

**UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE**  
**Department of New Media**

**NMED 2850N – DOCUMENTARY FILM**  
**Spring 2012**

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**Lectures & seminar:** Wednesdays (W771)  
**Office Hours:** Mondays 11:30AM – 2:30PM

**Course Description & Objectives**

Traditional definitions of the documentary emphasise its association with the rationalist discourses of factuality, objectivity and empiricism. And yet, any casual survey of its history reveals that the genre is actually quite multi-faceted in its concerns and modes of address. Rather than attempt an historical overview of the documentary, this course aims to explore some of the crucial questions that have determined its various formal permutations over the past century.

- What distinguishes the documentary from narrative and experimental cinema? Conversely, how might these other genres intersect with the form?
- What are the responsibilities of the documentary filmmaker to his or her subjects?
- Should documentaries aspire towards objectivity and the pursuit of “truth?”
- Or, are documentaries the ideal means of self-expression and impassioned political rhetoric?
- How might the documentary contribute to the construction of a national identity?
- How might documentaries be used to represent the social and self-identities of various groups and individuals?

Through the close analysis of several landmark films, we will attempt to define the parameters of the form, and outline some of the basic ways in which the documentary interrogates, explores and engages with various public and private worlds.

**Evaluation**

Annotated Bibliography (due <b>Mar 28</b> )	5%
Participation and Attendance	25%
Mid-term exam ( <b>Feb 29</b> )	20%
Final exam ( <b>April 25</b> )	25%
Essay (due <b>Apr 11</b> )	30%

**\* NOTE:** All exams, reading responses, and assignments **must** be completed in order to complete the course. Failure to attend an exam or to complete an assignment will result in a final grade of **0%** for the course.

**Required Texts**

Grant, Barry Keith and Jeanette Sloniowski, ed. *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998.

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

**Prerequisite**

A minimum of 30.0 credit hours (Second-year standing)  
 DRAMA 3030 also recommended

### **Attendance**

Regular attendance is absolutely mandatory. It is imperative that you attend *all* of the screenings and lecture hours. Should you have more than three unexcused absences, I reserve the right to drop your mark by a full letter grade. If you are absent for more than five sessions, you will receive a grade of 0% for the course. If you are unable to attend a session, it is your responsibility to contact me to explain your circumstances.

### **Late Policy**

Late assignments will be penalized at **10% per day** and will not receive written comments. Essays that are more than one week late **will not** be accepted. If you foresee difficulties in meeting a deadline, please see me *at least* one week before the due date. Otherwise, extensions will not be granted, nor will make-up tests be allowed without the following documentation: **(a)** a letter from a medical doctor indicating that you were physically unable to complete an assignment or sit an exam on a specific date; **(b)** a letter indicating exceptional circumstances such as a family funeral or crisis; or **(c)** an official request made through Counselling Services. Please be aware that all accommodations are at my discretion, and that I am not authorized to make any adjustments to the scheduling of the final exam.

### **Note on Academic Misconduct**

Because academic integrity is vital to the well-being of the university community, the University of Lethbridge takes academic misconduct very seriously. Academic misconduct includes plagiarism, which involves presenting the words and ideas of another person as if they were your own, and other forms of cheating, such as using crib notes during a test, fabricating data for a lab assignment, or submitting the same piece of work in more than one course. The penalties for academic misconduct can be very severe. A grade of zero may be given for the assignment or even for the course, and a second offence may result in suspension from the University. Students are urged to read the section of the Undergraduate Calendar that pertains to academic offences (pp. 80-82). Students are also reminded that the Writing Centre (room L1012 in the library) offers free workshops on writing and study skills and on avoiding plagiarism.

### **Definition of Plagiarism**

“No student shall represent the words, ideas, images, or data of another person as his or her own. This regulation will affect any academic assignment or other component of any course or program of study, whether the plagiarized material constitutes a part or the entirety of the work submitted” (**University of Lethbridge Undergraduate Calendar, pg. 80**).

### **Mandatory Electronic Assignment Submissions**

You must submit electronic copies of your annotated bibliography and essay to the relevant NMED 2850N Moodle Assignment drop box.

If you wish to submit a hard copy, it should be submitted in class on the due date. If submitted after class hours, assignments must be dropped in the **essay drop box outside W666**. Essays submitted in the drop box after 4:30 PM will not be date stamped until the following day, and essays submitted after 4:30 PM on Fridays will not be date stamped until the following Monday. Also, ensure that you keep **electronic and hard copies** of all submitted work.

