Transnational Genre: Documentary Film
Fall 2013
Wednesdays 2:10-4:00pm (522C, Kent Hall);
Thursdays 4:00-6:00pm (Kress Room, Starr East Asian Library)
Instructor: Shi-Yan Chao
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Office Hours: Thursdays 11:30am - 1:30pm (Inter'1 Affairs Building, Room 906)

Course Description
This course examines the ideas and practices of documentary film in a transnational framework. It locates documentary traditions in the work by Robert Flaherty and John Grierson, alongside the influence of the Soviet and European avant-gardes. The class zooms in on different modes of documentary filmmaking, particularly the observational and participatory modes (as exemplified by direct cinema and cinema verite, respectively), as well as the reflexive and performative modes. It also addresses the important genres of ethnographic film, drama documentary, and essayist film in the larger documentary category. Special attention will be given to the ways in which particular ethics and politics are imbricated in these varied documentary modes and genres, and how social issues and histories are represented and evoked. The final section of the class will be devoted to Sinophone documentary film, particularly the sociopolitical implications of China’s “new documentary film movement” since the 1990s and the commercial success of Taiwan’s documentary films in the last decade. Among the films to be discussed are Nanook of the North (R. Flaherty, US), The Man with a Movie Camera (D. Vertov, USSR), A Song of Ceylon (B. Wright, UK/Ceylon), Chronicle of a Summer (J. Rouch and E. Morin, France), Titicut Follies (F. Wiseman, US), Two Laws (C. Strachan and A. Cavadini, Australia), Sans Soleil (C. Marker, France), The Emperor’s Army Marches On (K. Hara, Japan), Close-up (A. Kiarostami, Iran), 24 City (Jia Z., China), and Gift og Life (Wu Y., Taiwan).

Course Requirements
• Attendance and participation (25%): Your attendance and participation is expected in each class and you are supposed to come to finish all the readings assigned for the week before you come to class. Active participation is required. Two unexcused absences will automatically cost the students one grade point.
• One short essay (4-5 pages; 25%) Essay question regarding films or assigned readings will be announced two weeks before essay due date.
• Final project presentation and research paper (10-12 pages; 50%): The students will each give a ten minutes presentation related to their research papers during the last four weeks. Research papers are due a week after the last session.

Required Texts:
• ALL readings (including further readings) will be posted on Courseworks
Week 1 (9/4) Documentary Traditions (I): Robert Flaherty and John Grierson
Screening: *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922, US)
  *Drifters* (John Grierson, 1929, UK)
  *A Song of Ceylon* (Basil Wright, 1934, UK/Ceylon)
  *Night Mail* (Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936, UK)

Week 2 (9/11) Documentary Traditions (II): The Soviet and European Avant-Garde Influence
Screening: *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929, USSR)
  *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927, Germany)
  *Land without Bread* (Luis Bunuel, 1933, Spain)
  *Rain* (Joris Ivens, 1929, Netherlands)

Further readings:

Week 3 (9/18) Cinema Verite and Direct Cinema (I)
Screening: *Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961, France)
  Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, “Camerawork.” *Crafting Truth*:

Week 4 (9/25) Cinema Verite and Direct Cinema (II)
Screening: *Titicut Follies* (Frederick Wiseman, 1967, US)
*Salesman* (Albert Maysles and David Maysles, 1968, US)
*To Be and To Have* (Nicolas Philibert, 2002, France)
Further reading:

Week 5 (10/2) Ethnographic Film and Indigenous Media
Screening: *Two Laws* (Carolyn Strachan & Alessandro Cavadini, 1981, Australia)
*The Ax Fight* (Timothy Asch & Napoleon Chagnon, 1975, Venezuela)
*The Wedding Camels* (David and Judith MacDougall, 1980, Kenya)
*Cannibal Tours* (Dennis O’Rourke, 1988, Australia)
Timothy Asch, “The Ethics of Ethnographic Film-making.” In Peter Ian Crawford and David Turton (Eds.), *Film as Ethnography.* New York: Manchester University Press, 1992. 196-204.
Further reading:

Week 6 (10/9) Ethics of Documentary Film
Screening: Grey Gardens (David and Albert Maysles, 1975, US)
No Lies (Mitchell Block, 1973, US)
The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On (Kazuo Hara, 1987, Japan)
Secrets of the Tribe (Jose Padilha, 2009, UK/Brazil)

