

## **CMST 4312: Critical Media Theory & Practice Documentary Film & Video**

Spring 2016, TTH 1:30-2:50, 204 Coates

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**Description:** Through readings, screenings, and discussion, we will become acquainted with various approaches to documentary film and video in theory and practice. Our focus will be on the ethical, rhetorical, and creative choices that form conventions and modes documentary filmmakers have developed in their practice and critics have used to describe and analyze how documentaries communicate. We will experiment with some of these choices and possibilities by working on our own short documentary projects. No prior filmmaking experience is necessary; the point of the projects is to learn about the choices available to documentarists and the significance of these in the active mode—to make the theory “go.”

### **Special arrangements this semester**

Dr. Suchy will be at and around McMurdo Station in Antarctica working on a documentary project the first several weeks of the semester (until the last week of February). Mr. McElearney will be your instructor until that time, and he will continue to be a co-instructor when Dr. Suchy returns. He brings a wealth of knowledge about film and communication to the course, and will continue to contribute his insights and teaching across the semester. Due to the remote nature of Dr. Suchy’s location and the extremely limited access she will have to Internet, you should not try to contact her in Antarctica. She will do her best to communicate weekly with Mr. McElearney.

The Antarctica project, which you will hear more about as the semester progresses, will be explained and given context as a part of this class. If you’d like to follow along on the journey, Dr. Suchy is keeping a blog here: <https://beyondthetmostbound.wordpress.com/about/>. However, since Internet access will be limited from Antarctica, updates may be sporadic.

**Text** (ordered at campus B&N; also available in online and in Kindle edition)

Spence, Louise & Vinicius Navarro. *Crafting Truth*. Rutgers UP, 2011.

There will be additional reading material posted to Moodle.

Additional text for Grad Students: Winston, Brian, ed. *The Documentary Film Book*. BFI, 2013.

There will also be essays I will share with you.

You will also need an external hard or flash drive with enough storage space for your projects. If you plan to use tape or memory card based cameras, you may also need blank media for these.

**Equipment:** You will need access to a digital video camera, a computer, and editing software for this class. Students may use the above from Studio 151 (151 Coates). You are welcome to use your own stuff. Cameras in Studio 151 include several Canon Vixia HDs that write to MiniDV tape and some that write to flash memory. There are also brand new GoPros and HD Flip cameras. The Studio has microphones and digital audio recorders. If you borrow Studio 151 equipment, you are responsible for adhering to loaning policies.

For editing, any basic program will do—iMovie or the like, or you may use more advanced software like Final Cut; both are available on the Studio 151 computers. If editing software is new to you, you should consult Studio 151 and/or visit Lynda.com (available free through MyLSU) for tutorials on your own time. The Studio has a server with data storage space. Keep your footage there and it will be available from any computer in the lab (but not off-site). Some students make the mistake of keeping their data on one computer in the lab, and then count on it being unoccupied when you visit. That’s silly! Use the server! If you don’t know how,

just ask a peer mentor or other member of Studio 151 staff. If you want to work on your projects outside of the Studio or move back and forth from there to another location, I recommend you BYO external hard drive. Check for compatibility first. If you are moving large files, you may need to reformat the hard drive in advance of using it.

*Before you start any project, think through your workflow.* Make sure you have the means to capture your data, transfer it to store and work on it, software that will accept the file type and/or software to convert your file type (I recommend the *FREE* and wonderful MPEG Streamclip (easily located through Googling), adequate space on something to write the processed data to, and cables to connect everything. Never assume batteries for anything are charged up when you check out Studio equipment, especially during high demand times. When you borrow something from Studio 151, double check that *you know how to use it and that you know what you need to connect it.* Studio 151 cannot read your mind, and staff does not automatically offer advice—you have to *ask* for it. Just say nicely, “I have not used this camera before; can you help me figure out how to use it for my project?” Or, “How do I set things up so that my data will go on the server?”

### **Assignments and evaluation:**

Researched film presentation with accompanying essay	200 points
Quizzes	200 points
3 video exercises	300 points (100 each)
Synthesis video project (including pitch)	300 points

Grading scale: 967-1000 = A+; 933-966 = A; 900-932 = A-; 867-899 = B+; 833-866 = B; 800-832 = B-; 767-799 = C+; 733-766 = C; 700-732 = C-; 667-699 = D+; 633-666 = D; 600-632 = D- 0-599 = F

### **Graduate students:**

Graduate students enrolled in this course have the same assignments except for extensions to some: for the researched film presentation, they will do a more substantive research project that includes several films, a longer essay, and a longer presentation to the class; to prepare for these they will be assigned additional readings and short written responses and/or meetings to discuss those. Grad students should contact me before January 1 to discuss details.

