COM/ENG 355
History of Documentary Film
Spring 2015

Dr. Michael R. Ogden
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Meeting Times & Location
Tuesday & Thursday 10:00–11:50 AM Black Room 152

Course Overview

Catalog description: Survey of documentary history from 1895 to present. Focus on philosophy of documentary approach, overview of the most important topics and issues, and development of critical standards in the genre. Prerequisites: COM 201 or FVS 250, or permission of instructor.

What this class actually “is”: COM/ENG 355 is designed to be a survey course combining lectures, film screenings and discussions with the aim of providing an introduction to the history of documentary and the questions of ideology, aesthetics, representation and ethics in which this genre is grounded. The course will review the history of documentary through a number of key producer-directors as well as documentary movements with attention given to the evolution of documentary film language (including responses to changes in the technology of production) and the ethics of representation. By the end of this course, students should be able to identify the formative strands of documentary history and theory as they continue to operate in contemporary cultural productions. Specifically, students will:

• Develop a critical approach for examining the historical evolution of the documentary film.
• Be able to identify & address questions germane to understanding documentary’s overall impact on history & culture.
• Demonstrate knowledge of how documentary has become a part of societal commentary and helped shape our sense of the “other” and ourselves.

Requirements & Assignments

Students are expected to attend class regularly, be well prepared, and complete all readings and assignments by the designated due dates. **NO EXTENSIONS FOR ASSIGNMENTS OR INCOMPLETES GIVEN!** There are several ways for students to demonstrate their command of the subject matter covered in this course: (A) Exams covering lectures & assigned readings, consisting mostly of true/false &/or short answer questions; and, (B) Written Assignments; to be discussed later in class. Each course requirement will count towards the final grade as follows:

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<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Three Exams</td>
<td>45%</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-Class Screening Reviews</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Paper</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Documentary Scene Analysis</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attendance &amp; Participation</td>
<td>Good Karma!</td>
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Grading Scale for Assignments

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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>100–92 = A</td>
<td>87–79 = B</td>
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<tr>
<td>91–90 = A-</td>
<td>78–77 = B-</td>
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<tr>
<td>89–88 = B+</td>
<td>76–75 = C+</td>
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<td>74–66 = C</td>
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<td>61–52 = D</td>
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<td>51–50 = D-</td>
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<td>49–00 = F</td>
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ADA Support

Students with disabilities who wish to set up academic adjustments in this class should provide the instructor with a copy of their Confirmation of Eligibility for Academic Adjustments form from the Disability Support Services Office and schedule an appointment to discuss such adjustments with the instructor by the second week of class. Students without this form should contact the Disability Support Services Office via email at dissrecept@cwu.edu, or call 963-2171.

Required & Recommended Text(s)


At the instructor’s discretion, other readings may be assigned. Such materials will be placed on reserve or distributed in class.

Exams

There will be three (3) NON-CUMULATIVE exams, each covering all lecture material and reading assignments up to the day of the exam. Each exam will have the same structure; a selection of true/false, multiple choice &/or short answer (AKA, terms &/or concepts identification) questions followed by at least one essay question where students are expected to present and defend their opinion on one or more of the "subjective" issues discussed in class. Details will be discussed in class prior to each exam.

In-Class Screening Reviews

Throughout the quarter the class will be screening documentary films representative of the historical period under discussion that week &/or considered seminal works of the time. The entire class period will be devoted to the screening and discussion of the specific film. Of the eight (8) scheduled screenings, students will be expected to write a 3-4 page analytical review (typed, double-spaced, 1-inch margins, times-roman 12-point font) of at least six (6) of the films screened in class. More details will be provided at the time of the first in-class screening.

Documentary Scene Analysis

Understanding a documentary film requires not only a comprehension of its overall themes, techniques, and ideology, but also how each element contributes to the whole. As a way of practicing analytic skills on a smaller (but no less important) scale, students will choose and critically analyze one DVD chapter from the Academy Award winning film, 20 Feet From Stardom (2013). This is an analytical essay (not a research paper) of approximately 5-6 pages (typed, double-spaced, 1-inch margins, times-roman 12-point font). More details will be provided in class at the time of the assignment.

Research Paper

Students will be encouraged to choose either an influential documentary producer/director and provide a retrospective on their influence &/or contributions to documentary, or select a seminal documentary film and write an extensive analysis of its influence on documentary form as well as societal influences. More details will be provided in class at a later date.

Attendance & Participation

Attendance in this course is MANDATORY as is active participation and contribution to in-class discussions. During most class meetings an attendance sheet will be circulated that students are responsible for signing. If a student has medical documentation for missing class (doctor's note denoting the student’s eligibility to return to class— not a receipt that they visited a clinic) then that day’s absence will not
count against the student. Other instances that may be excused should be discussed in advance with the instructor (and supported with corroborating evidence). After the first unexcused absence, each subsequent unexcused absence lowers the student’s grade. If a student misses two (2) or more classes, ten (10) points will be deducted (per absence) from the student’s total course score. Determination of any (un)excused absence is at the instructor’s sole discretion.

