

Spring 2026

Com 350: Documentary Film History and Theory

Room: Williams Hall 128

Instructor: Dr. Andrew Ventimiglia

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Office Hours: Fell 428 / Mondays and Wednesdays 2-3pm, or by appointment

Course Description:

This course provides a historical, philosophical, and theoretical consideration of documentary in film and television.

Course Objectives

- Develop a critical understanding of documentary film and video. Students will demonstrate a substantial increase in general knowledge of documentary media.
- Develop writing skills to begin thinking about constructing documentaries. Students will grow in their capacity to demonstrate ability to write professionally.
- Gain a knowledge of the history of documentary film, technology, theory and techniques.

Required Textbook:

Barnouw, Erik. *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, Second Revised Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. ISBN 978-0195078985

Course Policies

Attendance

Attendance is essential for passing this course. Reading about the information is important but only part of the learning process. A quasi-Socratic approach is used to teach this course, which requires informed participation. Participation in class discussions and in-class assignments is extremely significant in understanding documentary. University sanctioned excuses are accepted.

Reading/ Participation

All reading assignments should be completed before class. Since classroom interaction is primarily in discussion form, the student's ability to articulate ideas expressed in the text will

be imperative. Points will be awarded for participation in discussion. If informed discussion within the class is lacking, quizzes will be given in lieu of participation points.

Absences due to Student Bereavement

Students who experience the death of an immediate family member or relative as defined in the University Student Bereavement Policy will be excused from class for funeral leave, subsequent bereavement, and/or travel considerations. Students are responsible for providing appropriate documentation to the Dean of Students office and for contacting the instructor as soon as possible to make arrangements for completing missed work. More information is available in the [Student Bereavement Policy](#).

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to be honest in all academic work. A student's placement of his or her name on any academic exercise shall be regarded as assurance that the work is the result of the student's own thought, effort, and study. Students who have questions regarding issues of academic dishonesty should refer to the University regulation that outlines unacceptable behaviors in academic matters. It is the student and faculty's responsibility to uphold the principles of Academic Integrity. Academic Integrity is an important part of this University and this course. Academic Integrity is required of you the student and myself as the instructor. Academic Integrity should be used in preparation of this course, in class time, regarding exams, and with regard to written assignments. In certain circumstances (such as cheating or plagiarism) faculty may be required to refer a student(s) to Community Rights & Responsibilities for a violation of Illinois State University's Code of Student Conduct (Quoted from "Community Rights and Responsibilities at Illinois State University").

AI Policy

Generative AI can be used in this course at specified times with proper attribution. In this course, you may use generative AI tools (such as Microsoft Co-Pilot or Adobe Firefly) to complete specific assignments, given instructor guidance and permission, so long as the use of generative AI tools is properly disclosed through in-text citations, quotations, and references. Note that any use of generative AI must be both responsible and ethical. This means that you are required to comply with all privacy laws and research requirements to protect data and must have appropriate permissions to enter data into a generative AI tool. You are encouraged to ask me any questions on ethical use as well as whether data or information may be entered into a generative AI tool.

Student Access and Accommodation Services

Any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability and/or medical/mental health condition should contact Student Access and Accommodation Services at 308 Fell Hall, Office Phone (309) 438-5853, Video Phone (309) 319-7682 or visit the [Student Access website](#).

Mental Health Resources

Life at college can get very complicated. Students sometimes feel overwhelmed, lost, experience anxiety or depression, struggle with relationship difficulties or diminished self-esteem. However, many of these issues can be effectively addressed with a little help. Student Counseling Services (SCS) helps students cope with difficult emotions and life stressors. Student Counseling Services is staffed by experienced, professional psychologists and counselors, who are attuned to the needs of college students. The services are FREE and completely confidential. Find out more at the [Student Counseling Services website](#) or by calling (309) 438-3655.

Campus Safety and Security

Illinois State University is committed to maintaining a safe environment for the University community. Please take a few moments to make sure you are signed up for ISU Emergency Alerts at the [Campus Safety and Security website](#). Also, note the information posted in each classroom about emergency shelters and evacuation assembly areas (both are indicated on stickers inside every classroom). Additional safety information is available on the [Campus Safety and Security website](#).

Contributing to Research

Graduate students and faculty in the School of Communication regularly conduct research and often solicit participation from students. You can find out about ongoing studies at the [School of Communication Research Study Announcement Board](#). If you participate in one of these studies, please let me know, as there may be extra credit opportunities for participating.

Assignments

All assignments (except in-class assignments) must be turned in on time. Missing class deadlines will cost you points toward your final grade (see section on grading). Late work will only be accepted in the event of a death in one's family or an illness documented by a health professional.

Assignment	Point Total
Final Paper	200
Midterm Exam	300
Final Exam	300
Three Quizzes	100
Participation and Attendance	100

Total: 1000 points

Writing Guidelines

You have two final paper topic options:

- 1) How are documentaries used by social and political activists?
- 2) Construct a critical analysis of documentary on a political or social topic.

You may combine these topics. Critically write about what interests you. You can write on either of these topics or combine the two in your paper.

Papers should be between 6-10 pages and should cite at least 5-8 outside sources (in addition to our text). The paper should be well organized. Please craft an appropriate introduction and conclusion. I would suggest using between 3 and 8 major main points in your paper and developing them with evidence, arguments, and examples.

