

Contemporary Political Documentary: Course Description

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It seems clear that we are living in the golden age of documentary film, (or perhaps a contemporary revival of a genre that gains importance during times of crises) with feature-length non-fiction films assuming an unprecedented popularity and commercial viability, not to mention political impact. Directors such as Michael Moore, Errol Morris, Jason Spurlack, Avi Moghrabi, Ziba mir-Hosseini, and films like Borat, Control Room, Fog of War, Jesus Camp, Nine Bad Apples, the BBC's Power of Nightmares, Divorce Iranian Style, Avenge But One of My Two Eyes, The Corporation, Fahrenheit 911, Outfoxed, Super Size Me, etc—everyone has their list. The aim of this seminar will be to investigate this phenomenon, map its tendencies, modes of production and distribution, and formal innovations. Why, in the age of simulation and illusory images, has investigative realism, and polemical, adversarial documentary emerged as such an important genre of cinema? We would like to think of this seminar as a learning collective that will begin by sketching out a tentative filmography of contemporary documentary, and discuss the theory of documentary and its relation to documents, monuments, and media. Among topics to consider: the transformation of documentary from a minor, marginal genre into a major element of the contemporary culture industry, employed on both the Right and Left; the nature of “the political” in political documentary; the relation of cinema and other media (television and video), and professions such as investigative journalism. We will try to establish some of the fundamentals of genre, form, and structure, narrative and discourse in documentary film at the outset by reference to important early films by Vertov and Eisenstein, with some sampling of American agitprop films from the sixties as well. We will discuss the question of realism, of course, and its relation to new media like video and digital imaging, and try to parse the issue of truth claims in cinema, photography, and video. We are especially interested in the way documentaries mimic the genres of fictional film, so that Errol Morris is really a kind of *noir* story-teller, a private eye looking obsessively into the darkness, while The Power of Nightmares, the BBC documentary on the parallel rise of the Islamic Brotherhood and American Neoconservatism, might best be described as an exercise in horror and paranoia. In addition to the obvious “blockbuster” American documentaries in recent years, we may investigate some less well known productions, particularly those focused on Israel and Palestine. An important aspect of the phenomenon we are investigating is the way in which the genre remains open to “work from below,” based in relatively modest resources and passionate commitment. Finally, we must consider the “margins” of documentary—the comic mockumentary, the philosomentary; photographic and filmic documentations of artworks and performances.

We will ask students to prepare reports on various films, propose screenings for a mini-“DocFest” in the final 2 weeks, and write a seminar paper or the equivalent.