Week 7 (10/16) Reflexivity and Performativity in Documentary Film
Screening: The Thin Blue Line (Errol Morris, 1988, US)
Night and Fog (Alain Resnais, 1955, France)
Paris Is Burning (Jennie Livingston, 1990, US)
Tongues Untied (Marlon Riggs, 1990, US)
Sari Red (Pratibha Parmar, 1988, UK)
Further readings:

Week 8 (10/23) Politics, History and Memory through Documentary Film
Screening: In the Year of the Pig (Emile de Antonio, 1968, US)
The Battle of Chile (Patricio Guzman, 1975-79, Chile)
History and Memory (Rea Tajiri, 1991, US)
Habitual Sadness (Young-joo Byun, 1997, South Korea)
Coming Out Under Fire (Arthur Dong, 1994, US)
Nitrate Kisses (Barbara Hammer, 1992, US)
Fahrenheit 911 (Michael Moore, 2004, US)
Control Room (Jehane Noujaim, 2004, US)
Waltz with Bashir (Ari Folman, 2008, Israel/France/Germany/USA/
Finland/Switzerland/Belgium/Australia)
5 Broken Cameras (Emad Burnat & Guy Davidi, 2011, Palestine/
Israel/France/Netherlands)
Bill Nichols, “How Have Documentarists Addressed Social and
Political Issues?” Introduction to Documentary. Bloomington:
Paula Rabinowitz, “Wreckage upon Wreckage: History, Documentary,
and the Ruins of Memory.” They Must Be Represented: The
Barbara Zhelutin, “The Art and Politics of Documentary: A
Emile de Antonio, “History Is the Theme of All My Films: An
Interview with Emile de Antonio.” Cineaste 12.2 (Spring 1982):
20-28.
Further reading:
Bill Nichols, “Please, All You Good and Honest People: Film Form
and Historical Consciousness.” Blurred Boundaries. Bloomington:

Week 9 (10/30) Drama Documentary, Docudrama, Docu-soap, and Reality Television
Screening: Close-up (Abbas Kiarostami, 1990, Iran)
An American Family (Craig Gilbert, 1971, US)
The Brandon Teena Story (Susan Muska, Greta Olafsdottir, 1998, US)
The Times of Harvey Milk (Rob Epstein, 1984, US)
Readings: Bill Nichols, “Telling Stories with Evidence and Arguments.”
Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 107-133.


Further readings:

Week 10 (11/6) Essay Documentary
Screening: Sans Soleil (Chris Marker, 1983, France)
Reassemblage (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1982, US)
The Beaches of Agnes (Agnes Varda, 2008, France)


Week 11 (11/13) The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement
Screening: Bumming in Beijing (Wu Wenguang, 1990)


Wu Wenguang, “Just on the Road: A Description of the Individual Way of Recording Images in the 1990s.” In Wu Hung (Ed.), Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-


Further readings:


Week 12 (11/20) History and Memory

Screening: 24 City (Jia Zhangke, 2008)

West of the Tracks (Wang Bing, 2003)

Though I Am Gone (Hu Jie, 2006)


Lu Xinyu, “Ruins of the Future: Class and History in Wang Bing’s Tiexi District.” New Left Review 31 (Jan-Feb, 2005)


Week 13 (11/27) The Queer Lens: Documenting the Tongzhi Community

Screening: Mei Mei (Gao Tian, 2005)

The Box (Ying Weiwei, 2001)

Night Scene (Cui Zi’en, 2003)

Our Story (Yang Yang, 2012)

Shi-Yan Chao, “Performing Gender, Performing Documentary in Postsocialist China.” In Yau Ching (Ed.), As Normal As Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010. 151-175.


Week 14 (12/4) Contemporary Taiwan Documentary Screening: Gift of Life (Wu Yi-feng, 2003)
Corner’s (Zero Chou Mei-ling, 2001)
Voices of Orchid Island (Tai-li Hu, 1993)
Viva Tonal (Jian Weisi/Guo Zhendi, 2004)
Go Grandriders (Hua Tien-hau, 2012)
Hsien-Hao Sebastian Liao, “Almost Propaganda But Not Quite:
Identity, Modernity and the Construction of ‘The Native’ in Gift of Life and Viva Tonal.” In Felicia Chan, Angelina Karpovich and Xin Zhang (Eds.), Genre in Asian Film and Television: New Approaches. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 61-76.