Documentary Touchstones
Instructor: Michael Fox
Thursdays, 10am-12noon, Sept. 29-Nov. 3, 2016
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The pioneering and innovative films that paved the way for the contemporary documentary are well known yet rarely shown. Beginning with *Nanook of the North*, this screening-and-discussion class surveys several canonical works of lasting power and influence, concluding with a formative work by modern master Werner Herzog. The discussion will encompass such perennial issues as documentary ethics, the line between current events and history, the use of metaphor and poetry, and our evolving relationship to images.

Sept. 29 *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922)
An Inuit hunter and his family struggle to survive in the harsh conditions of Canada’s Hudson Bay region. Enormously popular upon its release, *Nanook* remains a milestone for its pioneering use of narrative techniques: a defined central character, structured and shaped scenes, and dramatic pacing (alternating action and calm).

Robert Flaherty (1884-1951), arguably the first documentary filmmaker, also made *Moana* (1926), *Man of Aran* (1934) and *Louisiana Story* (1948). The son of a mining engineer, Flaherty became a filmmaker in order to document his travels as an explorer and prospector in the Canadian Arctic. He lived and worked with the Inuit, who served as his guides, companions, technical crew, navigators, dog sled driver and collaborators on many expeditions. He made more than 1,500 photographs of the Inuit from 1908-24, which are now housed in the National Photography Collection in the Public Archives of Canada and the Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center at Claremont College.

Oct. 6 *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (Pare Lorentz, 1936) and *The River* (1938)
*The Plow That Broke the Plains* “is a record of land... of soil rather than people -- a story of the Great Plains; the 400 million acres of wind-swept grass lands that spread up from the Texas panhandle to Canada... A high, treeless continent, without rivers, without streams... A country of high winds, and sun... and of little rain... By 1880 we had cleared the Indian, and with him the buffalo, from the Great Plains, and established the last frontier... A half million square miles of natural range... This is a picturization of what we did with it.”

*The River* describes the importance of the Mississippi to the U.S. It laments the environmental destruction committed in the name of progress, particularly farming and timber practices that caused massive erosion and washed vast amounts of topsoil down the river into the Gulf of Mexico. The film ends with a celebration of the TVA and the use of dams to control the river and prevent flooding.

http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/film/lorentz/front.html
Born in West Virginia, Pare Lorenz (1905-92) was a film critic in New York when he was asked to set up a Federal film program in 1935 that would effectively highlight the problems of American agriculture. A production unit was formed under the sponsorship of the Resettlement Administration (later it became part of the Dept. of Agriculture), where Lorentz made these artful New Deal propaganda films.

www.parelorentzcenter.org/biography/

Oct. 13 Triumph of the Will (Leni Riefenstahl, 1934)
Employing 30 cameras and 120 assistants, Riefenstahl recorded the 1934 Nazi Party Congress and rally in Nuremberg, depicting Hitler simultaneously as a man of the people and a Wagnerian hero. “Riefenstahl concentrates on cheering crowds, precision marching, military bands, and Hitler’s climactic speech, all orchestrated, choreographed and illuminated on a scale that makes Griffith and DeMille look like Poverty Row directors.”


Leni Riefenstahl (1902-2003) was a dancer, actress, filmmaker and photographer. *Triumph of the Will* won gold medals in Venice (1935) and Paris (1937 World Exhibition). By 1945, however, it was no longer hailed as art but condemned as National Socialist propaganda. For the rest of her life, Riefenstahl maintained that her intentions were artistic, not political. *Olympiad*, her two-part documentary record of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, won the gold medal in Paris (1937), first price in Venice (1938) and the IOC’s Olympic Award (1939).

Oct. 20 Night and Fog (Alain Resnais, 1956)
Commissioned to mark the 10th anniversary of the liberation of the camps by the Allies, this half-hour work remains the most powerful condemnation to emerge from the postwar era. Combining color tracking shots of postwar Auschwitz with black-and-white archival photographs and footage, Resnais links past and present while the chillingly understated narrative, written by survivor Jean Cayrol, raises searching questions about accountability and the suppression of truth.


A legendary figure, Alain Resnais (1922-2014) created some of the most important films of the postwar era. In a career spanning 70 years, Resnais repeatedly explored the relationship between time and memory, and truth and subjectivity. His films are intellectually rigorous yet buoyed by a lightness of touch and a sheer beauty that expresses the mind’s dreamlike interior. His oeuvre includes *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *Providence* (1977) and *Same Old Song* (1997).
Oct. 27 **Primary** (Robert Drew, 1960)  
*Primary* documents John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey campaigning in Wisconsin on the eve of the 1960 presidential primary. HHH is an old-school politician attempting to appeal to voters’ agricultural roots by portraying himself as a champion of the common man. JFK can be perceived as a celebrity adored by urban voters and youth. This was the first film in which the sync-sound motion picture camera was able to move freely with characters throughout a breaking story. “Had as immense and measureable an impact on nonfiction filmmaking as *Birth of a Nation* had on fiction filmmaking.” — Matt Zoller Seitz  

As an editor at *Life* magazine, Robert Drew (1924-2014) specialized in the candid still picture essay. As a Nieman Fellow he worked out theories for filmmaking based on candid photography in motion pictures. He assembled a group of journalists and filmmakers that included Richard Leacock, Gregory Shuker and D.A. Pennebaker. Drew managed the engineering of lightweight cameras and recorders and developed editing techniques to allow stories to tell themselves through characters in action. Drew’s documentaries include *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment*, *The Chair* and *Faces of November*.  

Nov. 3 **Lessons of Darkness** (Werner Herzog, 1992, 52 min)  
An apocalyptic vision featuring the oil well fires in Kuwait after the (first) Gulf-War, as a whole world burst into flames. This film is stylized as science fiction, as there is not a single shot in which you can recognize our planet. — Werner Herzog  
http://cinepassion.org/Reviews/I/LessonsDarkness.html  
www.nickschager.com/nsfp/2006/02/lessons_of_dark.html  
www.documentary.org/magazine/werner-herzog’s-lessons-darkness  
www.fandor.com/keyframe/lessons-of-darkness-burning-questions

Werner Herzog (b. 1942) established himself internationally as a key player in the New German Cinema of the 1970s with narrative films like *Aguirre, the Wrath of God; The Enigma of Kasper Hausar* and *Fitzcarraldo* (Best Director at Cannes). He made documentaries as early as 1970, but it wasn’t until the mid-’80s that he focused almost entirely on his personal approach to nonfiction. His best-known docs are *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (Emmy Award for Outstanding Nonfiction Special) *My Best Fiend* and *Grizzly Man. Encounters at the End of the World* (2007) was nominated for the Academy Award for Documentary Feature. Herzog received the Career Achievement Award from the International Documentary Association (IDA) in 2008.  
http://sensesofcinema.com/2006/great-directors/herzog/  
www.wernerherzog.com
Reference:


20 essential documentaries:
The Man With the Movie Camera, 1929
Land Without Bread (Las Hurdes), 1932
Night Mail, 1936
Spanish Earth, 1937
Why We Fight, 1942
Fires Were Started, 1943
Battle of San Pietro, 1945
Chronicle of a Summer, 1961
Tokyo Olympiad, 1965
Dont Look Back, 1967
Titicut Follies, 1967
Salesman, 1968
Sorrow and the Pity, 1969
Hearts and Minds, 1974
Grey Gardens, 1975
Battle of Chile, 1975-79
Harlan County USA, 1976
Sans Soliel (Sunless), 1982
Shoah, 1985
The Thin Blue Line, 1988