion sheet that includes: 3-4 key quotes from each reading and 6-8 discussion questions that provoke discussion. You should include questions that verify that we all understand the readings (e.g., "What is the main argument?") as well as more original questions that provoke discussion about connections between the film and the readings. Post your discussion sheet to e-learning. You will also play a role in facilitating the discussion that day in class.

2. Asynchronous Class Response Essays

***Response Essay #1 - January 29 or March 26**

***Response Essay #2 - March 26 or April 9**

Three times during the semester, I offer an asynchronous assignment opportunity. You are responsible for writing two response essays out of these three choices. A reading response forces you to articulate the main arguments and rhetorical strategies employed by the authors we read, and it also asks you to assess the import and significance of those arguments. Each essay should be no less than 750 words and should include the following elements:

- A summary of the main themes and documentary strategies at work in the film(s).
- A detailed description of at least one scene that demonstrates these.
- A summary of the main argument in the reading(s).
- Two quotes from each reading that encapsulate the author's main argument.
- An assessment of why the argument matters – whether that is to the field at large or to your personal thinking about the topic.

Each essay should be devoted to a single class session and must include a summary and assessment of all the material assigned for that session.

3. Two Short Analysis Papers (5-7 pages)

***Paper 1: 2/26 draft due for in-class peer review. 3/1 due to e-learning.**

***Paper 2: 4/2 draft due for in-class peer review. 4/8 due to e-learning.**

Twice, you will write a well-researched, persuasively argued [analysis of a film](#), director, genre of documentary, or a critical concept relevant to contemporary documentary. Sometimes this form of writing is called an "[argument essay](#)" and it is the most prevalent form of academic writing in the

US. I like the writing resources [here](#) for guidance on everything from writing good paragraphs to strong conclusions.

- Your paper must be 100% *original* work, which means that it was *not* written with the assistance of an LLM or other form of AI, and has not previously been submitted for a grade anywhere and anytime. Your paper also must be very clearly connected to the themes, films, and readings from *this class*.
- Your paper must incorporate at least two readings from this syllabus.
- Your paper must have a clear and obvious [main claim](#) (which we also call a thesis statement or argument). It should appear early in the paper, usually at the end of the [introduction](#).
- Your paper should include strong [paragraphs](#) that present and analyze evidence in support of the main argument.
- Your paper must use evidence from the films and readings you choose to incorporate in the form of close readings of scenes from the film and properly formatted citations from the readings.
- Your paper must arrive at a viable [conclusion](#).
- I encourage you to write about films on this syllabus, but you may also choose to write about a film that is not on this syllabus.

Each paper will go through a round of [peer-review](#) before it is submitted to me. The goal of a peer review is to benefit from a peer reader who can help you decide if you have achieved the objective you propose in your thesis. We will set class time aside for peer-review sessions before submission deadlines.

3. Final Paper (12-15 pages)

***Draft due May 7 in class. Final submission May 12 on e-learning.**

Choose one of your 2 Short Analysis Papers (above) and expand into a longer, more elaborate analysis with more sources. One round of peer review is required before submission.

Contemporary Documentary - Course Outline

January 22

Week 1: Introduction to the Class

January 29 - *no in-person class* - **Week 2: What is Documentary?**

Watch before class: [I Am Not Your Negro](#) (Raul Peck, 2016) - [Kanopy] Read before class:

- a) Bill Nichols, Chapter 1: "How Can We Define Documentary Film?" in [Introduction to Documentary, 2nd Edition](#) (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 1-41.
- b) Patricia Aufderheide, "[Defining the Documentary](#)," in *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 1-55.
- c) **Due: Asynchronous Response Essay by 11:59pm.**

Feb 5 - **Week 3: Documentary as Archive**

Watch before class: *Time* (Garrett Bradley, 2020) [rent online]

Read before class:

- a) Jamie Baron, "Introduction" and "Chapter 1: The archive effect," in [The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History](#) (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1-47.
- b) Bill Nichols, Chapters 6 and 7 in [Introduction to Documentary, 2nd edition](#) (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 142-211.
- c) Optional: Yasmina Price, "[Tearing, Stitching, Quilting: The Abolition Poetics of Garrett Bradley](#)," *Film Quarterly* 75.1 (2021).

Feb 12 - **Week 4: Documentary as Advocacy**

Watch before class: [Housing Problems](#) (Edgar Antsey and Arthur Elton, 1935) and [The Gleaners and I](#) (Agnes Varda, 2000) [Kanopy]

Read before class:

- a) Erik Barnouw, "Advocate," in [Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film](#) (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 84-139.
- b) Brian Winston, "The Tradition of the Victim in Griersonian Documentary," in *The Documentary Film Reader*, edited by Jonathan Kahana (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 763-775.
- c) Larissa Pham, "[The Gleaners and I and I](#)," *The Criterion Collection* (Nov 12, 2021).
- d) **Discussion of Paper #1**

Feb 19 - **Week 5: Documentary as Ethnographic Spectacle**

Watch before class: [Nanook of the North](#) (Robert Flaherty, 1922) [Kanopy] and *Reassemblage* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1983) [Kanopy]

Read before class:

- a) Robert J. Flaherty, "How I Filmed 'Nanook of the North'," *World's Work* (October 1922): 632-640.
- b) Fatimah Tobing Rony, "Taxidermy and Romantic Ethnography: Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*," *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Duke UP, 1996).

- c) Trinh T. Minh-ha, “[On Reassemblage](#) (1982),” in *The Flaberty: Decades in the Cause of Independent Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2017), 167-171.

