Instructor: Mercedes Vigón  
Contact: vigonm@fiu.edu; 305-919-5628  
Office hours: M. 9:30 -10:30 am & 1:30-2:30 pm  
W. 9:30 -10:30 am & 1:30-2:30 pm & 5:30- 6:10 pm

Course description: RTV 4323 is designed to introduce students to the fundamentals of long-format storytelling through documentary filmmaking. This will be accomplished through two approaches. The first will be a weekly screening of important documentary films produced during the previous six decades. Screenings will include assigned readings and class discussions related to the films. The second approach will be the development, pre-production, production, and editing of a short documentary (5 to 7 min.) that will be due at the end of the semester.

Course objectives: Students in this course are expected to engage with the historic development and contextual trajectory of documentary filmmaking, from the earliest moments of technological and societal changes during the late 19th and early 20th centuries that led to the first instances of non-fiction, narrative filmmaking, to key contemporary moments that have shaped the genre as a whole. This part of the course will require students to grapple with some of the key questions, ethical debates and controversies that have shaped the genre since the first moments of documentary filmmaking:

- What is a ‘documentary,’ and why is this the term used to describe the genre?
- Is it possible to ‘document reality’ and what are the subjective choices made by all filmmakers that shape the stories they tell?
- What changes when the camera captures a scene from ‘real life’?
- How involved can filmmakers be in the process of creation and interaction with their subjects while still remaining true to their objectives and honest with their audiences?
- What are the ethical questions facing documentary filmmakers and what responsibilities do they have towards their subjects and stories?

As the second key component to the course, it is expected that students will consider these questions when watching the films screened in class, during their discussions and written reflections, and that they will apply what they are learning to the documentary projects that they will develop over the course of the semester.

Student learning outcomes: By the end of the semester, it is expected that students will leave class with the following:

1) A basic overview of the history, development and impact of documentary filmmaking
2) A nuanced understanding of the films screened in the class in terms of their contribution to the genre, why they are considered seminal films, the influence of both the film and the filmmaker within a broader societal context, and the ability to convey this knowledge through participation in class discussion as well as in essay form
3) The ability to engage in the ethical, moral, and journalistic questions that have historically complicated the field of documentary filmmaking
4) The skills needed to produce a short documentary film, from writing the initial treatment to post-production, final editing and delivery
5) A strong grasp of the shooting, audio recording, and editing techniques that are particular to documentary filmmaking and also relevant to other forms of long-format storytelling


NOTE: All readings and summaries must be completed before the day of the class for which they have been assigned. *Exception: the first day of classes.

Class Expectations: Roughly half of the grade in this course will be based on assignments related to the screenings; the other half will be based on the production of the final documentary project, which will be produced through multiple assignments, each earning an individual grade, as well as a final grade earned on the documentary itself. IMPORTANT: This is an upper-level class, and the expectation is that all necessary introductory writing and production classes have already been completed. Thus, the written assignments and production elements produced by students throughout the semester will be graded accordingly, with the expectation of high levels of performance.

Professional Values and Competencies:

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications requires that, irrespective of their particular specialization, all graduates should be aware of certain core values and competencies and be able to:

- Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press for the country in which the institution that invites ACEJMC is located, as well as receive instruction in and understand the range of systems of freedom of expression around the world, including the right to dissent, to monitor and criticize power, and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances;

- Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications;

- Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications;

- Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society;

- Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information;
• Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity;

• Think critically, creatively and independently;

• Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work;

• Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve;

• Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness;

• Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts;

• Apply current tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work, and to understand the digital world

Assignments (description, percentage of overall grade, and grading):

• **Summaries for readings and pre-screening research (20%)**: We will have film screenings during each class and there will be assigned readings related to the films, and to the book. To ensure that every student is ready for class discussions, instead of quizzes, the student will need to write summaries of each documentary and of each assigned reading:

  1. **Specifications on how to write the summaries**: three components: at least two doc summaries (50%), a personal reflection (30%), and another summary with the readings from the text book (20%)

     a. Summaries for each documentary should have no more than 5 points. (10%)

     b. Make sure you read the assigned doc articles, or/and any other research. (10%)

     c. Summaries should focus on the novelty approaches and on the director techniques. (10%)

     d. They should discuss the ethics decision and controversies that the director/producer had to navigate. (10%)

     e. And they should outline the impact that each doc had for their audiences, but more importantly for future producers or directors. (10%)

     f. In the personal reflections: you are not to become audience: avoid describing the documentary and **defer judgement** as much as possible. **Strive for informed nuance**: get into the director shoes, on the time/place/culture when/where the doc was produced. Try to figure out the director intentions, and reflect about if the director accomplished those objectives. (Why or why not: informed reflections.) (30%)

