



Documentary Film (FMST-3355-130)

Dates: June 2, 2025 - July 25, 2025

Location:

Students will participate in the course using Georgetown University's online learning management system called Canvas. To learn more about Canvas, please go through the Canvas Guide for Students.

Professor: Sky Sitney

Professor Contact Information: sky.sitney@georgetown.edu

Virtual Office Hours: by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course, students will have the opportunity to survey the evolution of documentary film (technological, stylistic, thematic, and ethical) while taking up the theoretical debates around cinematic claims to truth and representations of reality. Students will examine how the documentary genre differs from other kinds of filmmaking, how documentaries make 'truth claims', and how these claims influence the ways in which these films are received and circulated. Beginning with the actualities of the Lumière Brothers at the turn of the century and concluding with key cinematic texts made within the past few years, students will be exposed to multiple sub-genres and filmmakers, milestones and controversies, while addressing the variety of arenas in which documentary cinema has appeared.

An overarching theme in this course will be that of documentary and representation, both in front of and behind the camera. Through film screenings, accompanying texts, discussions, and perspectives from documentary filmmakers, this course will explore the central question of who gets to tell whose story, and what right or privilege do they have to tell it?

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1. Describe issues related to the history and theory of one of the major types of filmmaking
2. Analyze a range of documentary films from the genre's origins to the present day
3. Compare a variety of types of documentary expression and movements (ethnographic film, poetic and experimental documentaries, direct cinema, cinéma vérité, social justice, advocacy, and propaganda).

4. Correlate developments in documentary history in national and international contexts
5. Discuss issues of documentary exhibition and its place in the film industry ecosystem

COURSE READINGS AND FILMS

Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

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

Films (full features available in Canvas)

- Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, USA, 1922, 79 min.)
- Land Without Bread* (Luis Buñuel, Spain, 1933, 30 min.)
- Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, France, 1961)
- Salesman* (Albert and David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, USA, 1969)
- News From Home* (Chantal Akerman, USA/France, 1977, 88 min.)
- Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (Peter Friedman, Tom Joslin, USA, 1992, 99 min.)
- Tongues Untied* (Marlon T. Riggs, USA, 1989, 55 min.)
- The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, USA, 1988)

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING CRITERIA

Graded Assignments

Discussions: 40%

Each student is required to participate in discussions of the films, lectures, and readings from the course. The discussions occur in each module, and the respective discussion prompts are posted on each discussion page. Except where otherwise noted, in addition to posting your own response to the prompt, you are required to return to the discussion board and respond to at least two of your classmates' posts by a given due date. Due dates for initial posts and responses to peers are on each follow up page. Discussion posts are graded for both their quality (whether they were thoughtful, reflective, on topic, and, where appropriate, references the module materials) and their contribution to the learning community (whether replies to peers were substantive and considerate).

Creative Project: 25%

In module 6, students will learn about the six modes of documentary filmmaking. You will make a short 3 to 5 minute film or scene that embodies a mode you have assigned. You may use your own camera (your phone or laptop camera is fine), or borrow a camera. You are not required to edit the clip (although you can if you are familiar with editing and prefer to do so). You will post

your final film in a discussion board and respond to at least two of your peers' films. See the Creative Project page for additional information about the project.

Reflection and Response Participation: 35%

In addition to discussions, you will be asked to independently reflect on module readings given specific prompts. These short writing assignments occur in each module and each is accompanied by a specific prompt you must respond to. Your response is graded on whether you responded thoughtfully to all parts of the prompt, referred to course materials (and/or personal experience) to support your answer where relevant, thoughtfully considered the course materials, and whether your response contained spelling or grammatical errors.