### **Re-examination Policy**

If you feel your work has been unfairly graded, you may submit it for re-examination. However, your grade will not increase by more than 5% and I reserve the right to drop it further.

## SCHEDULE

### **Week 1: Jan 11**

#### **DEFINITIONS & POETICS**

**Screening:** *My Winnipeg*. Guy Maddin, dir. Canada: IFC Films, 2007. 80 min.

**Reading:** Nichols 1-41 (Chapter 1)

### **Week 2: Jan 18**

#### **ORIGINS: ROBERT FLAHERTY**

**Screening:** *Nanook of the North*. Robert Flaherty, dir. Canada/USA: Pathé Exchange, 1922). 79 min.

**Reading:** Grant & Sloniowski 23-39 (Rothman, "The Filmmaker as Hunter")

### **Week 3: Jan 25**

#### **GUEST FILMMAKER: JEFF CHIBA STEARNS**

**Screening:** *One Big Hapa Family*. Jeff Chiba Stearns, dir. Canada: Moving Images, 2010. 85 min.

**Reading:** Nichols 120-41 (Chapter 5)

### **Week 4: Feb 1**

#### **KINO-PRAVDA: EARLY SOVIET DOCUMENTARY**

**Screening:** *The Man with a Movie Camera*. Dziga Vertov, dir. Soviet Union: VUFKU, 1929. 68 min.

**Reading:** Grant & Sloniowski 40-54 (Feldman, "Peace Between Man and Machine")

### **Week 5: Feb 8**

#### **RHETORIC: PROPAGANDA & WWII**

**Screening:** *Triumph of the Will*. Leni Riefenstahl, dir. Germany: UFA, 1934. 107 min. \* **Excerpts:** DVD Chapters 1-5, 8, 13-14, 17

*Why We Fight # 7: War Comes to America*. Frank Capra & Anatole Litvak. USA: RKO, 1945). 70 min

**Reading:** Grant & Sloniowski 99-118 (Tomasulo, "The Mass Psychology of Fascist Cinema")

### **Week 6: Feb 15**

#### **JOHN GRIERSON: THE DOCUMENTARY FILM MOVEMENT**

**Screening:** *Song of Ceylon*. Basil Wright, dir. UK: World Pictures Corporation, 1934. 40 min.

*Coal Face*. Alberto Cavalcanti, dir. UK: Associated British Film Distributors, 1935. 10 min.

*Night Mail*. Harry Watt & Basil Wright, dir. UK: Associated British Film Distributors, 1936). 30 min.

**Reading:** Grant & Sloniowski 83-98 (Guynn, "The Art of National Projection")

Nichols 212-28 (Chapter 8 – 1<sup>st</sup> half)

### **Week 7: Feb 29**

#### **OBSERVATION I: ETHNOGRAPHY**

**Screening:** *Hoop Dreams*. Steve James, dir. USA: Miramax, 1994. 170 min.

**Reading:** Nichols 228-52 (Chapter 8 – 2<sup>nd</sup> half)

Nichols 142-57 (Chapter 6 – 1<sup>st</sup> half)

\*\*\* Mid-term exam – Wednesday, Feb 29 @ 6PM

### **Week 8: Mar 7**

#### **OBSERVATION II: DIRECT CINEMA**

**Screening:** *Don't Look Back*. D. A. Pennebaker, dir. USA: Pennebaker Films, 1967. 96 min.

**Reading:** Grant & Sloniowski 223-37 (Hall, "Don't You Ever Just Watch?")

Nichols 158-71 (Chapter 6 – 2<sup>nd</sup> half)

\*\*\* Begin researching and reading secondary sources for your annotated bibliography!

### **Week 9: Mar 14**

#### **DOCUMENTARY ETHICS**

**Screening:** *The True Meaning of Pictures*. Jennifer Baichwal, dir. Canada: Rhombus, 2002. 75 min

**Reading:** Nichols 42-66 (Chapter 2)

**Week 10: Mar 21****PARTICIPATION: CANDID EYE & LE CINÉMA DIRECT**

**Screening:** *Paul Tomkowicz: Street-Railway Switchman*. Roman Kroitor, dir. Canada: NFB, 1954. 9 min.  
*Lonely Boy*. Wolf Koenig & Roman Kroitor, dir. Canada: NFB, 1962. 27 min.  
*Les racquetteurs*. Michel Brault & Gilles Groulx, dir. Canada : NFB, 1958. 15 min  
*La Lutte*. Michel Brault, Marcel Carrière, Claude Fournier & Claude Jutra, dir. Canada : NFB, 1961.  
**Reading:** Nichols 67-93 (Chapter 3)

