

Ethnographic Film (LCST 3016) Fall 2008

Wed. 6:00-9:20 PM | 66 West 12th Rm. 619

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Course Description

In this course, students learn how motion picture is used for ethnographic/qualitative research in cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, and beyond. The class will also discuss the moral, ethical, and aesthetic issues that arise for the ethnographic filmmaker and audience/reader. A variety of ethnographic, documentary, and experimental films that reflect, criticize, and innovate the field of anthropology and filmmaking are screened. Students participate in video documentary exercises to gain a practical understanding of the dilemmas that ethnographic filmmakers face. Authors and filmmakers include: Robert Flaherty, Judith and David MacDougall, John Marshall, Timothy and Patsy Asch, Jean Rouch, Peter Loizos, Rea Tajiri, and Sadie Benning.

Current Issues/Debates

Ethnography is considered a systematic method/approach to studying a culture in several fields of study including anthropology, sociology, cultural and media studies.

Ethnography (whether visual or written) is the practice by which the researcher goes out into the 'field' and learns from 'informants' (members within the culture being studied) about various aspects of the culture (cultural practices, rituals, beliefs, etc.). As you read about ethnographic filmmaking, you will find debates about what constitutes a film as being 'ethnographic.' The field of visual anthropology is at the forefront in grappling with key debates. Some anthropologists come from a more traditional or 'scientific' ethnographic approach where visual images must be qualified or meet certain criteria in a rigid systematic way to be deemed ethnographic or to be considered as 'data' for anthropological knowledge. These images are only used as aids to elaborate on the researcher's written recordings and tend to be limited by a literal interpretation. Due to the ambiguous nature of visual images, they cannot take a primary role in creating anthropological knowledge from a traditional perspective. From a more non-traditional, post-colonial perspective, the 'scientific' approach is considered another form of colonialism. True understanding of a culture must include practices like collaboration with the informants in the recording process and reflexive approaches to ethnography.

Learning Outcomes

This course will aid you in developing your own theoretical and research practices for ethnographic filmmaking. Students will also gain practical experience through the collaboration of a group film project from developing a study question to field research and film recording to analysis and editing to a final presentation.

Required Texts: The readings will be discussed on the day they appear in the syllabus. *Innovations in Ethnographic Film: From Innocence to Self-Consciousness* by Peter Loizos. Additional readings will be found on Blackboard or distributed in class.

Suggested Texts: Research Practice for Cultural Studies by Ann Gray; Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies by Robert S. Weiss; and Directing the Documentary by Michael Rabiger,

GRADING POLICIES

Final Grade Evaluation:

35% Final Paper/Video Presentation 35% Research Methods/Film practices Exercises
30% Participation & Attendance

Assignments:

Research Methods/Film practices Exercises

Each week you will have a research methods exercise or a film practice exercise. Whether it be research-based or production-based, it will be indicated as “Exercise” with due date in the syllabus. The production-based exercise equates to three videos that you will present on given due dates and will be turned in on a DVD compilation at the end of the semester. You can use in-camera editing and effects for some of it but you will also need to use a digital video editing software like Final Cut Pro or iMovie for basic editing.

Final paper/video presentation – (5-7 pages / Video running time – 5-10 minutes):

You and your group will develop an ethnographic film with an accompanied final paper that analyzes your research process, analysis of your project’s theoretical placement within the body of ethnographic films studied in class, as well as further elaboration of the context in which the cultural group is studied.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of someone else's work as one's own in all forms of academic endeavor (such as essays, theses, examinations, research data, creative projects, etc), intentional or unintentional. Plagiarized material may be derived from a variety of sources, such as books, journals, internet postings, student or faculty papers, etc. This includes the purchase or “outsourcing” of written assignments for a course. A detailed definition of plagiarism in research and writing can be found in the fourth edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, pages 26-29. Procedures concerning allegations of plagiarism and penalties are set forth in the Lang catalog.

Participation & Attendance:

Please demonstrate that you are truly engaged during class. Students are expected to attend classes regularly and promptly. More than 3 absences will result in a failing final grade. **Students who are more than 10 minutes LATE will be marked as absent---NO EXCUSES!** In case of personal and medical emergencies, students should e-mail me BEFORE class as well as contacting the Director of Academic Advising.

