Course Description and Objectives

Documentary can be distinguished from other forms of non-fiction writing, photography, audio production, or film and video via its two-tiered historical functions: to produce social or political change and/or to allow an audience to see and feel the world in new and unique ways. Although one could argue that stories in the local paper, family photographs made with a disposable camera, instructional audio tapes, and educational films may serve the same function, the documentary can further be distinguished as a unique mode of communication by its depth of research or close relationship to/with the subject(s) and the amount of time spent in the field. Although these features are central to documentary work, there have also been negative characteristics attached to the documentary in public discourse. For example, one dominant misperception about documentary is that it must be dry and scientific. The term “documentary” may conjure up images of an animal’s eating habits or English aristocrats and their exquisite gardens. Although these subjects have been presented in documentaries, the documentary can be much more than this. It can feature engaging stories, interesting characters, intriguing dialogue, and even sound effects. John Grierson’s definition of the term “documentary” speaks to these features: “the creative treatment of actuality.” When done well, a documentary is far more engaging than a traditional piece of journalistic reporting or a feature film.

Through practical application and the exploration of cultural reporting and documentary approaches to communication, we will consider questions that surround the interpretation of cultural experience. We will analyze written, audio, video and filmic approaches to documentary in an effort to understand better a significant form of storytelling. Course materials provide important models for cultural studies fieldwork that exemplify the ways in which people struggle to understand and explain the contradictions and instability of contemporary (and historical) cultural life in the United States. We will work from these models to become more skilled at producing our own critical and creative analyses of contemporary life.

There are three central objectives that will guide us through the course: (1) understanding the techniques people use to observe, (2) understanding the aesthetic and structural choices people make to explain what they do, and (3) understanding how challenges and problems continue to reemerge throughout history and the ways in which people attempt to make sense of those challenges and problems.

Required Materials

Jessica Abel and Ira Glass, Radio: An Illustrated Guide

David Pogue, iMovie 4 & iDVD

All other course readings are accessible via a password protected Web site. You are required to print each day’s reading and bring the article with you to class.
Blank minidisks (74 minutes each) available at the Campus Store, Wal-Mart, Sam Goody, or online (minidisco.com usually has very good prices).

Blank video media: 2-3 60-minute Premium grade Sony mini-DV tapes OR Sony digital 8 videotapes (this will depend on which departmental video camera your group uses for the video project). The tapes can be purchased from the department and you must use Sony brand tapes with the departmental cameras.

Multiple blank CD-Rs and DVDs to store your projects during production and after production. (Note: It is highly recommended that you purchase a portable hard drive with a firewire connection. This will ensure that projects can be saved without having to separate files, will allow you to work at home and in the CCLI if you have a good computer at home, and will be a valuable asset if you continue to work on media projects in future classes or jobs. We can make recommendations about size and brands if you are interested.)

**Course Assignments**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance and class participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audio Project (5-7 minutes)</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Video Project (5 minutes) or Literary Journalism essay/photo project</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quizzes</td>
<td>30%</td>
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You are required to complete the reading assignments **before** you attend class. This will lead to more fruitful discussion.

**Course Policies**

**Attendance and Active Participation** are expected and required. Excessive absences will result in a lower final grade.

**Promptness** is expected as a general rule. If you are consistently late to class then your grade will be negatively affected.

All assignments are due on assigned days. There will be **NO MAKE UPS**. Documented illness or documented emergencies are the only exception to this policy. Change in work schedules, personal celebrations (e.g., birthdays), transportation problems, etc. are NOT considered to be legitimate reasons for missing assignment deadlines or class meetings. If you miss a quiz and have documentation for your absence then you will take the quiz on the next date you attend class. (Note: If you will be missing a class because of a religious holiday, let me know in writing at least two weeks before the holiday so we can make arrangements to make up missed work.)

If you have a cellular phone, turn it off. If you have a pager, set it to vibrate or turn it off.

**Assignments**

The **Audio Project** will be 5-7 minutes in length. You can work on your own, with a partner, or in a group of three. Further details can be found on a separate handout in the folder where you find course readings.

The **Video Project** will be 5 minutes in length. You are encouraged to work in groups of three. We will discuss this project when we begin the unit on documentary images. If you prefer to write a **literary journalism essay**, you can choose that option for your second assignment. Documentary photographs made while you were doing your research should accompany the essay. Again, more information will be available when we get closer to the unit on documentary images.
Pop quizzes will be short answer and will allow me to gauge how well you understand the arguments made in the readings. Unlike your papers and class discussion, where I am interested in your opinions about the issues and the strength of the writer’s argument(s), the quizzes are designed for you to state the author’s argument only. In other words, I am not striving to understand what you think about the issues; rather, I am interested in how well you understand the construction of the author’s argument. If we do not understand what s/he’s saying then our critique of her/his work will not be properly grounded.

Plagiarism becomes tempting when students feel pressured. When in doubt, quote. If you are quoting somebody directly or paraphrasing then you need to properly cite your source(s). You can do this in an audio project or a video project by explicitly identifying the person you are quoting or paraphrasing and the source of that quote (e.g., “As Houghton mayor Tom Mertz noted in a city council meeting last October, ‘Rental inspections have improved the quality of Houghton’s housing stock and created safer living environments for Michigan Tech students.’”). If you are writing a paper then you should list the information within quotation marks and then cite the proper information. When paraphrasing, just cite the proper information. Never quote others to the point where your ideas become indistinguishable from your source’s ideas. Because we will read a variety of materials that teach us how to construct narratives and produce our own projects, and because Alison and I will be available to discuss problems with and possibilities for your projects, there is no reason to plagiarize. Plagiarized projects and papers will be sent to the Dean of Student Affairs.

**Grade Scale**

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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Equivalent</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>A</td>
<td>78-79 BC</td>
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<td>88-89</td>
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<td>60-67</td>
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Tentative Course Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>READING ASSIGNMENTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/11</td>
<td>Course Introduction</td>
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**DOING DOCUMENTARY WORK: AN OVERVIEW**

1/13  In Class Screening/Listening:
- Stefan Nadleman, *Terminal Bar*
- Scott Carrier, “Running After Antelope”

Recommended Reading: *Putting Documentary Work to Work* produced by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

1/18  Robert Coles, “Introduction”
Discuss Audio Project

1/20  Tom Wolfe, “Like a Novel” & “Seizing the Power”
Joan Didion, “Getting the Vegas Willies”

1/25  Required: Gay Talese, “Of Things Unnoticed”
Recommended: Steve Kurutz, “Not Quite Nudes Descending a Staircase”
Audio Project Topic and Schedule Due

**DOCUMENTARY STORYTELLING: WORDS AND SOUNDS**

Recommended: Adam Green, “Mystery Mobile”

2/1   Excerpts from *Sound Reporting*

2/3   Production Day in CCLI

2/8   Robin White, “Getting Good Ambient Sound”
Robin White, “How to Mic a Field Interview”
Chris Woolf, “Things That Go Wump”

2/10  Winter Carnival

2/15  Tape Selections Played in Class

2/17  Hildegard Westerkamp, “Soundwalking”

2/22  *Nieman Reports* excerpts from The Documentary and Journalism (pp. 6-21)

2/24  Production Day in CCLI

3/1-3/3 Audio Presentations

3/8-3/10 Spring Break

3/15-4/21 TBA

4/26  Video Screening/Literary Journalism Projects Presented