**Week 11: Mar 28****PERFORMANCE & AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

**Screening:** *Tarnation*. Jonathan Caouette, dir. USA: Wellspring Media, 2003. 88 min.  
**Reading:** Nichols 94-119 (Chapter 4)

\*\*\* Annotated bibliography due Wednesday, March 28

**Week 12: Apr 4****REFLEXIVITY I: FACT/FICTION**

**Screening:** *The Thin Blue Line*. Errol Morris, dir. USA: Miramax, 1987. 115 min.  
**Reading:** Grant & Sloniowski 379-96 (Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories")

**Week 13: April 11****REFLEXIVITY II: HOAXES & MOCKUMENTARY**

**Screening:** *Exit Through the Gift Shop*. Banksy, dir. USA/UK: Mongrel Media, 2010. 87 min.  
**Reading:** Nichols 172-211 (Chapter 7)

\*\*\* Essays due Wednesday, April 11

**Note on Screenings**

The assigned screenings **will not** be shown in class unless marked otherwise. All of the films are being held on four hour reserve at the circulation desk in the Library. You are expected to watch these in the Library **before class** and on your own time.

\*\*\* **IMPORTANT:** Please **do not** take these DVDs home! They will be in high demand and need to be accessible to your fellow classmates.

**Note on Evaluation**

Assignments and tests will be given a numerical grade. Translation to the standard letter grades are as follows:

PERCENTAGE	LETTER GRADE	GRADE POINTS
90 – 100	A+	4.0
85 – 89	A	4.0
80 – 84	A-	3.7
77 – 79	B+	3.3
73 – 76	B	3.0
70 – 72	B-	2.7
67 – 69	C+	2.3
63 – 66	C	2.0
60 – 62	C-	1.7
55 – 59	D+	1.3
50 – 54	D	1.0
0 – 49	F	0

## PARTICIPATION

### ATTENDANCE & IN-CLASS RESPONSES

- 5% for your final grade will go toward your attendance. Should you miss **more than three** classes, 5% will automatically be deducted from your final grade. If you are absent for **more than five** classes, you will receive a grade of 0% for the course.
- 5% of your final grade will go toward your in-class contributions. You will be assessed on both the **quantity and quality** of your participation each day according to the following scale:
  - 0 – No contributions
  - 1 – Fair response to a direct question
  - 2 – Good response to direct questions or opinions voluntarily provided
  - 3 – Excellent responses, voluntary opinions, or initiative taken in leading fruitful discussion

### READING RESPONSES

- 15% of your final grade will go toward prepared discussion questions and critical statements. You must prepare written responses to any **six assigned** readings of your choice, each worth 2.5% of your final grade.<sup>1</sup> These responses should be no more than four paragraphs in length (**350 to 400 words**). Be ready to use this material during discussion.
- Your responses **must not** be exclusively summative; they must demonstrate an interrogative familiarity with the readings. Such familiarity could be demonstrated as follows:
  - (1) attempt to **apply** the reading to the assigned material
  - (2) **offer your own position** on one of the author's principal arguments, and ensure that you provide evidence and reasons for your position
  - (3) prepare a **discussion question** that includes **your own opinion**.
- Please remember to cite appropriate page numbers!
- Because these reading responses are designed to ensure your in-class participation, each response must be submitted online to the appropriate Moodle assignment dropbox by **6PM of the day of your chosen assigned reading** (e.g., a response to the reading for session two – William Rothman's essay, "The Filmmaker as Hunter" – would be due on January 28 at 6PM).
- **IMPORTANT:** As all assigned work must be completed, you must hand in **all six** responses. Failure to submit a response will result in a **deduction of 15%** from your participation grade.
- The effort and ingenuity of your responses will be assessed according to the following scale:
  - 0 – Failure to engage with the correct reading
  - 1 – Misapprehension of or fatuous response to article
  - 2 – Basic comprehension and/or summary of ideas presented in article
  - 3 – Reasonable understanding of material or insightful discussion question generated
  - 4 – Good critical response to general thrust of the article & application to work
  - 5 – Penetrating criticism of the authors' ideas