Please format the paper according to an accepted set of style guidelines. APA is accepted as the appropriate style for communication scholarship. Most importantly, please be consistent with your use of style guidelines. Papers will be submitted via Canvas. Formatting guidelines: 1-inch margins; 12-point font in Times New Roman or 11-point font Courier New **only**.

Weekly Class Schedule (All dates tentative)

Important Dates

Date	Assignment
2/16	In-Class Quiz #1 (30 pts)
3/4	Midterm Exam (300 pts)
3/30	In-Class Quiz #2 (40 pts)
4/20	In-Class Quiz #3 (30 pts)
5/7	Final Exam (200 pts) / Paper (300 pts)

Week 4: Actuality and Ethnography

M (2/2): Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions," *Wide Angle* 8.3-4 (1986): 63-70.

W (2/4): Barnouw, "Explorer," 33-51.
Excerpts from Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

Watch: *Nanook of the North* (1922).

Week 5: The Camera Eye

M (2/9): Barnouw, "Reporter," 51-71.

W (2/11): Dziga Vertov, "WE: Variant of a Manifesto" (1922).
Malcolm Turvey, "Can the Camera See? Mimesis in 'Man with a Movie Camera,'" *October* Vol. 89 (Summer 1999): 25-50.

Watch: *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).

Week 6: Poetic Documentary

M (2/16): Barnouw, "Painter," 71-81.
Joris Ivens, "The Making of *Rain*" (1969) and "Reflection on the Avant-Garde Documentary" (1931).

Watch: *The Bridge* (1928)
Rain (1929)

Due: In-Class Quiz #1 (30 points)

W (2/18): Charlotte Hooker, "Jean Vigo's *À Propos de Nice*: Documentary Film and Cinematic Poem," *Literature Film Quarterly* Vol. 4(3) (1976): 251-258.

Watch: *À Propos de Nice* (1930).

Week 7: Social Documentary and Propaganda Part 1

M (2/23): Barnouw, "Advocate," 85-139.

Watch: *Housing Problems* (1935) and *Night Mail* (1936).
The River (1938).

W (2/25): Barnouw, "Bugler," 139-172.
André Bazin, "On *Why We Fight*: History, Documentation, and the Newsreel," (1946).
Watch: Excerpts from *Why We Fight* series (1942-1945).

Week 8: Social Documentary and Propaganda Part 2

M (3/2): Alan Sennett, "Film Propaganda: *Triumph of the Will* as a Case Study," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* Vol. 55, No. 1 (Spring 2014): 45-65.
Watch: Excerpts from *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

W (3/4): In-Class Midterm Exam (300 points)

SPRING BREAK [3/9 to 3/13]

Week 9: Television Documentary

M (3/16): Barnouw, "Poet" and "Chronicler," 185-212.
Watch: *See it Now* episode on Senator McCarthy (1960).

W (3/18): Barnouw, "Promoter," 213-228.
Watch: *Harvest of Shame* (1960).

Week 10: Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema

M (3/23): Barnouw, "Observer," 231-253.
Watch: *Salesman* (1969).

W (3/25): Barnouw, "Catalyst," 253-262.
Dan Yakir and Jean Rouch, "Ciné-Transe: The Vision of Jean Rouch: An Interview," *Film Quarterly* Vol. 31, No. 3 (Spring 1978): 2-11.
Watch: *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961).

Week 11: Revolutionary Documentary

M (3/30): Barnouw, "Guerrilla," 262-293.

Watch: Excerpts from *Hour of the Furnaces* (1968).

Due: **In-Class Quiz #2 (40 points)**

W (4/1): Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Toward a Third Cinema," *Cinéaste* Vol. 4, No. 3 (1970-71): 1-10.

Week 12: Archival Documentary

M (4/6): Barnouw, "Movement," 297-349.

Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," (1983).

Watch: Excerpts from *The Year of the Pig* (1968).
The Atomic Cafe (1982).

W (4/8): Eric Breitbart, "The Burns Effect: Documentary as Celebrity Advertisement," *New England Review* Vol. 28, No. 1 (2007): 168-178.

"Documentary Filmmakers' Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use," (2005).

Watch: Excerpts from *The Civil War* (1990).

Week 13: Errol Morris and Documentary Evidence

M (4/13): Errol Morris with Peter Bates, "Truth Not Guaranteed: An Interview with Errol Morris," (1989).

W (4/15): Shwan Rosenheim, "Interrotroning History: Errol Morris and the Documentary of the Future," from *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, edited by Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996): 219-234.

Watch: Excerpts from *American Dharma* (2018).

Week 14: Self-Reflexive and Postcolonial Documentary

M (4/20): David MacDougall, "Beyond Observational Cinema," (1975).

W (4/22): Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear and the Lure of Authenticity,” (1984).

Watch: *Reassemblage* (1982).

Week 15: Netflix Documentary and Wrapping Things Up

M (4/27): Catalina Iordache, Tim Raats, and Sam Mombaerts, “The Netflix Original documentary, explained: global investment patterns in documentary films and series,” *Studies in Documentary Film* Vol. 17, No. 2 (2023): 151-171.

W (4/29): Final Exam Review

FINAL EXAM WEEK [5/4 to 5/8]

TH (5/7): Final Exam (7:50am to 9:50am)

Due: **Final Paper**