Disabilities

In keeping with the University's policy of providing equal access for students with disabilities, any student requesting accommodations must first meet with Student Disability Services. Jason Luchs or a designee from that office will meet with students requesting accommodations and related services, and if appropriate, provide an Academic Adjustment Notice for the student to provide to his or her instructors. The instructor is required to review the letter with the student and discuss the accommodations, provided the student brings the letter to the attention of the instructor. This letter is necessary in order for classroom accommodations to be provided. Student Disability Services is located at 79 Fifth Avenue - 5th Floor. The phone number is (212) 229-5626. Students and faculty are expected to review the Student Disability Services webpage. The webpage can be found at <http://www.newschool.edu/studentaffairs/disability/> and the office is available to answer any questions or concerns.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Introduction

Sept. 3 - What is Ethnography? First Ethnographic Films – Formalism to Realism
Flaherty to Mead to Wiseman – Equipment access – Technical assessment.

Sept. 10 – *Readings: Loizos, “Innovations in Ethnographic Film,” Ch. 1 pp. 5-15 and excerpt from Rabiger, Michael “Directing Participants” from Directing The Documentary. (Handout on Blackboard)*

Using Camera demo and basic sequence construction.

Exercise due next week (Sept. 17th): Check out a miniDV camera from the school. Shoot a friend doing an activity (that is significant to them in some way), as a pure observer. Do not interfere with your friend’s activity. The activity should take place over a short period of time (for example, clothes shopping or making a meal). Tell them to just act like you are not even there. Construct your shots so they tell a story that details the person and his or her activity and environment with close ups, mediums shots, and wide shots. It is your job to record a series of shots that condenses time yet illustrations, the space, time, and context of the activity. The series of shots should be no longer 3 minutes in total. Be prepared to show it to the class.

Observational Cinema and innovations in Ethnographic Filmmaking

Sept. 17 – *Reading: Loizos, “For the record: Documenting from innocent realism to a form of self-consciousness,” Ch. 2 pp.16-39 . and Gray, Ann, Research Practice for Cultural Studies: Ethnographic Methods and Lived Cultures Grasping Lived Cultures” Ch. 1 pp.11-25 (handout on Blackboard)*

Screen sequence of shots from last week’s exercise.

Screen and discuss the Ax Fight by Timothy Asch and David MacDougall.

Sept. 24 – *Readings: Loizos, “Robert Gardner in Tahiti or the rejection of realism” Ch. 7 pp. 139-165 Ruby, Jay, Picturing Culture “Robert Gardner and Anthropological Cinema” Ch. 3 pp. 95-113 (handout on Blackboard)*

Screen Dead Leaves by Robert Gardner

Exercise due next week (Oct. 1st): Watch the video you shot last week and write narration for the person on camera. Try to assume the point-of-view of that person in your written narration in first or third person. Be prepared to read it to the class while the video plays.

Oct. 1 - *Reading: Excerpt from Rabiger, “Location Sound” and “Interviewing” (handout on Blackboard)*

Orate narration to your video.

Working with sound for interview and activities: technical workshop.

Exercise due next week (Oct 8th): With microphones, record an interview with your friend who you shot on video (the visual is not important at all). Also record your own narration that you wrote the previous week.

Oct. 4 - SATURDAY MAKE CLASS OPTION 1 – EDITING WORKSHOP

Meet at 12pm-3pm at 55 W. 13th St on 8th fl.

Have your recorded narration for the workshop. Once I demo basic editing techniques, you will work in the lab with my presence to work on the assignment due next week.

Exercise due next week (Oct. 15th): Edit your observation footage together with your recorded narration. Feel free to take out or use as much as the narration and shots you wish.

Oct. 8 – No Class – Yom Kippur

Oct. 9 - MAKE UP CLASS OPTION 2 – *Traces of the Trade* Screening and panel discussion at 6:30pm at 55 W. 13th St. 2nd Floor Arnold Hall. Write a 1 page review on your experience. **Exercise due next week (Oct. 15th):** Edit your observation footage together with your recorded narration. Feel free to take out or use as much as the narration and shots you wish.

Oct. 15 - Reading: Gray, Ann “A Question of Research” Ch. 4 pp. 57-79 & “Locating Instances and Generating Material” Ch. 5 pp. 79-106 (handout on Blackboard). Screen edited narration on video exercise. Discuss strategies to begin research on a topic. **Exercise due next week (Oct. 22nd):** Do a free write and come up with a list of possible questions, themes, subjects, or approaches to an ethnographic film. Be prepared to discuss one you would want to do for the final project with a group.