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<sup>1</sup> During weeks with two readings assigned, please respond to only one of the essays – i.e., either a chapter from Nichols or an essay from the Grant & Sloniowski anthology, not both.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The annotated bibliography is due in class on **Wednesday, March 28** and is worth 5% of your final grade. Submission of a **completed** bibliography by March 28 will automatically receive a grade of 100%. However, should you submit the assignment after March 28 it will automatically receive a grade of 0%. Whether or not you meet the deadline, the assignment is mandatory and **must** be submitted, or a final grade of **0%** will be assigned for the course.
- Your bibliography is an exercise that is designed to help you develop research skills and focus your essay. Its aim is to ensure that you have adequately researched your topic of choice and that you begin work on your chosen assignment well in advance of the due date.
- A completed assignment will include the following:
  - 1) A paragraph of **no more than 300 words** indicating your prospective thesis, including the primary filmic and literary texts upon which you will focus.
  - 2) A list of **4-5** secondary sources (ideally in **MLA format**).
  - 3) Include **two to three** sentences for each bibliographic entry indicating the secondary source's **argument** and **direct relevance** to your essay. **\*\*\* Your bibliography must include these annotations, or else it will be considered incomplete.**
  - 4) You must include at least one **book**, one **scholarly journal article** and/or one **professional/academic online periodical**. Please note that if you are drawing on an essay published within an anthology, you must identify the **specific** essay and not just the title of the anthology itself.
- Please note that while you are free to use course readings as secondary sources, **they will not count** towards the four to five sources listed in your completed assignment.
- You must submit an electronic copy of your bibliography to the NMED 2850N assignment drop box on Moodle.
- **\*\*\* IMPORTANT:** You will be expected to have **read** your listed secondary sources, so begin researching and reading relevant material **well before** the deadline – certainly no later than **session 8 (March 7)**. **A grade of 0% will be assigned for (1) arbitrarily chosen sources and/or (2) secondary sources that clearly have not been read ahead of time.**

## RESEARCH ESSAY & EXAMINATIONS

### ESSAY FORMATTING INSTRUCTIONS

- The essay is due on **Wednesday, April 11** and will be worth **30%** of your grade. Failure to submit an essay will result in a grade of **0%** assigned for the course.
- The length of each paper is set at a **strict 2000 words** (**not including** your Works Cited list) and so, you must structure your argument carefully. **Do not** exceed the word limit by more than 300 words (roughly a page). I will stop reading your assignment if it runs over a page longer than the word limit. Conversely, **10%** will be deducted per every **200 words** under the required limit.
- Your essay **must** be written in 12 point Times New Roman font and your margins **must** be set at 1". The assignment must also be **double spaced** and **paginated**.
- Your essay **must** be submitted to Moodle as a **Microsoft Word file** (preferably **Word 2007** – a **.docx** file). If you do not own the software, free access to Microsoft Word is available on campus, or you may wish to make use of OpenOffice, a free, Word-compatible open source application suite at <http://www.openoffice.org/>. Because I will be grading your assignments electronically, **other formats will not be accepted**.
- Use **your name** (last name first) as the name of your file (e.g., Taylor, Aaron.docx). Include your name, date, and course number within the assignment as well.
- **You must check** with me if you wish to write on material that is not on the course. An essay submitted on material that has not been authorised **will receive a grade of 0%**.

### CITATION INSTRUCTIONS

- References must be from reputable sources, and must include **at least one** book, as well as a scholarly journal article **and/or** a **professionally produced/academic** online periodical (see Moodle for links). Please note that assigned readings **do not** count as sources.
- While it is recommended that you use MLA format to reference your sources, you are free to use other acceptable styles of scholarly quotation **provided you cite your sources properly**. A guide to a number of citation styles is available at *Research and Documentation Online* (<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/>).
- In order to ensure that your research is explicitly incorporated within your essay, all citations must be **direct quotations** from the sources in question. Failure to comply with this requirement may result in a **failing grade**. Paraphrasing is acceptable, but you still **must** include a corresponding quotation. For example:

David Bordwell asserts that Hollywood filmmaking is often classical in its approach to style. This is due to the industry's reliance on "notions of formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver's response" (Bordwell 4).

