

## Anthropology 173: Culture Through Film

Spring 2012  
Mondays and Wednesdays 4:30-5:45 pm  
Clark 201

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office hours: M/W 10:30-12

### Course Description, Philosophy, and Practice

We live in an environment increasingly saturated by visual culture, forms of information and spectacle that operate in parallel with print culture and spoken communication, but that cannot be reduced to either, and must be understood on their own terms. This course is an introduction into how to understand visual culture and how to think about producing one's own visual documentation.

In the same sense that critical reading and thinking skills have been developed in order to help students attend to the circulation of written materials and argumentation at work in the public sphere, this class intends to help students begin to develop an understanding of the anatomy of visual culture, and the forms of rhetoric, persuasion, and genre that our visual culture deploys. The course, in other words, will help students acquire a kind of visual literacy. It will help students begin to inquire into how visual culture is organized, how it persuades, how it achieves its reality-effect or spectacular pleasures, and how to use its forms to engage in social or ethnographic documentation. We will begin from the premise that anthropology can (and should... and *maybe*... someday... will?) develop films that are not merely supplementary or secondary to ethnographic writing. Thus, we will address film – in photo, fiction, documentary, and experimental film – in order to cull lessons about how to develop visual documents that address contemporary social, cultural, and political life with an anthropological spirit. And we will think about how to become *producers* of visual culture rather than *passive* consumers.

To work towards our goals, the course will introduce students to basic analytic and critical tools for conceptualizing film, photo, and digital visual materials. *First*, we will learn to look and analyze what it is we see when we look: for instance, that cultures develop “ways of seeing” or habits of looking; as well as how film and photo contains an implicit rhetoric that often appears natural, or remains below the level of conscious thoughts – but not without registering on our perception. *Second*, the course will introduce students to formal analysis, a way of breaking down the grammar of a film and how it achieves its representational and narrative effects – that is, we'll examine *how* films *make sense* in the same way that sentences, paragraphs, or novels *make sense*. Formal analysis is a way of sensitizing us to a variety of components – such as editing, cinematography, mise-en-scene, and sound – that interact with and shape the way that stories are told and understood. And it will provide us with a grasp of the basic building blocks of filmmaking. *Third*, the course will provide examples of critical analysis: work that seeks to engage, describe, and often criticize film in terms of the way they represent cultural and political life. Critical analysis is essential to engaging film as something more than as a mere passive viewer. It's a form of literacy increasingly essential in today's world. However, we will not use critical analysis to simply deconstruct or criticize, but instead to elaborate, broaden, fill out, and draw connections between film style and broader social worlds. In other words, the course will assess a variety of films in order to examine their possibilities and limitations – and how they might teach us to tell our own stories and represent culture through film.

A warning: this course is not an experience in passive spectatorship. Even less so is it a matter of simply watching movies. Students will encounter a range of genres and styles of filmic representation – some of them challenging and purposely bent on upsetting the economy of pleasure, spectatorship, and sense that we have all learned from Hollywood editing conventions.

While the course will still be fun, it will be an experience in learning to think about film through *practicing different viewing habits*. Learning to understand culture through film requires this kind of defamiliarization and an ability to reflect on the way that filmic conventions cultivate our expectations about the relationship between seeing, information, and reality.

### **Course Requirements**

Attendance and participation in class lectures is required. Excessive absence will be grounds for failure. Students must come to class prepared to discuss course readings assigned for that day. Students will also be responsible for films viewed in class – and must learn to actively watch and take notes about films viewed in class.

I will not answer questions about what occurred in lecture due to absence. Please develop note-taking relationships with your peers. Students are responsible for being aware of assignment deadlines and administrative (add/drop) deadlines. Finally, if you are concerned about your performance in the class, please make an appointment and speak with me during my office hours. I am always willing to help students get as much as possible out of their education – but *do not* wait until the last minute. 99% of the time I can help a student that seeks out help – but rarely can I do much at the last minute.

### **Course Texts**

Course texts are available at Roberts' Bookstore and a course reader will be available at Maple Press.

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC, 1973.

Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, *The Film Experience, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2012.

Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. New York: Picador, 1973.

### **Course Assignments**

Students will write four papers in this course. *Late assignments will not be accepted unless arrangements are made prior to the deadline*. The first and second papers are designed to teach students skills in analyzing imagery and editing that provide the building-blocks for thinking in/about film. The third and fourth papers require students to use – and reflect critically on – films as ethnographic documents with an eye towards conceptualizing how they would go about researching and producing visual representations.

