

“Documentary Forms: Poetry, Film & Video, and Visual Art”

LITCW-AD 141-001 (cross-listed with Visual Arts, Film/new media)

New York University Abu Dhabi

Spring 2016, Su 2:10-4:50 pm | Jill Magi, Senior Lecturer | Email: Jill.Magi@nyu.edu

Office hours: Tuesdays 1:00-2:30 pm and by appointment

“Poetry is felt fact.”

-Susan Howe

“Fact is not truth. Accumulating facts does not necessarily lead to truth, and just as one gathers them to prove, one can also use them to falsify, negate, or disprove. The politics of interpretation is always at work.”

-Trinh T. Minh-ha

Course Description

This course centers on the generative intersection of art and non-fiction: in other words, documentary forms. Documentaries are compelling because they are driven by a desire to investigate, educate, reveal. They often do this by claiming objectivity and reality rather than claiming subjectivity and fiction. During the semester we will therefore explore the relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and point of view in three mediums: poetry, film and video, and visual art, with an emphasis on poetry and text.

Documentary film has a relatively long tradition and discourse. After early 20th century documentary film, came the 1990s “documentary turn” in visual art, followed by an outpouring of what has been called “documentary poetry” into the 2000s, with classes and critical work on documentary poetry currently abounding. Throughout the semester, we’ll take advantage of the opportunity to think across mediums, asking, how can documentary film discourse and theory inform texts and visual art? Do books of poems have any light to shed on either the making or reception of documentary film and documentary-based visual art?

Teaching Methodology

The course will run as a hybrid seminar and creative writing workshop, including close readings and viewings of exemplary documentary forms, as well as facilitated peer critique sessions. The course moves between the study of theory and artistic practice. Each week we will read theory and study examples of documentary modes in film, poetry, and visual art, engage in creative writing exercises, and participate in critique.

Learning Outcomes

During the first half of the course, we will experiment with making text in each mode in order to 1) gain a deeper understanding of documentary theory and compositional practices, and 2) find an appropriate compositional method and voice for individual projects. Each

student will make a final text project that may be accompanied by a visual component that reflects the culmination of learning outcomes: to be familiar with the history of documentary, the theory that informs its composition, to learn how to make creative text-based projects in documentary form, and to learn how to participate in a community of artists who rigorously support each other.

Note: Students who are practitioners of various other art forms are welcome in the course, but writing and text will be the emphasis of the creative assignments and workshops, and poetry, for our purposes, is defined broadly as text work that denaturalizes language and does not look like conventional journalism.

Rubric for Participation/Requirements and Assignments

The following assignments will be required of each student: weekly reading assignments, writing exercises, draft poems/texts, revisions to creative works; two short papers that are close readings of a single poem and a single film or visual work; a final project of 10-15 pages of revised poems/text, and a corresponding poetics statement reflecting on the practice of making in relation to theory and experiences in the class.

Class participation is essential and includes contributing to a supportive and rigorous community of writers and artists through writing together, providing workshop feedback to peers, leading class discussion on occasion, and participating in the final reading/exhibit and celebration.

Grading

Participation, attendance, including in-class writings and peer feedback/critique sessions: 20%

Writing exercises and shorter assignments, including two close readings: 40%

Reading discussion facilitation: 20%

Final project and poetics statement: 20%

Attendance

Attending all class sessions prepared is a requirement of the course. If you miss a class, please bring a note from the wellness center excusing your absence. Your grade will fall a third of a letter grade with each unexcused absence. Class will always start on time; two late arrivals equal one absence.

Required Texts

Representing Reality by Bill Nichols

“Poetry in Light of Documentary” by Jill Magi in *The Chicago Review* Issue 59:01/02

One Big Self: An Investigation by C. D. Wright

The Weather by Kenneth Goldsmith

The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers by Bhanu Kapil

Holocaust Museum by Robert Fitterman

Coal Mountain Elementary by Mark Nowak

Anti-Humboldt: A Reading of the North American Free Trade Agreement by Hugo Garcia Manriquez

Zong! by M. NourbeSe Philip

Electronic Devices

Please turn them off and refrain from using them in class. Our course is practice in making use of the lo-fi, portable, cheap, and flexible technology: the paper-based notebook or sketchbook.

