

## **Course Syllabus**

### **Course Information**

FILM 3321 – Contemporary Documentary Film

Spring 2017

Thursdays 1-3:45pm

GR 4.204

### **Professor Contact Information**

Dr. Shilyh Warren

Office Phone: 972-883-6316

Office Location: JO 5.112

Office Hours: Tuesdays 12-2 and/or by appointment

### **Course Description**

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 1980s, including some of the most popular documentary projects of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our goal is to survey the range of themes, techniques, stories, and experiences offered by contemporary documentary films. In an age of fake-news and accepted media bias, what truths or forms of authenticity do documentary films produce? What do we do with the knowledge and emotional experiences we gain from documentaries? What forms of engagement and interactivity can we produce in response to contemporary documentaries?

### **Learning Outcomes**

After taking this class students will be able to:

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

### **Required Textbook and Course Materials**

Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford UP, 2007) ISBN: 978-0-19-518270-5 (pbk.)

All other published course materials will be available on pdf through the UTD library e-reserves.  
<http://utdallas.docutec.com/eres/coursepage.aspx?cid=2124>

Most of the films are available at the UTD Library Media Center

## Assessment

### 50% - 5 Response Essays (500 words each)

You are required to submit 5 written Response Essays throughout the semester. A Response Essay is a form of academic writing that encourages you to describe and synthesize the reading and screening materials for the week on your own before coming to class. 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. These essays are due on e-learning by 10am on the class day you have chosen to write about. For example, if you are writing about the materials for Class 2, your essay is due on Jan 19 at 10am.

Each essay should be no less than 500 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.

### 40% - 1 Documentary Portfolio Consisting of 5 Media Entries

You have two choices for this assignment, depending on whether you want to focus primarily on creative techniques or critical approaches.

Creative: For a Creative Portfolio, you will first need to choose a theme to explore throughout the semester. This might be the environment, your family history, race, college campus sexuality, the city of Dallas, or any number of big themes that interest you. You need to create 5 *related* media objects based on this theme. For example, you may choose to create a **5-part** video series, webpage, podcast, or photo essay. You also need to incorporate a range of techniques, such as: interviews, original or stock visuals, research, data, narrative, voice-over, and/or text. We – as a class – will check in with you throughout the semester to support your project. In order to pursue this project, you will need to:

- Submit a treatment (or project proposal) by Mar 9
- Meet with your peer reviewer to review your respective projects and include a summary of this meeting with your final project
- Meet with the professor to review your proposal together and include a summary of this meeting with your final project
- Present a very brief description your final portfolio to the class on the last day

Critical: For a Critical Portfolio, you'll need to write 5 review essays related to documentary media. You should choose a theme and find 5 objects of documentary media (audio, film, non-fiction writing...) that deal with that theme. Your reviews essays should use the standards of journalism or non-fiction writing, such as the \* examples provided throughout the syllabus.

Good media reviews include: description (a brief summary of the object's themes and cinematic strategies); analysis (your ideas about what the objects means/asks/offers); and evaluation (whether the object does a good job or not and whom it would appeal to). For more specific guidelines see this handout: [https://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media\\_items/film-review-1.original.pdf](https://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/film-review-1.original.pdf)

In order to pursue this project, you will need to:

- Submit a project proposal that describes the media objects you plan to review by Mar 9
- Meet with your peer reviewer to review your respective projects and include a summary of this meeting with your final project
- Meet with the professor to review your proposal together and include a summary of this meeting with your final project
- Present a very brief description your final portfolio to the class on the last day

### **10% - Class Participation and Attendance**

I expect you to come to class prepared to participate. This means you will have completed all the screening and reading assignments before class. You will also bring necessary materials to class – either in hardcopy or digital format.

Grading Scale:

A+ = Rare*	B+ = 86-89	C+ = 77-79	D+ = 67-69	F = Below 60
A = 95-100	B = 83-85	C = 73-76	D = 63-66	
A- = 90-94	B- = 80-82	C- = 70-72	D- = 60-62	

\*A+ is reserved for the student who goes above and beyond the course expectations by contributing broadly and significantly to the entire learning experience of the community.

### **Course & Instructor Policies**

- You will not use your mobile phone during class lectures or discussions.
- You will not use your laptop for purposes other than taking notes.
- You will not wear headphones during class.
- You will participate in discussions in generous but also judicious ways that take into account the rest of our learning community.
- After 2 absences I lower your participation grade 1 point for each absence.
- If I notice that you are not prepared for class, I will lower your participation grade.
- Excessive tardies or early departures will lower your participation grade.
- In all cases of academic dishonesty, I follow UTD policy and procedures.
- I do not respond to grade questions by email. Please email me to schedule an appointment to answer any questions you may have about your grade.
- If you notice at the midterm that you have a failing grade, I expect you to contact me.
- If life circumstances are affecting your performance in class, I suggest you contact me.
- If you have an idea for an extra credit assignment, contact me. I'm interested to hear it.

## **UT Dallas Syllabus Policies and Procedures**

The information contained in the following link constitutes the University's policies and procedures segment of the course syllabus.

Please go to <http://go.utdallas.edu/syllabus-policies> for these policies.

### **Course Outline:**

#### **Jan 12. Class 1. Introduction**

*Capturing Reality: The Art of Documentary* (Pepita Ferrari, 2008)

#### **Jan 19. Class 2. Defining Documentary**

*Amy* (Asif Kapadia, 2015)

Patricia Aufderheide, "Chapter 1: Defining the Documentary," *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford UP, 2007): 1-55.

John Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary," in *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, Macdonald and Cousins, eds. (1996): 97-102.

#### **Jan 26. Class 3. Analyzing Documentaries**

*Virunga* (Orlando von Einsiedel, 2014)

\*Sheila Curran Bernard, "Keep a Close Watch: Analyzing a Documentary's Strengths and Weaknesses," *Documentary Magazine*, May 17, 2016.

<http://www.documentary.org/column/keep-close-watch-analyzing-documentarys-strengths-and-weaknesses>

Annie Goldson, "Journalism Plus? The Resurgence of Creative Documentary," *Pacific Journalism Review* 21.2 (2015): 86-98.

#### **Feb 2. Class 4. Documentaries are Political I**

13<sup>th</sup> (Ava DuVernay, 2016)

Michelle Alexander, "The New Jim Crow," *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2016): 178-220.

Belinda Baldwin and Bahar, Robert "Docs that Make a Difference: The Politics of Political Documentaries," *International Documentary* 23.3 (April 2004): 12–16.  
<http://www.documentary.org/magazine/docs-make-difference-politics-political-documentaries>

## **Feb 9. Class 5. Documentaries are Political II**

*Citizenfour* (Laura Poitras, 2014)

Patricia Aufderheide, "Chapter 2: Subgenres," *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford UP, 2007): 56-90.

Peter Maass, "How Laura Poitras Helped Snowden Spill His Secrets," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 13, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/magazine/laura-poitras-snowden.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

## **Feb 16. Class 6. Documentaries are Personal**

*Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley, 2012)

In class excerpts:

*Nana Mom and Me* (Amalie Rothschild, 1974)

*Joyce at 34* (Joyce Chopra and Claudia Weill, 1972)

*By Invitation Only* (Rebecca Snedecker, 2006)

Alisa Lebow, "First Person Political," In *The Documentary Film Book*, ed. Brian Winston (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 257-265.

\*Leah Anderst, "Memory's Chorus: *Stories We Tell* and Sarah Polley's Theory of Autobiography," *Senses of Cinema* 69 (December 2013).  
<http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/feature-articles/memorys-chorus-stories-we-tell-and-sarah-polleys-theory-of-autobiography/>

## **Feb 23. Class 7. Killer Docs I**

*Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (Nick Broomfield, 1992)

*Aileen Wuornos: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (Nick Broomfield, 2003)

\*Allison Pearson, "Nick Broomfield: The Fly in the Ointment," *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, Macdonald and Cousins, eds. (1996): 342-350.

Tanya Horeck, "From Documentary to Drama: Capturing Aileen Wuornos," *Screen* 48.2 (2007): 141-159.

## **Mar 2. Class 8: Killer Docs II**

*OJ: Made in America* (Ezra Edelman, 2016) – Parts 1 and 2

Patricia Aufderheide, "Chapter 2: Subgenres," *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford UP, 2007): 91-124.

\*A.O. Scott, Review: "'O.J.: Made in America,' an Unflinching Take on His Rise and Fall," *New York Times*, May 19, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/20/movies/oj-made-in-america-review.html>

Greg Howard, "Why 'Transcending Race' is a Lie," *New York Times Magazine*, June 17, 2016.

"Why Revisit O.J. Simpson?" Interview with Ezra Edelman at *Pure Nonfiction* podcast. <http://podbay.fm/show/1102957639/e/1465455642?autostart=1>

## **Mar 9. Class 9. Documentaries Change Lives**

*The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1987)

\*Charles Musser, "The Thin Blue Line: A Radical Classic," <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/3500-the-thin-blue-line-a-radical-classic>

David Resha, "The Thin Blue Line," *The Cinema of Errol Morris* (Weslyan UP, 2015): 49-81.

Errol Morris, "Play it Again, Sam (Re-enactments, Part One)," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2008.

## **Mar 13 – Mar 18: SPRING BREAK**

**Mar 23. No Class.**

## **Mar 30. Class 10. Documentaries of Changing Lives I**

*Queen of Versailles* (Lauren Greenfield, 2012)

\*Rose Lichter-Marck, "Money Changes Everything: An Interview with Lauren Greenfield," *Rookie*, May 23, 2013. <http://www.rookiemag.com/2013/05/money-changes-everything-an-interview-with-lauren-greenfield/>

Charles Warren, "Cinema Direct and Indirect: American Documentary 1960-1975," *The Wiley-Blackwell Guide to American Film* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013): 56-71.

## **Apr 6. Class 11. Documentaries of Changing Lives II**

*When the Levees Broke* (Spike Lee, 2006)

Anna Hartnell, "When the Levees Broke: Inconvenient Truths and the Limits of National Identity," *African American Review* 45.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2012): 17-31.

## **Apr 13. Class 12. Documentaries are Fake and Funny**

*This is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1984)

*Best in Show* (Christopher Guest, 2000)

Craig Hight, "The Mockumentary," *Contemporary Documentary*, eds. Daniel Marcus, Selmin Kara (London and NY: Routledge, 2016): 26-41.

## **Apr 20. Class 13. Fake and Funny and Serious**

*Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Larry Charles, 2006)

Leshu Torchin, "Cultural Learnings of Borat Make for Benefit Glorious Study of Documentary," *Film and History* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 53-63.

## **Apr 27. Class 14. Animated Documentary**

*Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008)

Patricia Aufderheide, "Chapter 3: Conclusion," *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford UP, 2007): 125-146.

Bella Honess Roe, "Animated Documentary." In *Contemporary Documentary*, eds. Daniel Marcus, Selmin Kara (London and NY: Routledge, 2016).