

- SAC 621 (45474)

Theory and Practice of Documentary

Markus Nornes

Office: 6111 Thayer Building

Tel: 763-1314 E-mail: amnornes@umich.edu

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 1:00-3:00 and by appointment

Seminar: Wednesday, 10:00-1:00 pm, 2265NQ

Screenings: Mondays: 6:30-9:00 pm

A Discursive Tour Guide

"Now I, a camera, fling myself along their resultant path, maneuvering in the chaos of movement, recording movement, starting with movements composed of the most complex combinations...My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you." —*Dziga Vertov*

"I was surprised to find that many people automatically assumed that any documentary film would inevitably be objective. Perhaps the term is unsatisfactory, but for me the distinction between the words document and documentary is quite clear. Do we demand objectivity in the evidence presented at a trial? No, the only demand is that each piece of evidence be as full a subjective, truthful, honest presentation of the witness's attitude as an oath on the Bible can produce from him." —*Joris Ivens*

"Yes, the camera deforms, but not from the moment that it becomes an accomplice. At that point it has the possibility of doing something I couldn't do if the camera wasn't there: it becomes a kind of psychoanalytic stimulant which lets people do things they wouldn't otherwise do." —*Jean Rouch*

"A post-modern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of common-sense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect. It is, in a word, poetry—not in its textual form, but in its return to the original context and function of poetry, which, by means of its performative break with everyday speech, evoked memories of

the ethos of the community and thereby provoked hearers to act ethically." —*Stephen Tyler*

"The documentary is not a step to fiction film but a step to freedom. Commercial fiction film is only real estate. When real auteurs, the Harvard Business School graduates, produce films, their concern is neither art nor ideas, but money. Maximize rents for a space called a seat. In documentaries, I confront our history on my own terms. Brecht said that only boots can be made to measure. He was right." —*Emile De Antonio*

"...although the universal juridicism of modern society seems to fix limits on the exercise of power, its universally widespread panopticism enables it to operate, on the underside of the law, a machinery that is both immense and minute, which supports, reinforces, multiplies the asymmetry of power and undermines the limits that are traced around the law. The minute disciplines, the panopticisms of everyday, may well be below the level of emergence of the great apparatuses and the great political struggles." —*Michel Foucault*

"Both realist and experimental documentary forms have been politicized by feminist filmmakers who see their work as coming out of and having an audience in the women's movement. And in return, the exigencies, methods, and forms of organization within that ongoing political movement have profoundly affected the aesthetics of documentary film." —*Julia Lesage*

"And so the opinion I give is to declare the measure of my sight, not the measure of things." —*Montaigne*

A Synoptic View

The quotations above sketch the analytical contours of this seminar, which investigates the history, theory, and techniques of documentary film within specific political, social, cultural, technological, economic, artistic, and historical contexts of the 20th and 21st centuries. Just as the witness' evidence is bounded by the context of the crime and the trial, so too is film. It is not isolated within the four walls of movie theaters. Documentary film is even more dependent on the history and culture in which it operates because it seeks to refine, inform, reform, change, reinforce, or stabilize politics, cultures and our minds. We will assume several postures in our approach to documentary. The first is that the history of documentary film creates standards of technique that are perpetuated, embellished, and resisted through the decades. The second is that, along with Joris Ivens, this course also argues that there is no such thing as objectivity in regards to documentary film. For years, the terrain of documentary debate involved issues of objectivity, ethics and ideology—questions of subjectivity, identification and gender were the domains of the narrative film. We will mix it up, see documentaries as deliberate aesthetic constructs (practice) and as a repository of cultural and historical values, beliefs, ideas, and events evoking an endless variety of pleasures, anxieties and discoveries (discourse).

Required Texts:

- Various articles, available on CTools.
- Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
- *Theorizing Documentary* ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Suffering of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).
- *Collecting Visible Evidence*, Jane Gaines and Michael Renov, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota UP, 1999).
- Barsam, Richard M. *Non Fiction Film. A Critical History* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992).
- Winston, Brian. *Claiming the Real II: The Documentary Film Revisited*, 2nd edition (London: BFI, 2008).

Grading: Based on short assignments and a final seminar paper.

September 9—Introduction to the Seminar & Historical Overview qua Clip-fest

Read: Renov, “Documentary Horizons” (CVE); Barsam—entire book; Krows, “A Quarter-Century of Non-Theatrical Films” (Ctools)

View in class: *The Sweetest Sound* (US, Alan Berliner, 60 min., 2001)

View in screening: *Nanook of the North* (US, Robert Flaherty, 79 min., 1922)

September 16—Bill Nichols: Documentary Modes

Read: Nichols, *Representing Reality*, ix-75; Williams, Linda. “Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary.”