**Researched film presentation:** Each of you will be assigned to make a presentation that gives the class a critical introduction to an assigned documentary film. For these presentations, you should watch the film, research and read about it, and pull together a 15-minute presentation (time may vary depending on enrollments) that includes clips you select. You’ll be expected to demonstrate fluency with relevant readings and concepts from the course and texts. You should submit a 5-page critical essay about your film, with appropriate citation and referencing, on the day you make your presentation. You will receive more detailed instructions in class.

**Quizzes:** While there is no midterm or final exam in this class, you will take several **unannounced quizzes** during the semester. These cover the reading, screening, and course concepts discussed and presented in class. To do well on the quizzes, you will need to attend regularly and attentively, keep up with the reading, and take notes during presentations and discussions. *We do expect you to read the book. You will not have the material fed to you in lecture. Rather, you will be expected to use the ideas in the reading to discuss films we screen and study, and to make choices in your own video work.*

**Video exercises:** These are short projects designed to acquaint you with the conventions and modes of documentary (both how to use their power, and how to break with them powerfully). You will make, submit, and present to the class three of these during the course of the semester. Typically these are 1-3 minute pieces. Generally you’ll work in teams. Depending on class size and other factors, the assignments may be individual, but your teammates should assist you, and in turn, you should assist them. Part of your grade for these assignments will be based on your teamwork, including how you

support others when the assignments are individual. Figuring out how to work together is up to you, but everyone must do her or his share. Filmmaking is rarely a solo activity; figuring out workable team dynamics, which may vary considerably from team to team and project to project, is always *part of your assignment*.

**Synthesis project:** At the culmination of the course, you will synthesize concepts from the video exercises and films and concepts we have studied to produce a 5 to 10-minute documentary. We'll see where enrollment numbers are when it's time to make the assignment, but currently the plan is that each student will work concurrently on *three* projects: her/his own (as producer, director, and editor), and 2 other projects directed by 2 classmates, for which each of you will serve as writer, cinematographer, sound person, performer, etc. It will be up to each director to assemble her/his team. You will be evaluated for your support of or leadership in peer projects by your peers, and these evaluations will figure into your project grade.

This project requires preliminary approval via a pitch, which will be evaluated as part of your grade for the project. Short (2-3 page) papers that describe your methods for making the video, along with peer evaluations, will also be due when projects are submitted. All steps in the process, including the paper, figure into your grade.

**Attendance and citizenship; late work policies:** Students are expected to be engaged good citizens in this class: attend regularly and come on time prepared with the day's assignment, participate in discussions, listen and be responsive to your classmates and instructor, pay attention in class, refrain from texting and using social media while in class, pull your weight in any group work, follow Studio 151 policies including use of the space and its technologies, support one another as a community of students learning together. It has been my experience that the students who put forth effort in as much of the above as possible also achieve the most success and tend to earn higher grades.

This is a 4000 level class that emphasizes discussion and participation in activities. It is not a class you can attend sporadically, sit in the back, and coast. If that's what you want, please drop this class and give the slot to someone who wants to be here.

Outside of any considerations for illness, late work will be docked a full letter grade for each day it is late, including weekends and days when we don't have class. Presentations and quizzes cannot be made up. In order for any of your work to be screened in class, you must be present. If you miss a screening day, we will not screen your work, and the assignment will be counted as late or not submitted (i.e., a zero). If you know you have to miss a class, it's far better to get out ahead of it and discuss it with your instructors, and/or to turn in any assignments early.

**Accommodation:** If you have a disability that may have some impact upon your work in this class and for which you may require accommodations, please see a Coordinator in the Office for Disability Affairs so that such accommodations may be arranged. After you receive your accommodation letters, please meet with me during the first two weeks of class to discuss the provisions of those accommodations.

**Schedule**      *Subject to change*

Th 1/14            Introductions; screen selections from *Shooting the Past*

T 1/19            Definitions; begin screening *Silverlake Life*

Th 1/21            Chapter 1, Authenticity; continue *Silverlake Life*;

T 1/26            Video exercise 1 assigned; Chapter 2, Evidence; begin screening *Thin Blue Line*