**Can I Get Extra Credit?**

After the 5th week of instruction, students feeling the need for extra credit should consult with the instructor to make sure their “academic karma” is balanced—in other words, near perfect attendance and no outstanding assignments! Any missing assignments must be made-up for little or no credit prior to any extra credit being allowed (that’s why it’s called “extra credit” and not “instead of” credit!). Once eligibility is determined, extra credit is available on a case-by-case basis. However, extra credit is NOT available to students wishing to make-up for a poor attendance & participation record!

**Course Schedule**

We will endeavor to adhere to the following schedule but reserve the right to be flexible! Any modifications will be announced in class &/or distributed in advance via email.

**Note:** Dates marked by an ➪ indicate an exam or assignment deadline (typically in class).

**Week 1 — Ways to Think About Documentary**

Mar. 31 INTRO: Representing “Reality”

Apr. 01 LECTURE: Ethics of the Documentary “Gaze”

Readings:


**Syllabus & Course Expectations**

**Week 2 — Documentary’s Beginnings: 1922–1929**

Apr. 07 LECTURE: Flaherty, Vertov & the European Avant-Garde

Apr. 09 SCREENING: Robert Flaherty (1922) *Nanook of the North*

Seminal documentary—seems like ethnographic observation but is actually carefully staged.

Readings:

McLane (2012) *A New History of Documentary Film* (2nd Ed), Chaps. 2–4

**Week 3 — An Instrument of Social & Political Views: 1929–1941**

**Apr. 14** SCREENING: Pare Lorentz (1936) *The Plow That Broke the Plains* & (1938) *The River*

Social & economic history of the Great Plains from the time of the settlement of the prairies by cattlemen & farmers through the World War I boom to the years of depression & drought.

Apr. 16 LECTURE: Grierson, Lorentz & Government Documentaries

Readings:

McLane (2012) *A New History of Documentary Film* (2nd Ed), Chaps. 5–6

**Week 4 — An Exam & a Movie... The Perfect Date?**

**Apr. 21** Exam #1

**Apr. 23** SCREENING: Morgan Neville (2013) *20 Feet from Stardom*

Backup singers live in a world just beyond the spotlight. Their voices bring harmony to the biggest music artists, but we’ve had no idea who these singers are or what lives they lead, until now.

**Week 5 — Documentaries: At War & After, from 1939–1961**

Apr. 28 LECTURE: Records of Battle or Indoctrination?

Apr. 30 SCREENING: Frank Capra (1944) *The Battle of China* (“Why We Fight” Series)

Using captured enemy footage, this film explains the necessity of WWII to the American people.

Readings:

McLane (2012) *A New History of Documentary Film* (2nd Ed), Chaps. 7–8
Week 6 — Golden Years of TV Documentary: 1951–1971

May 05 LECTURE: Early TV Documentary
May 07 SCREENING: Robert Drew (1960) Primary
Direct cinema feature that follows presidential hopefuls John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey during the 1960 Wisconsin primary.

Readings:
McLane (2012) A New History of Documentary Film (2nd Ed), Chap. 9

Week 7 — Documentary Becomes Engaged & Vérité: 1953–1970s

May 12 LECTURE: Free Cinema, Social Realism, Direct & Vérité
A harrowing documentary of the Rolling Stones’ 1969 tour, with much of the focus on the tragic concert at San Francisco's Altamont Speedway when 300,000 members of the Love Generation collided with a few dozen Hell's Angels.

Readings:
McLane (2012) A New History of Documentary Film (2nd Ed), Chaps. 10–11

Week 8 — An Exam & a Movie… Another Perfect Date!

May 19 Exam #2
A film that dramatically reenacts the crime scene and investigation of a police officer's murder in Dallas. So powerful and convincing that it helped free an innocent man from prison.

Week 9 — Documentary at the Turn of the Century

May 26 LECTURE: Documentary in the 1980s, 90s & Beyond
May 28 SCREENING: Rebecca Cammisa (2009) Which Way Home
Shows the personal side of immigration through the eyes of children who face harrowing dangers with enormous courage & resourcefulness as they endeavor to make it to the United States.

Readings:
Ellis & McLane (2005) A New History of Documentary Film, Chaps. 12–13 & 15

Week 10 — When is Documentary NOT “Reality”?

June 02 LECTURE: From Documentary to “Reality TV” & Back Again (Kinda…)
A chilling & inventive documentary that examines a country where death squad leaders are celebrated as heroes… a journey deep into the imaginations of mass murderers.

Readings:
McLane (2012) A New History of Documentary Film (2nd Ed), Chaps. 14 & 16

Finals Week

June 09 Exam #3

**10:00AM — 12:00PM**