  2. Make sure you read the syllabus, and include another summary with five points on the assigned text chapters. (20%)
• **Attendance and participation (10%)**: It is expected that students will show up for every class, fully prepared (with their summaries completed on time), ready to watch the film and participate in the discussion that follows. The discussions will average about 20 min, but may be longer or shorter depending on the material and other demands of the course. Of course, emergencies and unforeseen circumstances occur over the course of a semester, so please notify your professor and communicate any kind of emergency that will prevent you from completing your tasks. **Grading**: In order to receive these points, attendance each week is mandatory. As for participation, I expect a general level of engagement with the material and enthusiasm for interacting with fellow classmates on the discussion questions chosen for that week. I realize some are more comfortable speaking up during group sessions than others, and will take that into consideration when assessing participation grades. You will be allowed one unexcused absence for the semester. As per FIU policy, any other absence that is not a documented family or medical emergency, and for which you do not notify the professor within 24-hours of the missed class, will be counted as unexcused. **Each unexcused absence will result in a grade reduction of your final grade** (A to A-, B+ to B, etc.).

• **Student-led discussion (20%)**:  
  - During the course of the semester, teams of two or three students will be assigned a short presentation about one of the films to be screened in class. With this presentation the team will help lead the discussion after the screening. It should include questions for the class, brief film analysis, discussion of the technical aspects, historical background and the impact of the film and of the filmmakers.  
    - **Grading**: Please note that the team presentation and the written previews, and summaries will be worth 20% of your overall grade.

• **Documentary (40%)**: During the course of this session, students will be expected to produce a 5 to 7 minute documentary on a topic of their choosing (working with the guidance of the professor). **Students will partner with three other students in order to produce their project.**

The grade for the final project will be based on the following elements/assignments (see calendar below for due dates):

  - **Two-page treatment (5%)**: This treatment should clearly outline the proposed film that will be produced. The outline should include why the subject matter will make for compelling storytelling, the primary characters involved in the story, and how the filmmaker will go about gathering the footage needed to create the film that is being proposed. Make sure you describe “the visual story”… **Grading**: Is there a strong justification for creating this project? Have you made a good argument as to why audiences would be interested in the story you want to tell? Do you have a clear plan for production and access to the characters you hope to profile? Is the treatment well written, with strong use of language, limited errors, and a cohesive structure and flow?

  - **Interview project (5%)**: The voices of your subjects are probably the *most important* element of a documentary. It is how we learn about your characters, and why we become invested in their stories. This assignment is designed to help you work on your
interviewing techniques, not just in terms of the questions asked (which are of course crucial), but also in your technical approach. For this assignment, you will conduct the first interview for your project, which should be 20 minutes at a minimum (30-45 minutes should be your average), and edit it down to the two or three most compelling moments. **Grading:** In terms of content, have the questions asked led to compelling answers? Have the pieces that have been edited together help to tell a story? (It doesn’t have to be complete, but there should be some kind of narrative arc.) Technically, is the interview framed using proper line-of-sight and rule-of-thirds framing? Is the lighting sufficient and appropriate? Does the audio have strong levels, and is it clear and free of extraneous background noise? Does the background/setting chosen complement the interview, or is it distracting?


- **B-roll/sequence project (5%):** It is essential that your documentary contain multiple edited sequences that will be used to both tell your story and help the film move from one scene to the next. For this assignment, you will take multiple shots from a single scene for your project and edit them into a single sequence that does not use narration or interview footage, but has a clear beginning, middle and end. The initial amount of footage shot is up to you, but the final sequence should be between 0:45–1:00 minute in length. **Grading:** Have the techniques for shooting sequences discussed in class been followed? Is there a strong mix/variety of shots (establishing/wide/medium/close-up/cutaway) needed to portray the scene? Are the shots that have been chosen for the sequence properly framed, focused, and white-balanced? Are the hand-held shots steady and was a tripod used when needed? Have you avoided an overuse of zooms, tilts and pans? Does the editing help to tell the story, have jump cuts been avoided, and do the shots chosen fit together in a logical order?

**REVIEW**

- Basic Camera Shoots
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICcE72RewEyc
- Video sequence:
  - https://storify.com/mututemple/sequence-shooting
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z119FTTcEBA
  - Video Sequencing Made Easy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaiJlaQAyUI
- Video example for sequences and sound…
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7yiFksS2C8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7yiFksS2C8)
Six String Slinger Combines Bourbon and Music to Make Art

www.youtube.com

A man in the hear

- **Sound project (5%)**: This assignment will be similar to the previous, but the emphasis will be on the conscious awareness of and the capturing and editing of sound. Too often, sound becomes an afterthought when working with video, but it is an integral part of your project and cannot be ignored or treated as an afterthought. As with the broll/sequence project, you will take unedited footage and edit it down into a 0:45–1:00 minute piece, but the emphasis (and the grading) will be on the sound in your scene and how it can be best used to tell your story. **Grading**: The same guidelines will be followed as with the broll/sequence project, but grading will focus on the use of sound, both the quality as it was captured in the field as well as how it was used in the editing to tell the story.