Grading Scheme

93 - 100 % = A

90 - 92 % = A-

87 - 89 % = B+

83 - 86 % = B

80 - 82 % = B-

77 - 79 % = C+

73 - 76 % = C

70 - 72 % = C

67 - 69 % = D+

60 - 66 % = D

Below 60 % = F

COURSE SCHEDULE

This course begins with an Orientation and is divided into six (6) modules. Below is an outline describing the course structure. Each Module will be released on a weekly basis every Sunday at 11:59 pm (ET). Students are required to move through each module in sequential order.

ORIENTATION

The orientation provides an overview of the course and introduces you to your instructor and peers. You will also learn about the technology requirements and where to get support.

MODULE 1: [June 2 - June 15] The Beginning of Cinema

In Module 1, we will explore the origin of cinema and how it relates to the emergence of documentary films. We will ask, what is a documentary? Is it a mirror to reality, or a representation of it? And what should we consider about its portrayal of reality -- are there cultural elements, technological limitations, or ethical implications to consider? Keep these questions and topics in mind as you begin to engage with the materials for the module, as we

explore the cultural and sometimes personal impacts that documentary film may have. Film Screening: *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, USA, 1922, 79 min.)

MODULE 2: [June 16 - June 22] The Social Documentary

In Module 2, we will examine the documentary as a method of exploring social issues. In this module, you'll view and engage with a few different styles of "social documentary", and reflect on how these different styles may be used to call attention to social problems. Film Screening: *Land Without Bread* (Luis Buñuel, Spain, 1933, 30 min.)

MODULE 3: [June 23 - July 6] Cinéma vérité and Direct Cinema

In Module 3, we will continue to explore new approaches to documentary film: cinéma vérité and direct cinema. Like the other forms of documentary film we have explored so far, both of these forms take two similar approaches to portray a truth - although there are key distinctions. Cinéma vérité (translates to "cinema truth" involves participation and provocation in its attempt to reveal hidden truths. Direct cinema uses an unobtrusive, fly-on-the-wall camera and aims to reveal truths about the subject through observation. Film Screenings: *Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, France, 1961) and *Salesman* (Albert and David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, USA, 1969).

MODULE 4: [July 7 - July 13] Avant Documentary

In Module 4 we will explore experimental and avant-garde cinema and its profound connection to the world of documentary filmmaking. By examining the avant-doc movement, you will gain a deep understanding of how experimental techniques, such as abstract visuals, unconventional narratives, and subjective perspectives, have been harnessed to capture the essence of highly subjective and personal reality in thought-provoking and unconventional ways. We will focus particularly on a sub-genre of avant-garde cinema, the structural film. Film Screening: *News From Home* (Chantal Akerman, USA/France, 1977, 88 min.).

MODULE 5: [July 14-July 20] The Six Modes + The Democratization of Video

In Module 5, we will explore the emergence of video and its rise as a democratizing force, providing a platform for perspectives traditionally marginalized in documentary cinema. We will also examine the rise of politically engaged films that embraced heightened autobiography, advocacy, and self-determination. Film Screenings: *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (Peter Friedman, Tom Joslin, USA, 1992, 99 min.) and *Tongues Untied* (Marlon T. Riggs, USA, 1989, 55 min.).

MODULE 6: [July 21 - July 25] The Height of Representation -- The Fictionalized Documentary

In Module 6, we examine the evolution of the investigative and true crime genres, as well as the shift in documentary filmmaking from a genre traditionally distinct from fictionalized film to one that more comfortably borrows tropes and techniques in its representation of truth. We conclude the course by exploring the new current era of documentary, marked by its increasing cinematic and aesthetic affinity to fiction. Film Screening: *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, USA, 1988).

INFORMATION ABOUT TOOLS AND TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

As a Georgetown student, your online classroom experience will be very different but just as rigorous as your residential student experience. You can expect to:

- Communicate with your professor and classmates regularly via email, discussion boards, and other technologies available.
- Navigate the internet using a web browser (note that certain tools may require a specific browser).
- Use applications such as Microsoft Office or Google Docs to create documents and work on projects.
- Submit assignments in Canvas.
- Upload and download saved files (including text, audio, and video).
- Use a microphone to record audio.
- Use a webcam to record video.