View: *Thin Blue Line* (US, Errol Morris, 103 min., 1988)

September 23—Axiographics (First Assignment Due)

Read: Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 76-164; Nornes, “The Axiographics of the Visible Hidden Camera” (Ctools)

View: *Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On* (Japan, Hara Kazuo, 122 min., 1987)

September 30—Michael Renov: Poetics, Functions

Read: Renov, “Toward a Poetics of Documentary,” from *Theorizing Documentary*; Vertov, excerpts from *Kino-Eye* (Ctools).

View: *Philips Radio* (Netherlands, Joris Ivens, co-edited by Helen Von Dongen, 36 min., 1931); *Fighting Soldiers* (aka. *Soldiers at the Front*, Japan, Kamei Fumio, 60 min., 1939); *Blood of the Beasts* (France, Georges Franju, 20 min., 1949)

View Independently: *Man With a Movie Camera* (USSR, Dziga Vertov, 68 min., 1929)

October 7— **Chinese Documentary** (Markus)

Read: Zhang, “Bearing Witness”; Berry, “Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism”; Nornes, “Bulldozers, Bibles, and Very Sharp Knives: The Chinese Independent Documentary Scene.”

View: *1428* (China, Du Haibin, 2009, 117 min.)

October 14— **Yamagata Documentary Film Festival**

Skype discussion with director Du Haibin

View in screening: *Bowling for Columbine* (US, Michael Moore, 120 min., 2002)

October 21— **Grierson Tradition and the Victim** (_____)

Read: Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 1-123; 219-end

View: *Housing Problems* (Britain, Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, 13 min., 1935); *The River* (US, Pare Lorentz, 31 min., 1938); *Land Without Bread* (Spain-France, Luis Buñuel, 27 min., 1933);

October 28— **The Body—Death in/and Representation** (_____) **(Second Assignment Due)**

Read: Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 229-266; Renov, “Filling up the Hole in the Real” (SD); Lippit, “Phenomenologies of the Surface” (CVE), Nornes, “Body at the Center” (CTools)

View: *Hiroshima, Nagasaki August, 1945* (US, Paul Ronder, Geof Bartz, Prod. Iwasaki Akira, 16 min., 1970); *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (US, Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman, 99 min., 1993)

November 4— **Cinéma Verité / Direct Cinema** (_____)

Read: Nichols, “Voice of Documentary” (CTools); FitzSimons, “Braided Channels” (CTools); Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 125-169, 197-218; (skim Brian Winston, “The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription” [TD]); Paul Arthur, “Jargons of Authenticity” (TD); Interview with Jean Rouch (CTools).

View: Excerpt of *Chronicle of a Summer* (France, Alain Resnais, 85 min., 1960); *Dont Look Back* (US, D.A. Pennebaker, 96 min., 1967)

November 11— **Mimesis & Musicality & the Collective Documentary** (_____)

Read: Musser, “Political Documentary”; Corner, “Documenting the Political” (CTools); Lerner, “Damming Virgil Thompson’s Music for *The River*” (CVE); Gaines, “Political Mimesis,” (CVE); Nornes, *Forest of Pressure* (excerpts, CTools)

View: *Peasants of the Second Fortress* (Japan, Ogawa Shinsuke, 143 min., 1971); *Yum, Yum, Yum* (US, Les Blank, 31 min., 1990)

View Outside of Class: *Devotion* (USA, Barbara Hammer, 2000, 82 min.)

November 18— **Essayistic Documentary: The New Autobiography** (_____)

Read: Renov, “The Subject in History” (SD); Renov, “New Subjectivities: Documentary and Self-Representation in the Post-Verite Age” (SD); Renov, “The End of Autobiography or New Beginnings?” (SD).

View: *Cult of the Cubicles* (US, George Kuchar, 45 min., 1987); *Sans Soleil* (France, Chris Marker, 100 min., 1983)

November 25— **(Re)Assessment and Critique of Ethnography** (_____)

Read: Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 170-196; Asch, “Collaboration in Ethnographic Filmmaking: A Personal View” (CTools); “Ax Fight Study Guide” (CTools); Trinh, after-film discussion of *Reassemblage* at the Flaherty Seminar (CTools); Trinh, “The Totalizing Quest of Meaning” (TD); Trinh, script for *Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam* (CTools); “American Anthropological Association’s Statement on Ethics and Visual Materials” (CTools); Ginsberg, “The Parallax Effect” (CVE).

View: *The Ax Fight* (US, Timothy Asch, 30 min., 1974); *Les Maitres Fous* (France, Jean Rouch, 36 min., 1955); *Reassemblage* (US, Trinh T. Minh-ha, 40 min., 1982)

December 2— **Oppenheimer & Sensory Ethnography**

Read: TBA

View: *Act of Killing* (US/Indonesia, Joshua Oppenheimer, 159 min., 2012)

December 9— **Regarding War Documentary** (_____)

Read: Sontag, *Regarding the Suffering of Others* (if you wish, see powerpoints of photographs she cites); Neroni, *The Nonsensical Smile of the Torturer* (CTools)

View: *Kill or Be Killed* (circa 1945 3 min.); *Lessons of Darkness* (France, UK, Germany, Werner Herzog, 50 min., 1992)