

MRTS 4550: CINÉMA VÉRITÉ

(undergrad syllabus)

FALL 2026 • TUESDAYS 6:35 – 9:35 pm • RTFP 184

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Office: RTFP Building, Room 238
Office hours: M/W 12:45–1:45 pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

How close can documentary filmmaking come to capturing the “truth”—of cultural history, of human nature, of daily life? In this class, we’ll explore this question by watching and analyzing a wide range of films that are considered, by many, to belong to the documentary subgenre known as *cinéma vérité* (translation: film truth); though, as we’ll discuss, others would strongly dispute the use of that term to describe most of our assigned films. With the exception of the first text on our syllabus—Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronicle of a Summer*, the French film from 1961 that coined the term *cinéma vérité*—all the films we’ll be watching were filmed in different regions across the United States and explore different aspects of American culture from the 1960s to today.

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. Understand and engage in key theoretical, ethical, and historical debates within the field of documentary film studies.
2. Gain a deeper understanding of American cultural history as seen through the lens of *cinéma vérité* filmmakers.
3. Improve verbal expression skills by participating in class discussions regarding the formal elements and thematic import of screened films.
4. Improve writing skills by completing a variety of written assignments and reading/analyzing a range of articles that serve as scholarly writing models.

REQUIRED READING:

There is no required textbook for this course. All readings are available as PDFs on Canvas.

SCREENINGS:

All films will be screened in their entirety during class (with the exception of *Hoop Dreams*, which you’ll need to watch half of at home, since it’s about twice as long as all the others). If you miss class, you’ll be responsible for watching the film you missed on your own time, either by checking out the DVD that’s on course reserve at the Media Library or by streaming the film for free via the link you’ll see listed in Canvas. (Two exceptions: *Crisis* will only be available on DVD, and *The Perfect Neighbor* is only streamable on Netflix.) All in-class screenings will have closed-captioning turned on for greater accessibility; if you need other accommodations please let me know. All phones, laptops, and other electronic devices must be off/closed throughout the screening, unless you have an ODA accommodation specifically allowing for otherwise. You’re welcome (encouraged, in fact) to take notes as you watch, but only by writing them down on paper. I want our in-class screenings to be a positive, undistracted viewing experience for all!

GRADE BREAKDOWN:

Participation/attendance: 20%
 Weekly short responses: 20%
 In-class comparative essay: 15%
 Critical conversation paper: 10%
 Short film project: 15%
 Short film project reflection paper: 15%

Participation/attendance: Because your participation and active engagement in our class discussions is so crucial to the success of this class, it will comprise 20% of your total grade. Attendance obviously affects your ability to participate, so all missed/tardy classes will serve to lower this part of your grade. That said, I don't want you coming to class if you're feeling sick and may cause others to get sick as well. If you do need to miss due to illness or some other significant emergency, you need to let me know **prior to class** so I can help you stay on track. Missing four or more class meetings will result in failure of the course (unless you've been in proactive contact with me and we're on the same page about the seriousness of what has been causing you to miss). The main thing is, in all things course-related: communicate, communicate, communicate! At the end of the semester, I will assign you a holistic attendance/participation grade that will take into account both the number of classes you've missed or been late for and the quality of your participation in all the class sessions that you did attend.

Weekly short responses: To demonstrate to me that you've read the assigned articles (and, if you were absent the week before, watched the assigned film on your own), you will respond to weekly discussion prompts that I will be posting on Canvas. Due to the new realities of A.I., you will respond to these prompts during the first 15 minutes of class on paper, and will therefore need to buy a notebook of lined paper to bring with you to each class (unless you have an ODA accommodation stipulating your use of a computer for in-class work). More detailed instructions for these short responses will be provided.

In-class comparative essay: On 10/6, you'll have one hour (or 90 minutes, if you have a time-and-a-half ODA accommodation) to write an essay that puts two or three of the films we'll have watched up to that point into conversation with one another. More detailed instructions for this assignment to follow.

Critical conversation paper: By 11:59 pm on 11/1, you will submit a short paper (750-1000 words long) in which you engage with the ideas of one of the critics whose articles we'll have read by that point in the semester. In this paper, you'll take one specific argumentative point made in the article of your choosing and **either** respectfully disagree with the point and argue for an alternate reading of the film at hand **or** express your agreement with the author's viewpoint but then take that point to a new place or in a new direction in some way. More detailed instructions for this assignment to follow.

Short film project: At the end of the semester, you will make a short film of your own that directly responds to one or more of the films on our syllabus in one of the ways that I will lay out in the assignment instruction sheet. The film can either be a nonfiction documentary or a fictionalized "mockumentary." On the last day of class, 12/1, we will have a screening of all the films in class. More instructions to follow.

Short film project reflection paper: A week after the short film screening, you will have to submit a 1250-1500 word reflection paper in which you'll answer a specific set of questions about the connections your film is drawing to the film or films that served as its inspiration. More instructions to follow.

