

## **Class Title: Memory and Social Change in American Documentary Film**

**Class Instructor: Mihaela Precup**

### **Class Description:**

This class is both an introduction to American documentary film and an examination of the strategies of representation employed by a genre that mediates the memory of important (historical and personal) events, often with the intention of producing social change. Used initially as an educational tool with a voiceover that conveyed a certain distancing effect, the documentary genre has more recently moved into areas where “objectivity” is mimicked less, but where the strong referential pull of the genre is still retained and prized. In a world where the United States is still perceived as one of the main players on the political, military, and cultural scene, as well as an increasingly selective refuge for those fleeing war and conflict across the globe, an analysis of American documentary films that bear witness to conflict and destruction, but also other forms of human suffering and resilience (from both within and without US borders) is essential for the understanding of transcultural identity and memory, as well as the narrative patterns through which they are expressed.

This class will ask questions such as: in the process of memorialization, how are concepts such as grief, trauma, and survival represented in documentary film and translated across cultures? How can the classification of participants in war, conflict, or crime into “victims,” “perpetrators,” “bystanders,” as well as “soldiers” and “civilians” be refined so that it contributes to a better understanding of what makes ordinary people commit evil deeds (Waller 2002)? How do Western tropes of storytelling, suffering, and healing influence the narratives of both American and non-American stories? How do the requirements of a particular genre (such as documentary film) influence the way certain events are memorialized? What blind spots exist in the memorialization of human suffering?

### **Class Requirements:**

Every student will be asked to participate in at least one round-table discussion on the assigned readings and hand in a film viewing journal. Extra points will be awarded for excellent class participation. There will be a final written exam.

### **List of Films** (this may be subject to some revision):

*Standard Operating Procedure* (dir. Errol Morris, 2008), *Into the Abyss* (dir. Werner Herzog, 2011), *The Act of Killing* (dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012), *Stories We Tell* (dir. Sarah Polley, 2012), *Italianamerican* (Dir. Martin Scorsese, 1974), *Reel Injun* (Dir. Neil Diamond et. al., 2009), *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* (PBS, 1994), *Boy I Am* (Dir. Sam Feder, Julie Holler, 2006), *We Were Here* (dir. Ed Wolf and Paul Boneberg, 2011)