

Carleton University
Summer (May/June) 2025 Preliminary Course Outline
Department of English

ENGL 4115B/ENGL 5610S
Culture and the Text/Studies in Contemporary Literature and Culture:
Immersive Documentary, 1945 to the Present

ENGL 4115B Prerequisite: Fourth year standing or permission of the department.

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***** This is a preliminary syllabus only—texts and assignments are subject to change. A complete version will be available closer to the start of the term. *****

Immersive Documentary, 1945 to the Present

In this course we will study immersive documentary—a form that has flourished in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. If an objective approach to recording social reality was discredited by the surreal conditions of the Second World War, post-war documentarians explored subjective modes of reporting that placed the perspective of the observer front and center. Further, they argued that subjective reporting was the most accurate and complete way to capture the bizarre properties of modern life. Writers, filmmakers and photographers working in this tradition seek out extreme situations, spend long periods of time with their subjects, explore immersive technologies, and report on how their encounter with a situation, subject, or event alters the perspective of the documentarian. Their works stands to transform our understanding of what constitutes the “real,” and the social applications of documentary expression.

Learning Outcomes

In this course, I hope you will learn how to interpret and interrelate a variety of texts in different media; think deeply about experiments in documentary form; develop interesting and original ideas that evolve over the course of the term; express those ideas in clear and concise prose; generate questions and ideas collectively through discussion.

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

Class Participation

This seminar will be a workshop where we will hammer out ideas with an emphasis on collaboration and collective inquiry. Please come to class prepared to share your responses, thoughts, and questions about the day’s readings. Each of you will on occasion be responsible for developing discussion questions and leading class discussion.

Co-Journal

Over the course of the term, you will write **three** entries in a collaborative journal. Journal entries will be posted to a common document and will engage and respond to one another. Ideally, the result will be a kind of call and response in which our ideas combine, conflict, and build. I will give you more direction as the due date for the first entry approaches.

Research Essay/Project

You will write a 10-page research essay or design a research project that is due at the end of the term. This essay/project will focus on a single text or documentarian from our syllabus and through primary source research will: 1) build a context (biographical, historical, critical) for that text and on that basis 2) advance an original and illuminating interpretation of the subject at hand. You will write a brief (2-3 paragraph) research proposal that states your research question and identifies the primary sources that you will use.

Grading and Assessment

My final determination of your grade will be based on the following questions: 1) Did you do the reading/viewing regularly and on time? 2) Did you participate in discussions in a generous and generative way? 3) Did your writing demonstrate engagement, polish, creativity, and independent thought? 4) Did you conduct disciplined and purposeful research using both primary and secondary sources?

With these questions in mind, your final grade will be based on class participation, including attendance and contribution to discussion (40%); co-journal entries (30%); research proposal and essay/project (30%). These percentages are, however, not written in stone and when determining your final grade, I will keep individual circumstances in mind. Feel free to check in with me about your grade at any point during the term.

Texts may include:

Yuval Abraham, Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Rachel Szor, “No Other Land” (2024)

Joan Didion, “The White Album” from *The White Album* (1979) and “Pacific Distances” from *After Henry* (1992)

Tim Hetherington, “Sleeping Soldiers” (2008) and “Diary” (2010)

John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (1945)

Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, “Trouble the Water” (2008)

Lee Miller, “Hitleriana” (July 1945) and selected images

Mary McCarthy, “The Fact in Fiction” (1960)

Richard Mosse, *Incoming* (2017)

Maggie Nelson, *The Red Parts* (2007)

Haskell Wexler, “Medium Cool” (1969)

Jeff Sharlet, *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War* (2023)

Barrett Swanson, “Disaster City” from *Lost in Summerland* (2021)