In this course we will use the following tools:

- Zoom enables users to conduct synchronous (“real-time”) conferences, presentations, lectures, meetings, office hours and group chats via audio, video, text chat and content sharing.
- Panopto is a cloud-based lecture capture service available to Georgetown University faculty, staff, and students.

Computer Requirements

- You will need access to a computer (Windows or Mac) and adequate Internet service to complete this course. Although you can use other devices such as smartphones and tablets for some online coursework, please note that some tools, such as Proctorio, do not work on tablets or smartphones.
- You will also need an internal or external microphone and camera to complete this course. While you can use any browser to access Canvas please note that some tools only work with certain browsers (e.g., Proctorio only works with Chrome).

The minimum requirements needed to use Canvas can be found in this [Canvas guide](#).

COURSE POLICIES AND EXPECTATIONS

Student Expectations

You are expected to complete all readings, assignments, and activities on time. Participation is essential to your success in this class. You are expected to actively participate in discussions with your peers, and contribute to the group assignments. It is important to subscribe to the course discussion boards so that you receive notifications when new messages are posted. In order to get full credit for participation, you will have to complete all of your module assignments and quizzes on time.

Time Expectations

Our remote learning courses are designed to meet the same academic standards as our place-based (face-to-face) courses. Students should plan on spending approximately 9-12 hours a week on assignments, readings, projects, etc. in addition to the 2.5 hours of instructional time.

Communication Expectations

Building an inclusive climate of mutual respect and inquiry in this class:

I respect your right to be called whatever you want to be called, because I understand that for all of us, social recognition of our sense of self is key to our own integrity and flourishing. I expect everyone in the class to do the same. **In particular, if you would like to be called by a specific set of pronouns or name that might not be obvious from your official school records, please let me know in any way that makes you comfortable.**

Georgetown's Trans, Non-Binary, and Gender Non-Conforming Resource Guide:
<https://lgbtq.georgetown.edu/resources/transatgu/>

Communication with Peers

You will be expected to engage with your peers via the discussion board and other required tools on a regular basis.

Communication with Professor

Please feel free to email me with your questions, concerns, and/or to schedule a time to meet over Zoom. When sending emails please remember to follow the guidelines outlined below.

- *Check the syllabus.* Before sending your email or message, be sure that your question has not already been addressed in the syllabus or announcements.
- *Be patient.* If you have a concern and send me a message, you can expect a response within approximately two business days. Please allow 3 to 4 business days for assessment submission feedback.
- *Specify subject.* Subject line should include the topic of the message and class title.
- *Greet & Close.* Emails should begin with a formal greeting and end with you signing your name in all messages/emails.

- *Check writing.* Proofread (i.e. grammar and spelling) your message before sending.

Netiquette Guidelines

To promote the highest degree of education possible, we ask each student to respect the opinions and thoughts of other students and be courteous in the way that you choose to express yourself. Students should be respectful and considerate of all opinions.

In order for us to have meaningful discussions, we must learn to genuinely try to understand what others are saying and be open-minded about others' opinions. If you want to persuade someone to see things differently, it is much more effective to do so in a polite, non-threatening way rather than to do so antagonistically. Everyone has insights to offer based on his/her experiences, and we can all learn from each other. Civility is essential.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Students with Disabilities

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, individuals with disabilities have the right to specific accommodations that do not fundamentally alter the nature of the course. Some accommodations might include note takers, books on tape, extended time on assignments, and interpreter services among others. Students are responsible for communicating their needs to the [Academic Resource Center](#), the office that oversees disability support services, (202-687-8354; arc@georgetown.edu; <https://academicsupport.georgetown.edu/disability/>) before the start of classes to allow time to review the documentation and make recommendations for appropriate accommodations. The University is not responsible for making special accommodations for students who have not declared their disabilities and have not requested an accommodation in a timely manner. Also, the University need not modify course or degree requirements considered to be an essential requirement of the program of instruction. For the most current and up-to-date policy information, please refer to the [Georgetown University Academic Resource Center website](#). Students are highly encouraged to discuss the documentation and accommodation process with an Academic Resource Center administrator.