COURSE AND UNIVERSITY POLICIES:

Office hours/one-on-one communication: If you have questions or concerns that you'd like to discuss with me one-on-one, I'll be holding office hours from 12:45–1:45 pm on Mondays and Wednesdays in RTFP 238, and by appointment. You are also, of course, welcome to email me at nora.gilbert@unt.edu at any time with questions or concerns, and I always try to reply to your message within 24 hours, except on weekends when I check email less regularly. Please also make sure to check **your** UNT email and Canvas accounts frequently, to make sure you're seeing all emails/announcements from me!

Academic freedom and community guidelines: UNT has a robust policy regarding academic freedom and academic responsibility. Crucially, this policy encompasses not only the rights of faculty members but also the rights “of the student to freedom in learning.” As a student in this classroom, therefore, you have the right to encounter and debate new ideas, diverse forms of knowledge, and unfamiliar or contrary points of view. At the same time, to encourage the free exchange of ideas, and to ensure that your right to learn is protected, the tone for such discussion must always be civil, thoughtful, and respectful. Discriminatory and/or hate speech will not be tolerated. For more information, please consult the full UNT policy at <https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-035>.

Course-wide content alert: Some of our assigned films contain implicitly and/or explicitly disturbing content. If there is a certain kind of subject matter that is particularly difficult for you to see shown or discussed on film, please contact me privately to discuss alternative screening options.

Accessibility: UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for all students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time; however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see <https://disability.unt.edu/>.

To be clear: I am deeply committed to facilitating your success in this course. Please don't hesitate to contact me about any accessibility issues, large or small!

Audio/video recording: Although UNT is a publicly supported institution, our classroom is not a public space. Therefore, in order to protect the intellectual property and privacy rights of both faculty and students, video and audio recordings are prohibited during class. The exception is for students who have been granted explicit approval as an ODA accommodation. For more information, see <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access/faculty/faculty-guide/accommodations-explained/Audio-Recording-Faculty.html>

Academic integrity policy: According to [UNT Policy 06.003](#) (“Student Academic Integrity”), academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.

Specific A.I. policy: The use of generative AI writing tools is prohibited in this class. Assignments for the course have been designed to help you develop as a writer without the use of these technologies. You will generate ideas, read, revise, and write on your own and/or in consultation with peers, me, or Writing Center tutors, and you will not use AI at any stage of your writing process. You are the author of your work for the course and authorship means you take responsibility for your words and claims. Any use of AI technologies will be considered in violation of UNT's academic integrity policy and addressed accordingly. (Statement by Annette Vee, under CC-BY-NC Creative Commons by Noncommercial license.)

* Please note also that my A.I. policy goes both ways, meaning that I will never use A.I. "tools" to shortcut any of my responsibilities to you under any circumstances. Let's agree to be human beings together!

Prohibition of Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation: According to UNT Policy 16.004, the University prohibits discrimination and harassment because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, or any other characteristic protected under applicable federal or state law in its application and admission processes; educational programs and activities; employment policies, procedures, and processes; and university facilities. The University takes active measures to prevent such conduct and investigates and takes remedial action when appropriate.

Sexual harassment and assault: If you are a survivor of relational or sexual violence, there is support for you. Counseling and Testing Services can provide confidential mental health counseling; you can reach them at (940) 565-2741 to schedule an appointment. Denton County Friends of the Family is a community agency that offers free counseling and 24/7 crisis hotline services to survivors; contact them at (940) 387-5131. The UNT Survivor Advocate can assist in reporting options, arrange for academic and housing accommodations, schedule appointments and help connect students to UNT and other community resources; their number is (940) 565-2648. To report sexual misconduct to Equal Opportunity & Title IX, visit report.unt.edu. The UNT Police Department can be contacted at (940) 565-3000.

Student support services: UNT provides mental health resources to students to help ensure there are numerous outlets to turn to that wholeheartedly care for and are there for students in need, regardless of the nature of an issue or its severity. Listed below are several resources on campus that can support your academic success and mental well-being:

- Student Health and Wellness Center (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center>)
- Counseling and Testing Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- UNT Care Team (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care>)
- UNT Psychiatric Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/services/psychiatry>)
- Individual Counseling (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/individual-counseling>)
- Academic Resource Center (<https://clear.unt.edu/canvas/student-resources>)
- Writing Lab (<http://writingcenter.unt.edu/>)

Homework and Class Discussion/Screening Workflow:

Before you arrive to class: read the two articles listed on the syllabus about the **prior week's** screened film

Arrive to class **on time**. Right at 6:35 you can begin responding to the discussion board question, which will ask you think about last week's film in relation to the two articles you've read about it since (15 min.)

Next, we'll have a class discussion about the arguments made in the two articles about the prior week's film, and any other points about the film itself that you'd still like to raise/discuss. For 8 of the films, graduate student class members will prepare questions and lead the discussion for this segment (25-30 min.)

Brief bathroom/stretch break before we start the screening of the week (5 min.)

Prior to the screening, I'll give a short talk contextualizing the film (5-10 min.)

About an hour into the class, screening begins (film running times vary, but most clock in around 90 min.)