Cinema Verité

Ethnographic filmmaking as collaboration with the subjects

Oct. 22 – Reading: Loizos, “Challenging documentation-realism: Three early experiments by Jean Rouch,” Ch. 3 pp. 45-64
Screen *Chronicles of a Summer*.

Discuss proposed final project ideas in class.

Exercise due next week (Oct. 29): Interview the person who did the activity with you in the first assignment. Interact with him/her and have them repeat the activity if you want. On the contrary to the first shooting exercise, the person does not have to act like you are not there. Ask them for suggestions of what they think you should shoot and incorporate all your conversations with them on camera during shooting. Be prepared to edit the interaction with the original footage or the re-shoot of them doing the activity.

Participants as the Ethnographer & Experimental Ethnography

Oct. 29 – Reading: Russell, Catherine, *Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self* by Catherine Russell, 1999 Excerpt from: *Experimental Ethnography*, Duke University Press <http://www.haussite.net/haus.0/SCRIPT/txt2001/01/russel.HTML>

Review works of Rea Tajiri and Sadie Bennings. Guest filmmaker and former Lang Student, Karen Shakredge presents her work, *Habayta (To Home)*. *Parallel Adele* will also be presented.

Screen segment of collaborative exercise. Discuss proposing final ethnographic film for a group project.

Exercise due week (Nov. 5th): ~~Record your story. Making a short bio piece less than 5 minutes long defining who you are.~~ Write a formal proposal to pitch your final project to the class. See guidelines in handout on Blackboard.

Nov. 5 – Propose final projects and form groups.

Exercise due next week (Nov. 12th): Meet up with your group and come up with a description of your study (What is the context in which you are studying this particular group? What greater questions do you hope answer or understand about this particular group and how it relates to society as a whole? What personal bias may you have? How will film be used in the study?) Draft a method and approach and begin a relationship with your informant(s) if you have not already done so. Begin writing a log of your interactions and observations with your informant. Be sure to tell your informant(s) about your study and get their permission to incorporate them in your study.

Developing Ethnographic Film Study & Research Methods

Nov. 12 – Reading: Weiss, Robert S., *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* by Robert S. Weiss Ch. 2 “Respondents: Choosing them and Recruiting them”

Present group project method and approach.

Exercise due in two weeks (Nov. 19th): Go out into the field with your informant without a camera. Take field notes and make a diary/log of your experience. Plan with your group how and what you will use video/film for your final project.

Nov. 19 – Reading: Weiss, Robert S., *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* by Robert S. Weiss Ch. 6 “Analysis of Data”
Berg, Bruce L., *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, excerpt from Ch. 6 “Ethnographic Field Strategies” pp. 140-156

Guest Producer Amy Goodman presents *Girlhood* followed by Q & A.

Exercise due next week (Dec. 3rd): Do an interview with one of your informants and record field notes. Be prepared to show some of the footage to the class and turn in the transcripts.

Nov. 26 – No Class – *Need to schedule make up day* – Work on your final project

Dec. 3 - Present group progress and continue to workshop project.

Screen *Forest of Bliss* by Robert Gardner

Present your written research with your first encounter with your informant.

Dec. 10 – **Live music performance with Ethnographic film images. Filmmaker, Tomas Cassis.** Workshop your final project.

Dec. 17 - Final Presentation – Turn in a DVD compilation of all your video exercises for final review as well as a copy of your final group project with all field notes and documentation as well as a report of your findings. You will be required to answer a questionnaire called “Group Evaluation” that will give you a chance to explain your process in the final project. You will also write a brief narrative on the groups’ process and cooperation.

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Alternative Final Project (*For those who would prefer to not work on a group project can opt out by using a film as a text for analysis which you will present to the class.*)

Paper Presentation (7 to 10 pages)

Analyze a 'documentary' style film, video, tv program or news media program that you would consider to be 'ethnographic'. Explain why and how through and ethnographic 'lens' it influences or is influenced by the fields of cinema studies, anthropology, cultural and media studies, and/or sociology. Be able to present your paper to the class with examples from the films and readings consumed throughout the course to support your findings with an annotated bibliography. (Consult MLA handbook for bibliography format.)