Accessibility and Inclusion

One of the central tenets of Georgetown's educational mission is *cura personalis*, a Latin phrase meaning "care of the whole person." Georgetown is committed to showing care and concern for each student by creating an inclusive and accessible learning environment that follows universal design principles to meet the needs of its diverse student body.

I am committed to creating a learning environment for my students that supports a diversity of thoughts, perspectives and experiences, and honors your identities (including race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, ability, etc.). If your name or pronoun needs to be corrected, please let me know early in the semester so that I can make the appropriate changes to my records.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Students at Georgetown University are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic and personal integrity. Although most Georgetown students conduct themselves in accordance with these standards, occasionally, there are students who violate the code of conduct. Cheating harms the University community in many ways. For example, honest students are frustrated by the unfairness of cheating that goes undetected, and students who cheat can skew the grading curve in a class, resulting in lower grades for students who worked hard and did their own work.

Academic dishonesty in any form is a serious offense, and students found in violation are subject to academic penalties that include, but are not limited to failure of the course, termination from the program, and revocation of degrees already conferred. All students are expected to fully adhere to the policies and procedures of [Georgetown's Honor System](#) and to take the Honor Code Pledge.

Honor Code Pledge

In pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life I commit myself to respect and to uphold the Georgetown University honor system:

- *To be honest in every academic endeavor, and*
- *To conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together.*

Plagiarism

Stealing someone else's work is a terminal offense in the workplace, and it will wreck your career in academia, too. Students are expected to work with integrity and honesty in all their assignments. The Georgetown University Honor System defines plagiarism as "the act of passing off as one's own the ideas or writings of another." More guidance is available through the [Gervase Programs](#). If you have any doubts about plagiarism, paraphrasing, and the need to credit, check out [Plagiarism.org](#).

All submissions must be your original work. Any submission suspected of plagiarism will be immediately referred to the Honor Council for investigation and possible adjudication. All students are expected to follow Georgetown's honor code unconditionally. If you have not done so, please read the honor code material located online at the [Honor Council website](#).

SUPPORT SERVICES

Georgetown recognizes that COVID-19 has a significant impact on everyone in the Georgetown community. Georgetown offers a variety of support services for students that can be accessed online and has put together [this newsletter](#) which aims to provide you with information about well-being resources and virtual meetings that can connect you with mental health professionals on and off campus during this time. Below are some resources available to you:

- [Academic Resource Center](#)
202-687-8354 | arc@georgetown.edu
- [Counseling and Psychiatric Services](#)
202-687-6985
- [Institutional Diversity, Equity & Affirmative Action \(IDEAA\)](#)
(202) 687-4798

Title IX/Sexual Misconduct

Georgetown University and its faculty are committed to supporting survivors and those impacted by sexual misconduct, which includes sexual assault, sexual harassment, relationship violence, and stalking. Georgetown requires faculty members, unless otherwise designated as confidential, to report all disclosures of sexual misconduct to the University Title IX Coordinator or a Deputy Title IX Coordinator.

If you disclose an incident of sexual misconduct to a professor in or outside of the classroom (with the exception of disclosures in papers), that faculty member must report the incident to the Title IX Coordinator, or Deputy Title IX Coordinator. The coordinator will, in turn, reach out to the student to provide support, resources, and the option to meet. [Please note that the student is not required to meet with the Title IX coordinator.]. More information about reporting options and resources can be found on the [Sexual Misconduct Website](#).

