**AMST 411/686 / FILM 453**

**Introduction to Documentary Studies**

Monday & Wednesday, 2:30-3:45 WLH 112

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Office hours: Bass L30A, T @ 2:00 – 4:00 and by appointment.

This mixed graduate/undergraduate seminar surveys documentary work in three media---film, photography, and sound--since the 1930s, focusing on the documentary as both a cultural form with a history of its own and as a parcel of skill sets and story-telling and production practices to be studied and mastered.  Readings and discussions will cover important scholarly approaches to documentary as a genre, as well as close readings of documentaries themselves and practitioners' guides to various aspects of documentary work.  Topics include major trends in documentary practice across the three media, documentary ethics, aesthetics and truth-claims, documentary's relationship to the scholarly disciplines and to journalism, and documentary work as political activism.  Class meetings include screenings/viewings/ soundings of documentary works, and discussions with working documentarians (including Gaspar Gonzalez, Jake Halpern, and Zareena Grewal).

The course offers a certain breadth across the documentary form, but its depth lies in the work of documenting violence—painful realities, suffering, sufferers, and in turn, human endurance, survival, and resistance. We will consider the ways in which technologies of violence and technologies of documentary have evolved simultaneously, at times informing one another, and we will explore the ways documentary forms have been wielded both for and against causes of dispossession, war, and inequality, and in struggles of race, class, and gender. We will also be thinking more generally about what documentary forms *do*, looking to scholars who have framed documentary work as any number of active and passive projects: regarding, witnessing, encountering, preserving, recovering, communing, storytelling, advocating, or simply facing facts. Readings and screenings will ask students to engage with the liberties and limits of documentary strategies to engage politically challenging themes, to raise awareness, and to bring about change. Four short assignments and a final project provide students the chance to explore these questions in relation to specific works of their choice. Students' final projects may take the form of a traditional scholarly paper on some aspect of documentary history or a particular documentary producer, OR an actual piece of documentary work—a film treatment, a brief video, a set of photographs, a sound documentary or script.

**Readings**

Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning*

Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work*

Fred Ritchin, *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen*

Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil*

Susan Sontag, *On Regarding the Pain of Others* (selections)

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs* (selections)

Ken Light, *Witness in Our Time*

Linda Gordon, Gary Okihiro, *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of*

*Japanese American Internment*

Matthew Ehrlich, *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest*

Betsy McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film*

Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling: Creative Nonfiction on Screen*

Joshua Glick, *Los Angeles Documentary and the Production of Public History*

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

**Required viewing:**

***Photography***

We will be visiting the Yale University Art Gallery a few times over the course of the semester to view a selection of documentary and street photographs from the turn of the century to the 1970s. We will also make extensive use of the photography archives at the following sites:

http://photogrammar.yale.edu/

<https://pro.magnumphotos.com/>

[www.historianseye.org](http://www.historianseye.org)

“Then They Came for Me: Incarceration of Japanese-Americans during World War II,” International Center for Photography, Bowery Museum, New York City, January 26 – May 6

***Film***

In addition to our screenings of *The Act of Killing* and *Hearts and Minds*, students will be required to arrange for private (or group) viewings of THREE of the following films. We will call these our “Canon of Twelve”—not that they are the 12 most important films in the whole universe of films; but they are widely admired and they are exemplars of important practices and principles in documentary filmmaking, and will provide us a common set of reference points in our discussions. (These are on reserve at the Film Study Center; most are also readily available for rental or purchase on DVD or through Amazon, Filmstruck, or Netflix.)

*1. Harvest of Shame* (Fred Friendly and Edward R. Murrow, 1960)

The plight of migrant farm workers in the US.

*2. Le Jolie Mai* [*The Lovely Month of May*] (Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme, 1963)

Interviews in the streets of Paris at the end of the Algerian War.

*3. Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett, 1978)

Working-class life in the Watts section of L.A.

*4. Forbidden City, USA* (Arthur Dong, 1989)

The famous Asian American (“Oriental”) night club and revue in San Francisco

in the 1930s and ‘40s.

*5. Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamera* (Errol Morris, 2003)

Reflections on war structured by interviews with former Defense Sec’y.

*6. From a Silk Cocoon: A Japanese American Renunciation Story* (Satsuki Ina, 2006)

The internment experience through family stories, letters, and photographs.

*7. Taxi to the Dark Side* (Alex Gibney, 2007)

US policy on torture and interrogation.

*8. Made in L.A.* (Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar, 2007)

Labor struggle of Latina sweatshop workers in Los Angeles.

*9. What Happened, Miss Simone?* (Liz Garbus, 2015)

The life, art, and politics of singer/pianist Nina Simone.

*10. American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs* (Grace Lee, 2015)

The life and activism of a major Civil Rights figure.

*11. I Am Not Your Negro* (Raoul Peck, 2016)

Black politics, past and present, through the reflections of James Baldwin.

*12. The Vietnam War: Episode 6: Things Fall Apart* (Ken Burns, 2017)

Epic archival narrative of the Vietnam War (Tet offensive and after) by America’s most

celebrated and hated documentarian.