Th 1/28            Chapter 3, Authority; Continue *Thin Blue Line*

T 2/2	Conclude <i>Thin Blue Line</i> and discuss
Th 2/4	Video Exercise 1 due; screen and discuss; Video Exercise 2 assigned
T 2/9	Mardi gras holiday
Th 2/11	Chapter 4, Responsibility; Begin screening <i>Chronicle of a Summer</i> ; Research presentation selections due (see list at end of syllabus)
T 2/16	Continue <i>Chronicle of a Summer</i> ; discuss
Th 2/18	Chapter 5, Argument; Screen <i>Why We Fight: Prelude to War</i>
T 2/23	Video Exercise 2 due; screen and discuss
Th 2/25	Video Exercise 3 assigned; Chapter 6, Dramatic Stories, Poetic and Essay Documentaries; Begin screening, <i>Encounters at the End of the World</i>
T 3/1	Antarctic documentary; continue <i>Encounters</i>
Th 3/3	Antarctic documentary
T 3/8	Chapter 7, Editing; Begin screening from <i>Cinema Verite</i> ;
Th 3/10	Chapter 8, Camerawork Continue <i>Cinema Verite</i> ; excerpts from <i>Titicut Follies</i>
T 3/15	Chapter 9, The Profilmic
Th 3/17	Video Exercise 3 due: screen and discuss
T 3/22	Spring break
Th 3/24	Spring break
T 3/29	Project pitches
Th 3/31	Pitch critiques and planning; Screen <i>Night Mail</i> ; Chapter 10, Sounds

*From this point forward in the class, we will hear your research presentations (that you have been working on since early in the semester) and you need to attend to doing and watching these, but most of your out of class time for this course should be spent working on your projects.*

T 4/5	Research presentations
Th 4/7	No class. Work on projects.
T 4/12	Research presentations
Th 4/14	Research presentations
T 4/19	Research presentations
Th 4/21	Research presentations
T 4/26	Research presentations
Th 4/28	Wrap up
Th 5/5 3-5 PM	Final Exam: Project screenings

## **Films we will screen in class, in whole or in part (NB, we will probably clip others)**

Shooting the Past/Stephen Poliakoff/1999/182" (this is a fiction film)  
Silverlake Life/Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin/1993/99"  
The Thin Blue Line/Errol Morris/1988/103"  
Chronicle of a Summer/Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin/1961/85"  
Why We Fight: Prelude to War/Frank Capra/1942/52"  
Cinema Verité: Defining the Moment/Peter Wintonick/2000/193"  
Titicut Follies/Frederick Wiseman/1967/84"  
Night Mail/Harry Watt and Basil Wright/1936/25"

### Antarctic documentary:

Encounters at the End of the World/Werner Herzog/2007/99"  
Antarctica: A Year on Ice/Anthony Powell/2013/92"  
90 degrees South/Herbert Ponting/1933/72"  
Endurance ("South")/Frank Hurley/1920/88"

### **Presentation films**

Start looking these up; you will be asked for your top 3 choices a few weeks into the semester. If you can't choose, we will choose for you. If you are burning to present something that isn't on this list, talk to us.

4 Little Girls/Spike Lee/1997/102"  
The Act of Killing/Joshua Oppenheimer/2012/115"  
Amy/Asuf Kapadia/2015/128"  
Bear 71/ Leanne Allison and Jeremy Mendes/2012/interactive web documentary, <http://bear71.nfb.ca/#/bear71>  
Bowling for Columbine/Michael Moore/2002/120"  
Bus 174/Felipe Lacerda and Jose Padilha/2002/122"  
Call Me Kuchu/Katherine Fairfax Wright and Malika Zouhali-Worrall/2012/87"  
Capturing the Friedmans/Andrew Jarecki/2003/107  
Cave of Forgotten Dreams/Werner Herzog/2010/90"  
Close-Up/Abba Kiarostami/1990/98"  
Control Room/Jehane Noujaim/2004/84"  
The Cove/Louie Psihoyos and Fisher Stevens/2009/92"  
Don't Look Back/D. A. Pennebaker/1967/96"  
Fast Cheap & Out of Control/Errol Morris/1997/80"  
The Gleaners & I/Agnes Varda/2000/82"  
Grey Gardens//Albert Maysles and David Maysles/1975/100"  
Grizzly Man/Werner Herzog/2005/103"  
Harlan County, USA/Barbara Kopple/1976/103"

Hearts and Minds/Peter Davis/1974/112"  
Louisiana Story/Robert Flaherty/1948/78"  
Man on Wire/James Marsh/2008/94"  
Man with a Movie Camera/Dziga Vertov/1929/68"  
Nanook of the North/Robert Flaherty/1922/79"  
Night & Fog/Alain Resnais/1955/32"  
Paris is Burning/Jennie Livingston/1990/71"  
Primary/Robert Drew/1960/60"  
Reassemblage/Trinh T. Minh-ha/1983/40"  
Restrepo/Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger/2010/93"  
The River/Pare Lorentz/1938/31"  
Roger & Me/Michael Moore/1989/91"  
Salesman/Albert Maysles and David Maysles/1968/85"  
Sans Soleil/Chris Marker/1983/100"  
Sherman's March/Ross McElwee/1985/157"  
Standard Operating Procedure/Errol Morris/2008/116"  
Tabloid/Errol Morris/2010/87"  
Tarnation/Jonathan Caouette/2003/88"  
Tongues Untied/Marlon Riggs/1989/55"  
Triumph of the Will/Leni Reifenshtahl/1935/110"  
The War Game/Peter Watkins/1965/48"