If you would prefer to speak to someone confidentially, Georgetown has a number of fully confidential professional resources that can provide support and assistance. These resources include:

- Health Education Services for Sexual Assault Response and Prevention: confidential email sarp@georgetown.edu
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS): 202.687.6985 or after hours, call (833) 960-3006 to reach Fonemed, a telehealth service; individuals may ask for the on-call CAPS clinician.

More information about reporting options and resources can be found on the Sexual Misconduct Website.

Title IX/Pregnancy and Parenting Accommodations

Georgetown University is committed to creating an accessible and inclusive environment for pregnant and parenting students. Students may request adjustments based on general pregnancy needs or accommodations based on a pregnancy-related complication. Specific adjustments will be handled on a case by case basis and will depend on medical needs and academic requirements. Students seeking a pregnancy adjustment or accommodation should follow the process laid out on the [Title IX website](#).

Discrimination based on sex, including sexual misconduct and discrimination based on pregnancy or parenting status, subverts the University's mission and threatens permanent damage to the educational experience, careers, and well-being of students, faculty, and staff.

Office of the Student Ombuds (OSO)

Confidential | Independent | Impartial | Informal

The Office of the Student Ombuds (OSO) serves all undergraduate and graduate students, including SCS and BGE, on the main campus. Consider contacting the Student Ombuds when you want to talk to a caring professional about a University-related issue but don't know where to turn. The OSO is a confidential and safe space that is independent of formal university organizations or structures where students can discuss their concerns, share their experiences, ask questions and explore their options. The student ombuds can help you problem-solve,

identify your goals, and empower you to think through ways to navigate complex situations. Some reasons for you to visit the office may be to address academic concerns, clarify administrative policies, discuss interpersonal conflicts, seek coaching, mediation or facilitation to handle a sensitive situation, advise you on the process to file a formal complaint if you are experiencing bias, harassment, bullying or other forms of intimidation, identify other appropriate campus resources, and allow you to safely express your frustrations and concerns.

Request an in-person or Zoom appointment with the Student Ombuds by writing studentombuds@georgetown.edu or calling 202-784-1081. The OSO is located in Room 207 of the Reiss Building (across from Arrupe Hall). Find more information at <http://studentombuds.georgetown.edu>.

Georgetown Library

If you have a question for a librarian, you can go to their “[Ask Us](#)” page where you will have the option to chat online, send an email, or schedule a Zoom appointment to discuss a research topic, develop a search strategy, or examine resources for projects and papers. Librarians offer an overview of and in-depth assistance with important resources for senior or master's theses, dissertations, papers, and other types of research. This service is available to currently enrolled students who need assistance with Georgetown-assigned projects and papers. Please review the [Services & Resources Guide for Online Students](#) for additional information.

eResources

Students enrolled in courses have access to the University Library System's eResources, including 500+ research databases, 1.5+ million ebooks, and thousands of periodicals and other multimedia files (films, webinars, music, and images). You can access these resources through the [Library's Homepage](#) by using your NetID and password.

Learning Resources

Georgetown offers a host of [learning resources](#) to its students. Two that you might find particularly helpful in this course are the [Writing Center](#) and [Refworks](#).

- [The Writing Center](#) offers peer tutoring by trained graduate and undergraduate students who can assist you at any point in the writing process. They help at any stage of your writing process, from brainstorming to revision. Tutors can offer advice on thesis development, use of evidence, organization, flow, sentence structure, grammar, and more. The Writing Center will not proofread or edit papers; rather, they will help to improve your proofreading and editing skills to become a better writer. Appointments can be booked online through their website.
- [Refworks](#) is an online research management tool that aids in organizing, storing, and presenting citation sources for papers and projects.

Technical Support

All students have 24/7 access to Canvas technical support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, including live chat and a support hotline at 855-338-2770. Use the 'Help' icon in the lower left of your Canvas window to view all available support and feedback options. If you're looking for help on a specific feature, check out the [Canvas Student Guide](#).