Feb 26 - **Week 6: Documentary as Vérité**

Watch: [Chronique d'un Été](#) (*Chronicle of a Summer*, Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1960) [Kanopy]

Read:

- a) Michael Renov, “[Rethinking Documentary: Toward a Taxonomy of Mediation](#),” *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3/4 (1986), 71-77.
- b) Jean Rouch with Dan Georgakas, Udayan Gupta and Judy Janda, “[The Politics of Visual Anthropology](#),” in *The Documentary Film Reader*, 478-489.
- c) Edgar Morin, “[Chronicle of a Film](#) (1962),” in *The Documentary Film Reader*, 461-472.
- d) **Peer Review Session for Paper #1 - Bring a hardcopy of a full draft to class.**
- e) **Paper 1 due by 3/1 at 11:59pm.**

March 5 - **Week 7: Documentary as Observation**

Watch: [Excerpt](#) from [Cinema Verite: Defining the Moment](#) and [Cameraperson](#) (Kristen Johnson, 2016)

Read:

- a) Nichols, Chapters 2-3 in [Introduction to Documentary, 2nd edition](#) (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 42-93.
- b) Patricia White, “Woman with a Movie Camera: Gender and Documentary Sustainability,” *Radical Equalities and Global Feminist Filmmaking: An Anthology* (Vernon Press, 2022).

March 12 - **Week 8: Feminist Documentary Forms**

Watch: *Four Daughters* (Kaouther Ben Hania, 2023), *Granny's Sexual Life* (2021), [Measures of Distance](#) (Mona Hatoum, 1988)

Read:

- a) Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, “[Introduction](#),” in *Feminism and Documentary* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 1-36.
- b) Shilyh Warren and Najmeh Moradiyan-Rizi, “Introduction,” *Women and Global Documentary: Practices and Perspectives in the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury P, 2025), 1-8.
- c) Shilyh Warren and Christine Veras, “Feminist Animated Documentary: Ways of Confronting Violence Against Women,” *Women and Global Documentary: Practices and Perspectives in the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury P, 2025), 73-96.
- d) Discuss **Project: Exploring Form**

March 19 - **Week 9: Spring Break - No class**

March 26 - **SCMS - no in-person class - Week 10: Queering Documentary**

Watch: *El silencio es un cuerpo que cae* (Agustina Comedi, 2017) and [Hide and Seek](#) (Su Friedrich, 1996)

Read:

- a) Michael Renov, "[New Subjectivities: Documentary and Self-Representation in the Post-verify Age](#)," *The Subject of Documentary* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 2004), 171-181.]
- b) Lorena Cervera, "Affective Relations and First-Person Enunciation: Daughters/Filmmakers Reformulate the Latin American Documentary," *Women and Global Documentary: Practices and Perspectives in the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2025), 97-112.
- c) **Due: Asynchronous Response Essay due at 11:59pm.**

April 2 - **Week 11: Essay films**

Watch: *Terra Femme* (Courtney Stephens, 2021) and [Sans Soleil](#) (Chris Marker, 1983)

Read:

- a) Laura Rascarolli, "[The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments \(2009\)](#)," *Essays on the Essay Film* (New York: Columbia UP, 2017), 183-196.
- b) Michael Renov, "[The Subject in History: The New Autobiography in Film and Video](#) (1989)," in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 2004), 104-119.
- c) **Peer Review Session for Paper #2 - Bring a hard copy of a full draft to class.**
- d) **Paper 2 due by April 8th at midnight.**

April 9 - **no in-person class - Week 12: Documentary Testimony & Evidence**

Watch: *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator* (Pamela Yates, 2011)

Read:

- a) Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker, "Introduction: Moving Testimonies," *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1-34.
- b) **Due: Asynchronous Response Essay due at 11:59pm.**

April 16 - **Week 13: Documentary Witnessing**

Watch: *The Missing Picture* (Rithy Pahn, 2013)

Read:

- a) Leshu Torchin, "Introduction: Screen Media and Witnessing Publics," in [Creating the Witness: Documenting Genocide on Film, Video, and the Internet](#) (U Minnesota P, 2012), 1-20.
- b) Leshu Torchin, "[Mediation and remediation: La parole filmée in Rithy Panh's The Missing Picture](#) (*L'image manquante*)," *Film Quarterly* 68.1 (2014), 32-41.

April 23 - **Week 14: Necessary Fictions**

Watch: [Las Hurdes](#) (Luis Buñuel, 1933) and *INAAT/SE* (Adam Shingwak Khalil, Zack Khalil, 2016)

[Kanopy]

Read:

- a) Jill Godmilow, "[Kill the Documentary as We Know it](#)," *Journal of Film and Video* 54.2-3 (Summer/Fall 2022): 3-10.
- b) Toby Lee, "The Radical Unreal: Fabulation and Fantasy in Speculative Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 74.4 (2021): 9-18.
- c) **Critical/Creative Project Due.**

April 30 - Week 15: Beyond Story?

Watch: [A Video Manifesto: Beyond Story](#) (Juhasz and Lebow, 2018)

Read: Selections from Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow, editors, "Beyond Story," [World Records Journal 5](#) (2021):

- "Introduction: Beyond Story," Juhasz and Lebow.
- "Telling Something Else: Documentary Beyond (Hi)story," Alex Johnston.
- "Assembly Over Algorithm: Resisting Overnarrativization," Rick Prelinger.
- "The Irresistible Rise of Story: Documentary Film and the Historical Transformation of Radical Commitments," Paige Sarlin.
- "All that Glitters: Reflections on the Not-So-Golden Age of Documentary Storytelling," Cecilia Aldarondo & Samara Chadwick.
- "How Does It End? Story and the Property Form," Brett Story.

May 7 - Week 16: Project Viewing and Final Paper [Peer Review](#) Sessions

- a) Bring a hardcopy of the draft of your final paper to class.

***Final Paper Due May 12, 2026.**