*Paper 1, Rhetoric of the Image*: This paper requires students to perform an analysis of an image or of image-culture-at-large by drawing on the tools and examples provided by John Berger and Susan Sontag.

*Paper 2, Shot Breakdown Assignment*: This assignment requires students to document, in close detail, the editing and cinematography of a short scene from a film of their choosing. After the shot breakdown, students will write a short essay describing how editing and cinematography – that is, what they *see* – relays narrative information beyond or before anything *spoken* in the scene.

*Paper 3, Film-Ethnography-Mapping*: This paper will require students to discuss what either John Sayles' or Agnes Varda's film can tell us about ethnographic narration and the relationship between social documentary and fieldwork.

*Paper 4, Picturing Ethnography:* This paper is an experimental writing assignment in which students will be asked to tell a short story through evocative imagery. In contrast to the argumentative style of writing so common in collegiate writing, students will be asked to make an *implicit* argument through descriptive writing that could function as a sketch of a film scene. In other words, students will learn to write in images. And they may chose to write in mimicry of various forms that documentaries we've watched are organized in.

### **Grading**

Papers 1-4: 100 points each

Attendance and participation: 50 points

450 points total, grades will be determined on the basis of percentage: 90-100% = A, 80-89% = B, etc.

### **University Policies and Resources**

#### **Academic integrity**

Students are expected to be familiar with the University's Academic Integrity Policy. Your own commitment to learning, as evidenced by your enrollment at San José State University, and the University's Academic Integrity Policy requires you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the Office of Student Conduct and Ethical Development. The policy on academic integrity and other resources related to student conduct can be found at [http://sa.sjsu.edu/student\\_conduct](http://sa.sjsu.edu/student_conduct).

#### **Campus Policy in Compliance with the American Disabilities Act**

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, or if you need to make special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible, or see me during office hours. Presidential Directive 97-03 requires that students with disabilities requesting accommodations must register with the DRC (Disability Resource Center) to establish a record of their disability. Special accommodations for exams require ample notice to the testing office and must be submitted to the instructor well in advance of the exam date.

#### **Student Technology Resources**

Computer labs for student use are available in the new Academic Success Center located on the 1st floor of Clark Hall and on the 2nd floor of the Student Union. Additional labs may be available to students in your department/college. Computers are also available in the Martin Luther King Library.

#### **Learning Assistance Resource Center**

The Learning Assistance Resource Center is designed to assist students in the development of their full academic potential and to motivate them to become self-directed learners. The center provides support services, such as skills assessment, individual or group tutorials, subject advising, learning assistance, summer academic preparation and basic skills development. The Learning Assistance Resource Center is located in Room 600 in the Student Services Center.

#### **SJSU Writing Center**

The Writing Center in Clark Hall 126 offers tutoring services to San Jose State students in all courses. Writing Specialists assist in all areas of the writing process, including grammar, organization, paragraph development, coherence, syntax, and documentation styles. For more

information, visit the Writing Center website at <http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter> or call 924-2308.

### **Peer Mentor Center**

The Peer Mentor Center is staffed with Peer Mentors who excel in helping students manage university life, tackling problems that range from academic challenges to interpersonal struggles. On the road to graduation, Peer Mentors are navigators, offering "roadside assistance" to peers who feel a bit lost or simply need help mapping out the locations of campus resources. Peer Mentor services are free and available on a drop-in basis, no reservation required. The Peer Mentor Center is located on the first floor of Clark Hall in the Academic Success

### **Course Schedule**

#### **Week 1: Introduction**

1/25 Introduction

#### **Week 2: Ways of Seeing**

1/30 and 2/1 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

Recommended: Errol Morris, "The Case of an Inappropriate Alarm Clock (Parts 1 and 2)" (reader)

#### **Week 3: The Rhetoric of the Image**

2/6 and 2/8 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

#### **Week 4: Photo**

2/13 and 2/15 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

Guest Lecture: Rian Dundon, a practicing photojournalist and graduate student in the Social Documentation program at UC Santa Cruz, will discuss how he conducts his visual research about Chinese youth culture.