- **Cinema verite project (5%)**: The concept of cinema verite ('real cinema') is at the heart of some documentaries, but also highly contested (can anything that is filmed really be ‘real’?). We will be discussing the method in class at some length and you will be expected to go and capture your own 1:00–1:30 minutes of cinema verite. This assignment will be completely unedited—only the start and end points will be chosen—and thus it will rely heavily on your ability to find the right scene, know where to shoot and who to follow, and your technical ability with the camera. **Grading**: Does the piece tell a story? Does it have a clear beginning and end? (It doesn’t have to be a complete story, but the narrative/purpose of the scene for storytelling purposes should be clear.) Is there a strong technical use of the camera, which will almost certainly be hand-held? Are shots in focus and have you paid attention to the lighting in your scene? Is audio also an integral part of the scene?
  - Story telling brain work: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1drR3oaVGc

- **Final project (15%)**: Your final project, due at the end of the semester, will be graded in its entirety, based on the elements that were developed in the preceding projects as well as the additional material recorded and edited in order to complete the film. **Grading**: All of the questions used for grading the preceding projects will be used to grade the final project, as well as an additional emphasis on how well the entire piece fits together. Is there a logical flow to the story? Have you conducted enough interviews in order to tell your story clearly? Is there a clear beginning, middle, and end? Do all the technical elements (framing, lighting, sound, editing, music, and graphics) fit together in a cohesive manner?
- The 7 keys of storytelling beginning and end: 
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVcg9L6FLPA
- How Leslia Evans became an icon of the Black Lives Matter 
  - https://youtu.be/SzPjNM2Y8ME
- Autistic Kid becomes a basketball player: 
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WV1akgvFknk

**Use of technology:** I strongly believe that the only way to appreciate the films we will be watching this semester is by paying close attention and immersing yourself fully in the experience. Therefore I will insist that there be **no computers, laptops, tablets or phones** used during the film screenings. We will take two 10-minute breaks during class at which point you can catch up on all your missed texts, snaps, tweets, likes, shares, tags, pics, vines, whatsapps, whispers, etc.

**Ethical Conduct & Plagiarism:** Student must follow the Standards of Conduct described in the student handbook (http://www.fiu.edu/~sccr/standards_of_conduct.htm). Students are expected to use all resources, including books, journals, and computers only in legal and authorized ways. Participants are expected to perform individual assignments without consulting each other. Participants in this course are also reminded that materials may not be pasted or paraphrased from printed, electronic or any other sources without appropriate citations and credits. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism and will result in penalties as set forth by University policies.

**IMPORTANT DATES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 9 Monday</td>
<td>First day of classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 16 Monday</td>
<td>Martin Luther King Holiday (University Closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 17 Tuesday</td>
<td>Last day to add courses; last day to drop courses or withdraw from the University without incurring financial liability for Tuition and Fees (Last day to change grading basis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 3 Friday</td>
<td>Last day to apply for graduation at the end of Spring 2017 term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 13-18 Monday-Saturday</td>
<td>Spring Break (University Open, No Classes)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| March 20 Monday | Deadline to drop a course with a DR grade 
  Deadline to withdraw from the University with a WI grade |
| April 24 & 29 Monday – Saturday | Finals Week - If a final exam is not required, classes are expected to be held during finals week |
| May 4 Thursday | Grades available to students by web |
Course schedule/Film screenings (Preliminary*)

WEEK 1: January 9-11: Go over the syllabus. What is a documentary? Watch clips from: *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922); *Man with a Camera* (Vertov, 1929); *Night Mail* (1936); *The Plow That Broke The Plains* (1936).


WEEK 2: January 18: Basic documentary production techniques. Pitch project ideas to the group; discuss elements expected in a two-page treatment.

- **DUE TODAY before class today and every other Monday (weeks 4-6-8-11-13-15) at the beginning of the class Summary:**
  Specifications on how to write the summaries: three components: doc summaries (50%), a personal reflection (30%), and another summary with the readings from the text book (20%)
  Warning: Put on your director hat! Couch potatoes are not welcome
  - Summaries for each documentary should have no more than 5 points. (10%)
  - Make sure you read the assigned doc articles, or/and any other research on them. (10%)
  - Summaries should focus on the novelty approaches and on the director techniques. (10%)
  - They should discuss the ethics decision and controversies that the director/producer had to navigate. (10%)
  - And they should outline the impact that each doc had for their audiences, but more importantly for future producers or directors. (10%)
  - In the personal reflections: you are not to become audience: avoid describing the documentary and defer judgement as much as possible. Strive for informed nuance: get into the director shoes, on the time/place/culture when/where the doc was produced. Try to figure out the director intentions, and reflect about if the director accomplished those objectives. (Why or why not: informed reflections.) (30%)

- The summary should be based on the following doc and text readings: *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922); *Man with a Camera* (Vertov, 1929); *Night Mail* (1936); *The Plow That Broke The Plains* (1936), and PRIMARY.