**Schedule of Class Meetings**

Week One, January 17 and 19 (the 19th is a “Yale Monday”)

Introductions

Matthew Frye Jacobson, “Afterword,” from Sara Blair, Joseph Entin, and Franny

Nudelman, eds., *Remaking Reality: US Documentary Culture after 1945*

**January 20: screening of *The Rape of Recy Taylor* (Nancy Buirski, 2017)**

**I. FOUNDATIONS**

Week Two, January 22 and 24

Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and*

*Meaning*

Week Three, Jan 29 and 31

Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work*

**January 31, meet at the Yale Art Gallery**

Week Four, February 5 and 7

Fred Ritchin, *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen*

**Tuesday Feb. 6, 7:00pm: Screening of *The Act of Killing* (2012)**

Week Five, February 12 and 14

Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil*

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (selections available on Canvas)

**Assignment #1 due Feb. 14**

**II. PHOTOGARAPHY**

Week Six, February 19 and 21

Roland Barthes, *Camera Ludica*

Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs* (selections available on Canvas)

**February 19, visit Sterling Memorial Library exhibit, “An American and**

**Nothing Else: The Great War and the Battle for National Belonging”**

Week Seven, Feb 26 and 28

Ken Light, *Witness in Our Time: Working Lives of Documentary Photographers*

**February 28, meet at the Yale Art Gallery**

Week Eight, March 5 and 7

Linda Gordon and Gary Okihiro, *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored*

*Images of Japanese American Internment*  
**Assignment #2 due March 7**

March 12, 14, 19, and 21 **SPRING BREAK**

**III. SOUND**

Week Nine, March 26 and 28

Matthew Ehrlich, *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest*

Week Ten, April 2 and 4

*This American Life—Switched at Birth* and other listening assignments

**April 2, visitor Jake Halpern**

**IV. FILM**

Week Eleven, April 9 and 11

Betsy McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film*

**April 11, visitor Gaspar Gonzalez**

Week Twelve, April 16 and 18

Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling: Creative Nonfiction on Screen*

**April 16, visitor Zareena Grewal**

**Tuesday April 17, 7:00: Screening of *Hearts and Minds* (1974)**

Week Thirteen, April 23 and 25

Joshua Glick, *Los Angeles Documentary and the Production of Public History*

**V. THE DOCUMENTARY SENSIBILITY**

Week Fourteen (reading week), April 30 and May 2

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

**Requirements**

**I. Participation**

Students are required to come to class, well prepared to discuss the readings and other assigned documentary materials. This is very much a group enterprise, and our seminar time together is an important resource for all of us; therefore “participation” does not merely entail showing up, but also a consistent demonstration of energy, intellectual generosity, and curiosity. **Participation in these terms accounts for 30% of your grade.**

**II. Four Short Writings**

Each student is required to turn in 4 short think pieces on the following assigned topics. These should be 500-750 words in length; they may be written in either a formal academic style or in a more personal voice, but in either case they should represent an honest and rigorous grappling with the issues provoked by the exercises at hand. **The four short papers together account for 30% of your grade.**

Assignment 1:  Choose an image from our Yale University Art Gallery (YUAG) visit or the Photogrammar or Magnum archives and analyze it using the conceptual tools provided in one of our opening readings (Spense & Navarro, Ritchin, Coles). **Due in class by February 7.**

Assignment 2: Juxtapose any two images from the following sources:

Sterling Library: “An American and Nothing Else: The Great War and the Battle for National Belonging”

Whitney Humanities Center: “Trapped in the Middle: Photographs by Julien Fisher”

International Center for Photography (NY): “Then They Came for Me: Incarceration of Japanese-Americans during World War II”

Gordon and Okihiro, *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese*

*American Internment*

Discuss some formal, aesthetic, compositional, conceptual, practical, logistical, historical, social, political, or ethical issue that you believe this *juxtaposition* illuminates or speaks to in an important way. Draw from class readings, as appropriate. (To be clear, you can choose any two images—they needn’t be next to each other in your source—although they could be and this might be interesting, too.)  **Due in class by March 7.**

Assignment 3:  Listen to an audio documentary on radio or the internet and compare/contrast the disposition of sound and voice to the nature of visual imagery in either photography or film. What are the particular strengths of the audio channel when it comes to conveying meaning and creating emotive power? What are its limitations? Alternatively, you might wish to analyze the audio channel of a particular documentary film from our “Canon of Twelve.” **Due in class by April 4.**

Assignment 4: Choose a single edit or sequence from a film in our “Canon of Twelve” to analyze how meaning can be built, altered, or augmented purely through editorial or camera technique. Draw on class readings as appropriate. **Due in class by April 25.**

**III. Final Project**

Each student will execute a term essay or project consisting of one of the following:

**A. A conventional scholarly research or critical essay** treating some aspect of documentary work in depth. This could be an analysis of a single work (Agee and Evans’ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Morris’s *Thin Blue Line*), a group of works (recent films by Asian American filmmakers; a cluster of films or audio documentaries on the Iraq War or Black Lives Matter), the work of a single practitioner (Margaret Bourke- White, Robert Frank, Stanley Nelson, Sarah Koenig), or a cross-genre analysis of a particular theme (labor, Civil Rights politics, immigration, criminal justice, gender arrangements, the arts…). The possibilities here are endless. Papers will be taken on their own terms, but will be judged by the overall care of their execution, the level of insight of their argument, and the sophistication of their engagement with relevant works from the existing literature.

**B. A piece of actual documentary work.** You will likely not be able to produce an entire film, nor will this course teach you all that you would need to know in order to do that. (You might be amazed at what goes into the production of a truly well made 30-minute reel.) But many of you probably already possess some of the necessary skills in the realms of photography, sound, or film, and so we do encourage you to attempt something manageable *as a practitioner* if that is where your interest lies. Be sure to have your project approved by the professors, but the possibilities include a digital photo gallery on a particular theme, with an accompanying essay; a radio documentary script; a film treatment; a finished (produced) film sequence and supporting essay… We will give what technical support we can, and will also connect you with practitioners and technicians across campus who can help you. The important thing will be to develop a project that is well bounded and doable in one semester. Projects will be judged on their success in both intellectual and technical terms.

**The final project accounts for 40% of your grade, and is due by Wednesday, May 9.**