

SAMPLE CLASS

FILM 485: Cinema Vérité - The Art of Documentary Realism

Course Credits: 3

Prerequisites: FILM 200 (Introduction to Film Studies) and FILM 300 (Documentary Foundations)

Course Description

Cinema Vérité, or "cinema truth," represents the pinnacle of observational filmmaking—often described as the "fly on the wall" approach to documentary cinema. This intensive course explores the art of capturing authentic human experiences while maintaining minimal filmmaker intervention, bringing audiences into worlds they may never otherwise experience.

Students will develop practical skills in shooting interviews and real-time events while studying the philosophical and technical foundations that define this influential documentary style. The course emphasizes the critical principle that in effective cinéma vérité, the interviewer speaks minimally, and the camera anticipates rather than follows action.

Instructor

Professor Jay Gianukos

Award-winning documentary filmmaker with 25 years of professional experience in directing, shooting, and producing documentaries. Professor Gianukos is recognized as a leading practitioner of LifeStory documentaries, a specialized subgenre of Cinema Vérité, culminating in his acclaimed feature documentary *An Ordinary Couple*.

Course Objectives

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Analyze the historical development and theoretical foundations of Cinema Vérité
- Demonstrate proficiency in shooting observational documentary footage
- Conduct effective cinéma vérité-style interviews that prioritize subject authenticity
- Apply technical skills in cinematography, sound recording, and editing for documentary production
- Develop, produce, and present an original Cinema Vérité short film
- Critically evaluate Cinema Vérité works within broader cultural and media contexts

Course Structure

Module I: Foundations (Weeks 1-4)

Historical and theoretical exploration of Cinema Vérité principles

Module II: Interview Techniques (Weeks 5-8)

Mastering the art of observational interviewing

Module III: Production Skills (Weeks 9-12)

Technical proficiency in cinematography and sound

Module IV: Independent Production (Weeks 13-16)

Project development, production, and presentation

Weekly Schedule

Week 1: Foundations of Cinema Vérité

Class 1: What is Cinema Vérité?

Exploration of Cinema Vérité's literary and cinematic roots, examining early pioneers Richard Leacock and Robert Drew. Analysis of how technological advancements enabled the vérité movement.

Class 2: Evolution and Influence

Tracing the journey from *Citizen Kane* to *Hoop Dreams*—how landmark films balanced Hollywood production values with authentic storytelling. Discussion of Cinema Vérité's influence on reality television and contemporary media.

Week 2: Historical Context and Masterworks

Class 3: Origins and Great Works

Comprehensive study of Cinema Vérité's emergence and examination of seminal works that define the genre.

Class 4: LifeStories Documentary Subgenre

Introduction to Professor Gianukos's specialty: LifeStories documentaries. Analysis of life-review centered films and their value to individuals and society.

Week 3-4: Observational Cinematography

Class 5: Shooting with Anticipation

Advanced techniques for capturing real-time events, emphasizing the skill of positioning cameras to capture decisive moments on first takes.

Class 6: Production Laboratory I

Hands-on practice shooting live events using Cinema Vérité principles.

Week 5-6: Interview Mastery

Class 7: The Art of the Interview

Understanding how Cinema Vérité interviews differ from traditional documentary interviews, focusing on temporal narrative—exploring past experiences and future implications rather than immediate moments.

Class 8: Interview Laboratory I

Practical session where half the class conducts interviews while the other half serves as subjects.

Week 7: Role Reversal and Perspective

Class 9: Interview Laboratory II

Continuation of interview practice with reversed roles, providing students experience from both interviewer and subject perspectives.

Week 8: Post-Production Foundations

Class 10: Finding Moments in the Edit

Exploration of Cinema Vérité editing principles and techniques for discovering narrative within observational footage.

Week 9-10: Pre-Production and Subject Development

Class 11: Finding Your Subject

Comprehensive discussion of identifying compelling subjects and stories suitable for Cinema Vérité treatment.

Class 12: Technical Fundamentals

Intensive workshop on camera operation, lighting techniques, and sound capture methods essential for professional-quality documentation.

Week 11-12: Project Development

Class 13: Project Development Workshop

Individual consultation and development of student projects, focusing on the three pillars: Subject, Story, and Access.

Class 14: Footage Review and Critique

Collaborative review and discussion of footage captured by each student, with constructive feedback and technical guidance.

Week 13-14: Post-Production Workshop

Class 15: Editing Workshop and Scene Analysis

Review and critique of edited sequences created by students, focusing on narrative construction and Cinema Vérité principles.

Week 15: Presentation and Festival

Class 16: Cinema Vérité Film Festival

Public screening and celebration of completed student projects, with industry guests and peer evaluation.

Assessment

Assessment Component	Percentage
Participation and Engagement	20%
Laboratory Exercises	25%
Midterm Project Analysis	20%
Final Cinema Vérité Film	35%

Required Materials

- Professional-grade digital camera (equipment checkout available)
- External microphone and recording equipment
- Editing software access (provided in campus media lab)
- Course reader with selected Cinema Vérité texts and case studies

Course Philosophy

"Leave your control issues at the door."

Cinema Vérité demands a fundamental shift from directorial control to observational patience. Students must embrace the unpredictability inherent in authentic documentary filmmaking and develop the technical and emotional skills necessary to capture truth as it unfolds.

Academic Integrity

All work must be original. Proper attribution is required for any referenced films, interviews, or subjects. Students are expected to obtain appropriate permissions and releases for all documentary subjects.

This syllabus is subject to modification based on class progress and scheduling needs. Students will be notified of any changes in advance.