Readings:


- **DUE Monday:** Two-page documentary treatment, uploaded to Dropbox by the beginning of class.

WEEK 4- January 30- February 1: Screening of *Titticut Follies* (Fred Wiseman, 1967). Planning, shooting, and editing strong sequences. Discuss broll/sequence project. Documentary treatment returned with comments, grades.

• **DUE MONDAY (weeks 6-8-10-12-15) at the beginning of the class:** ONE PAGE summary with the most important facts of the documentaries FOR THIS WEEK AND THE FOLLOWING WEEK. (*Titticut Follies* & *HARLAND COUNTY*). Make sure you also include the readings in dropbox about the film or your own research, the assigned reading of the book, and a personal reflection.

WEEK 5-February 6-8: Screening of *Harlan County USA* (Barbara Kopple, 1973). Can filmmakers also be advocates? Discussion of ethics behind relationship with subject. Update on projects; brainstorming session, group feedback.

  • **Readings:** Aufderheide, pp. 56-65; King, Noel. “Recent ‘Political’ Documentary.” *Screen, 7-18.*
  
  • **DUE:** Interview project; compressed .mov file or link to video on Vimeo uploaded to Dropbox by beginning of class

WEEK 6-February 13-15: Screening of *Life of Crime* (John Alpert, 1988). Capturing and editing with sound; discussion of the sound editing project. Grades and comments back on Interview Project, group screening of selected projects.

  
  • **DUE TODAY (weeks 8-11-13-15) at the beginning of the class:** ONE PAGE summary with the most important facts of the documentaries FOR THIS WEEK AND THE FOLLOWING WEEK. (*Life of Crime* & *THIN BLUE LINE*). Make sure you also include the readings in dropbox about the film or your own research, the assigned reading of the book, and a personal reflection.


  
  • **DUE:** Broll/sequence project; compressed .mov file or link to video on Vimeo uploaded to Dropbox by beginning of class

WEEK 8-February 27-March 1: Screening of *Why We Fight* (Eugene Jarecki, 2005). Grades and comments on Broll/sequence project; screening of select projects, class discussion.

  
  • **DUE:** Sound project; compressed .mov file or link to video on Vimeo uploaded to Dropbox by beginning of class

  • **DUE MONDAY (weeks 11-13-15) at the beginning of the class:** ONE PAGE summary with the most important facts of the documentaries FOR THIS WEEK AND THE FOLLOWING WEEK. (*Why We Fight* & *Hoop Dreams*). Make sure you also include the readings in dropbox about the film or your own research, the assigned reading of the book, and a personal reflection.

WEEK 9- March 6-8: Screening of *Hoop Dreams* (Steve James, 1994). Grades and comment back on Sound project; screening of select projects, class discussion.


• **DUE:** Cinema verite project; compressed .mov file or link to video on Vimeo uploaded to Dropbox by beginning of class

**WEEK 10- March 13-15:** Spring Break

**WEEK 11- March 20-22:** Screening of *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005). In-class editing time.


• **DUE TODAY (week 10)** at the beginning of the class: **ONE PAGE summary** with the most important facts of the documentaries FOR THIS WEEK AND THE FOLLOWING WEEK. (*Grizzly Man* & *Farhenheit 9/11*). Make sure you also include the readings in dropbox about the film or your own research, the assigned reading of the book, and a personal reflection.

**WEEK 12- March 27-29:** Screening of *Farhenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004). In-class editing time.


**WEEK 13- April 3-5:** Screening of *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012). Grades and comment back on cinema verite project; screening of select projects, class discussion.


• **DUE TODAY (week 12)** at the beginning of the class: **ONE PAGE summary** with the most important facts of The Act of Killing and Citizen Four, all the related readings and a reflection.

**WEEK 14- April 10-12:** Screening of Citizen Four (Laura Poitras, 2014; TBD). In-class editing time.


• **DUE:** Rough cut of final project; compressed .mov file or link to video on Vimeo uploaded to Dropbox by end of class
WEEK 15- April 17-19: In-class editing, feedback on rough cut from professor. Workshop.
  • DUE TODAY (week 15) A personal reflection of what you have learned during this course.

WEEK 16- (4/24 better! TBD first day of class): LAST DAY. Final projects due by beginning of class. Screenings of student projects and pizza party!

* This means: Not written in stone…Some of the course content might change.