Plagiarism (Academic Integrity)

The passing off of another's words or ideas as your own is a serious offense and will be handled in accordance with the official university policy on academic dishonesty:

<https://nyuad.nyu.edu/students/campus.life/policies/policy.academic.integrity.html>

Course Schedule (subject to Change)

January 31 Introduction to course themes, terms, historical context Poet, Artist as Investigator/"The Poetics of Investigation:

US WPA-era and international war photography, films and poetry of Stephanie Gray, works by visual artist Emily Jacir and painter Richard Diebenkorn

The Expository Mode in Documentary Film/Expository Poetics

February 7 Read Nichols pages 3-38

Read Magi pages 248-256

Film: *Land without Bread* dir. Luis Buñuel

Poetry: C. D. Wright's *One Big Self: An Investigation*

February 14 Writing Assignment 1 due: A Letter to a City (or sequence of short notes) that includes research done on a walk, research done in the library

Wright, continued, plus the photographs of Deborah Luster

February 21 Poetry/prose: Muriel Rukeyser's *US 1*

Writing activity, in class: Writing the approach

February 28 Writing Assignment 2 due: write an “I am going to investigate . . .” poetics statement/poem, on a subject of your choice and in the vein of Wright and Rukeyser

Share session/group critiques

The Observational Mode in Film/Observational Poetics

March 6 Read Nichols pages 39-44

Read Magi pages 256-263

Films: *Into Great Silence* dir. Philip Gröning and *Kodak* dir. Tacita Dean

Poetry: Kenneth Goldsmith’s *The Weather* and Robert Fitterman’s *Holocaust Museum*

March 13 Installation/sculpture: Fred Wilson (in class)

Writing activity, in class: experimenting with found text

Introduction to the poetics and film/video works of Trinh T. Minh-ha, read excerpts from *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism, and the Boundary Event* and “The Politics of Forms and Forces” (NYU Classes)

March 17 Required Film Night: *Naked Spaces, Living is Round* dir. Minh-ha

The Interactive Mode in Film/Interactive Poetics

March 27 Read Nichols pages 44-56

Read Magi pages 263-268

Writing assignment 3 due: Found text project

Poetry: Corrine Fitzpatrick’s *Zamboanguña*, excerpts from Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony*, Jill Magi’s *Cadastral Map* (NYU classes)

Visual art: the work of Sophie Calle (in class)

April 3 New modes of interactivity: Dale Hudson, guest speaker on *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf*, a film by CAMP

Read excerpt from *Thinking Though Digital Media: Transnational Environments and Locative Places* by Dale Hudson and Patricia R. Zimmerman (NYU Classes)

Writing assignment 4 due: an interview poem/a transcript poem

The Reflexive Mode in Film/Reflexive Poetics

- April 10 Read Nichols pages 56-73
Read Magi pages 268-275
Poetry: *Coal Mountain Elementary* by Mark Nowak
In-class work on final projects.
- April 14 Required Film Night: *When the Levees Broke* dir. Spike Lee
- April 17 Poetry: *Anti-Humboldt: A Reading of the North American Free Trade Agreement* by Hugo Garcia Manriquez
Visual/conceptual art: Hans Haacke's real estate project (in class)
Due: Final project proposal/rationale.
In-class work on final projects.
- April 24 Poetry: *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip
In-class work on final projects.
- May 1 *Zong!* continued
In-class work on final projects.
- Documentary and Fiction: *Imagined Archives and Reenactors*
- May 8 Visual art, film: Walid Raad and *Looking for Langston* dir. Isaac Julien
In-class work on final projects.
- May 15 Final Projects Due! Reading/Exhibit/Celebration