#### **Week 5: Formal Analysis**

2/20 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

### **Rhetoric of the Image Assignment Due**

2/22 Mise-en-scene: Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, chapter 2 in *The Film Experience*

#### **Week 6: Cinematography and Editing**

2/27 Cinematography: Corrigan and White, chapter 3

2/29 Editing: Corrigan and White, chapter 4

#### **Week 7: Sound and Narrative**

3/5 Sound: Corrigan and White, chapter 5

### **Shot breakdown and formal analysis assignment handed out**

3/7 Narrative: Corrigan and White, chapter 6

**Week 8: Genre**

3/12 Documentary and Experimental Film: Corrigan and White chapter 7, Bill Nichols, “How Can We Define Documentary Film” and “What Gives Documentary Films a Voice of Their Own?” in *Introduction to Documentary*

3/14 Fiction: Corrigan and White chapter 8

**Shot Breakdown assignment due****Week 9: Beyond Hollywood, Beyond Continuity Editing**

3/19 Global and Third Cinema: Corrigan and White, chapter 10

3/21 Guest Lecture and Film Viewing: Rose Khor, a documentary and experimental filmmaker, will present and discuss her documentary about Asian-American history and memory.

**Week 10: Spring Break, no classes 3/26 or 3/28****Week 11: Critical Analysis I: Narration and heteroglossia in the films of John Sayles: or, how to think about telling stories and ethnographic mapping**

4/2 Mark Bould, “Planting Seeds: Some Contexts,” in *The Cinema of John Sayles* (reader)

Viewing: John Sayles, *Sunshine State*

4/4 Mark Bould, “Living the Dream,” in *The Cinema of John Sayles* (reader)

**Week 12: Critical Analysis II: Documentary as Fieldwork? Or, how to be curious and go out and engage the world**

4/9 and 4/11 Interview with Agnes Varda (reader) and Bill Nichols, “What Makes Documentaries Engaging and Persuasive?”

Viewing: Agnes Varda, *The Gleaners and I*

Optional: George Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography” (reader)

**Week 13: What you find in the world is weird; or, how can film form express feelings and arguments?**

4/16 Nichols, “How Can We Differentiate Among Documentaries? Categories, Models, and the Expository and Poetic Modes of Documentary Film” and Nichols, “How Can we Describe the Observational, Participatory, Reflexive, and Performative Modes of Documentary?”

Viewing, excerpts from Maya Deren, *Meshes on the Afternoon*, Frank Capra, *Why We Fight*, and Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will*

4/18 Nichols, “How Have Documentaries Addressed Social and Political Issues?”

**Film-Ethnography-Mapping Assignment Due****Week 14: How *not* to tell a story; or, storytelling is perspectival and political**

4/23 Fatimah Tobing Rony, “Taxidermy and Romantic Ethnography: Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*” (reader) and Bill Nichols, “What are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?”

Viewing, Robert Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*

4/25 Rony, “King Kong and the Monster in Ethnographic Cinema” (reader) and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “Tropes of Empire” in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (reader)

Viewing, Marlon Fuentes, *Bontoc Eulogy*

Optional: Elliot Weinberg, “The Camera People” (reader)

### **Week 15: The Poetic Mode and the Corporeal Image: Affects, Cities, and Documentaries Beyond Biography**

4/30 David MacDougal, “Social Aesthetics and the Doon School” (reader), Michael Taussig, “Heat” (reader), Kathleen Stewart, short excerpt from *Ordinary Affects* (reader)

Viewing, David MacDougal, *Doon School Chronicles*, Kenneth Anger, *Scorpio Rising*, Maya Deren, *Meshes on the Afternoon*

Optional: John Marlovits, “Interlude I: The Kalakala” and “Interlude II: Aesthetics and Anaesthetics, Coffee and Cigarettes” (reader)

5/2 Viewing, selections from Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, Walter Ruttmann, *Berlin: Symphony of a City*, and Wong Kar Wai, *Happy Together*

Optional: Malin Wahlberg, “Screen Events of Velocity and Duration” (reader)

### **Week 16: Making Documentary**

5/7 Viewing, Kate Trumbull, *Abaayo/Sister*

5/9 Guest Lecture: Kate Trumbull, a documentary filmmaker and graduate of UCSC’s program in Social Documentation will discuss her film *Abaayo/Sister* as well as her experience working in documentary production.

### **Week 17: The End**

5/14 Review

### **Picturing Ethnography Assignment Due**