- \*\*\* **IMPORTANT:** At least **10%** of your grade may be deducted for
  - deviating from the stylistic formatting outlined above
  - improper citation style
  - including a citation without an actual quotation from the source used

- Criteria for the assessment of essays are as follows:
  - clarity and cogency of expression and argument
  - clear structuring in terms of introduction, conclusion and signposting
  - the ability to adduce appropriate evidence in support of the argument
  - competent and correct use of grammatical, scholarly and research conventions
  - demonstration of a clear understanding of the key concepts taught on the course
  - the originality, inventiveness and insightfulness of the argument put forward

### **ESSAY TOPICS**

- Please note that these are **suggested** areas of focus only and are designed to prompt your *own* thoughts on each subject. In this light, they should be regarded as points of departure, rather than definitive questions with prescribed answers. Therefore, you need not follow the topics exactly, nor should you attempt to answer all of the questions asked under each heading; your essay will be much stronger if you focus on **one question only!**
- You are encouraged to write on a topic of your own, but please note that you **must** submit it to me in written form as part of your annotated bibliography. Particular consideration will be given to novel topics and the creative expression of ideas, so be sure to choose an area of significant interest as it will heavily shape the project you undertake.
- Finally, I encourage you to meet with me during my office hours to discuss your topic well before you begin to write so that you are sure to embark upon the right course.

**1) DOCUMENTARY PARAMETERS** – How do you understand documentaries to be different from either/both fiction and experimental filmmaking? Or, if there is overlap between these different forms, what sets of features do they share and how might it be helpful to keep these similarities in mind?

**2) ORIGINS & POETICS** – In what sense have documentary poetics evolved since their origins in the early twentieth century? Do you see the impulses behind recent non-fictional endeavours as being somehow different than their precursors? You might also wish to consider how recent digital technologies might influence the “voice” of contemporary filmmakers.

**3) CREATIVITY VS. MANIPULATION** – Are there limits to the “creative treatment of actuality?” How do you understand the balancing act between documentation and rhetoric, or reportage and expression? You may wish to draw on the work of Grierson, Vertov, or a more contemporary filmmaker to consider these fundamental tensions.

**4) RHETORIC & PROPAGANDA** – How might one go about creating a persuasive politicized documentary? Must a rhetorical documentary give equal treatment to the various perspectives on the subject it represents? Alternatively, you might consider the defensibility of propagandistic non-fiction – i.e., whether or not its biases might be warranted in a given situation.

**5) OBSERVATION VS. PARTICIPATION** – Make a case for either the observational or participatory mode. What are the merits to a non-interventionist approach to the pro-filmic events one records? Or, should documentary filmmakers strive to actively involve their subjects in the creative representation of these events?



**6) ETHNOGRAPHY & NATIONALISM** – How ought a filmmaker attempt to describe the cultural traditions, values and beliefs of a people or social group? Do the filmmakers need to explicitly acknowledge their own subject positions in relation to these groups? Alternatively, how might filmmakers effectively characterize and/or celebrate their own national identity?

**7) DOCUMENTARY ETHICS** – Is Bill Nichols right in arguing that filmmakers have an inherent responsibility towards their subjects? If so, provide a case study of a work that you feel either effectively upholds or violates this ethical duty. By contrast, you might argue that there are situations in which this duty does not apply.

**8) AUTOBIOGRAPHY** – What is involved in the documentation of the self, and what are some of the means by which non-fictional filmmaking might forego so-called objective “truth” for self-expression? Are filmmakers working within the performative mode permitted to depart from pure facticity in order to represent their memories and/or feelings about familiar events?

**9) REFLEXIVITY** – Why might filmmakers explore the beliefs, conventions and limitations of the documentary tradition? Identify how an important reflexive documentary has advanced our understanding of non-fictional filmmaking. Contrarily, you could argue that reflexive preoccupations are redundant, misplaced, or shirk a more important direct engagement with reality.

### **EXAMINATION FORMAT**

- The exams are each worth 20% of your final grade. The mid-term will be written on **Wednesday, February 29 at 6PM**, and the final exam will be written on **Wednesday, April 25 at 6PM**. Failure to attend either exam will result in a grade of **0%** for the course.
- The format for the examinations consists of a multiple-choice (10%), fill-in-the-blank (10%), true and false (20%), and short answer section (60%).
- The questions in sections one to three will test your familiarity with some of the key concepts we will have discussed in class up to that point. The ten true and false questions are worth 2%, while the ten questions in each remaining section are worth 1% each.
- In section four of the exams, you will be required to provide a concise, illustrated answer for approximately four conceptual questions (worth 15% each).