Brief bathroom/stretch break, post-screening (5 min.)

Open class discussion about the film we've just watched (30-40 min.)

Reading/Viewing Schedule:

8/18: Class introduction

In-class screening: *Chronicle of a Summer* (dir. Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961)

8/25: To be read prior to class:

- New York Film Academy, "Cinéma Vérité vs. Direct Cinema: An Introduction"
- Sam Di Iorio, "*Chronicle of a Summer*: Truth and Consequences"

In-class screening: *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment* (dir. Robert Drew, 1963)

9/1: To be read prior to class:

- Bill Nichols, "Why are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?"
- Thom Powers, "The Kennedy Films of Robert Drew & Associates: Capturing the Kennedys"

In-class screening: *Salesman* (dir. Albert & David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 1969)

9/8: To be read prior to class:

- Michael Chaikan, "*Salesman*: For God and Company"
- William Schultz, "Selling the Gospel of Positive Thinking"

In-class screening: *Gimme Shelter* (dir. Albert & David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 1970)

9/15: To be read prior to class:

- Dean Goldberg, “*Gimme Shelter* 50 Years (+1)”
- Aaron Taylor, “Angels, Stones, Hunters: Murder, Celebrity, and Direct Cinema”

In-class screening: ***Grey Gardens*** (dir. Maysles Bros., Ellen Hovde, and Muffie Meyer, 1975)

9/22: To be read prior to class:

- John David Rhodes, “‘Concentrated Ground’: *Grey Gardens* and the Cinema of the Domestic”
- Matthew Hays, “The Gayness of *Grey Gardens*”

In-class screening: ***Harlan County, U.S.A.*** (dir. Barbara Kopple, 1976)

9/29: To be read prior to class:

- Paul Arthur, “*Harlan County USA*: No Neutrals There”
- Grace Elizabeth Hale, “Documentary Noise: The Soundscape of *Harlan County, U.S.A.*”

In-class screening: ***This is Spinal Tap*** (dir. Rob Reiner, 1984)

In-class discussion of excerpts from:

- Carl Plantinga, “Gender, Power, and a Cucumber: Satirizing Masculinity in *This is Spinal Tap*”

10/6: IN-CLASS COMPARATIVE ESSAY (written during 1st hour of class)

In-class screening: First half of ***Hoop Dreams*** (dir. Steve James, 1994)

10/13: ** HW: Watch second half of *Hoop Dreams* (<https://discover.library.unt.edu/catalog/b7578183>)

To be read prior to class:

- bell hooks, “Dreams of Conquest”
- John Edgar Wideman, “*Hoop Dreams*: Serious Game”
- Kimberly Chabot Davis, “White Filmmakers and Minority Subjects: Cinema Vérité and the Politics of Irony in *Hoop Dreams* and *Paris Is Burning*,” Part I (read up to the paragraph that begins with “The film *Paris Is Burning*...” on p. 38)

In class screening: ***Paris Is Burning*** (dir. Jennie Livingston, 1990)

10/20: To be read prior to class:

- Michelle Parkerson, “*Paris Is Burning*: The Fire This Time”
- Marcos Gonzalez, “Paris Doesn’t Always Have To Be Burning”
- Kimberly Chabot Davis, “White Filmmakers and Minority Subjects,” Part II (read from “The film *Paris Is Burning*...” on p. 38 to end of article)

In-class screening: ***American Movie*** (dir. Chris Smith, 1999)

10/27: To be read prior to class:

- Rob Nelson, “Made in Milwaukeewood”
- Robert Greene, “*American Movie* at 20: Why This Portrait of a Working-Class Auteur Endures”

In-class screening: *Made in L.A.* (dir. Almudena Carracedo, 2007)

11/1: CRITICAL CONVERSATION PAPER DUE AT 11:59 PM ON CANVAS

11/3: To be read prior to class:

- Robert Bahar, “‘Made in L.A.’ Funded from All Over”
- PBS, P.O.V. Discussion Guide: *Made in L.A.*

In-class screening: *Cameraperson* (dir. Kirsten Johnson, 2016)

11/10: To be read prior to class:

- Michael Koresky, “I Am a Camera”
- Lauren Du Graf, “Woman with a Movie Camera: The Art of Not Looking Away in *Cameraperson*”

In-class screening: *Minding the Gap* (dir. Bing Liu, 2018)

11/17: To be read prior to class:

- Jay Caspian Kang, “*Minding the Gap*: What It’s About”
- J. Paul Johnson, “*Minding the Gap*’s Opening Scene: A Brilliant Trespass”

In-class screening: *The Perfect Neighbor* (dir. Geeta Gandbhir, 2025)

In-class discussion of excerpts from:

- Nate Rogers, “The Panopticon Age of Documentaries Is Here”

11/24: NO CLASS -- THANKSGIVING BREAK

12/1: In-class screening: Your short films!
End-of-semester wrap-up

12/7: SHORT FILM REFLECTION PAPER DUE AT 11:59 PM ON CANVAS