NYU Arthur Carter Journalism Institute  
Course Title: Visual Thinking

The class explores the complexity of documentary visualization through cinematography. It will examine not only how stories get told, but also how we might inspire new ways of telling them visually. This class will immerse the students in the challenges of different approaches and shooting styles through production exercises and through significant documentary examples.

A great cameraperson balances the technical complexities of the camera itself, the physical, logistical, ethical, and emotional challenges of filming people and live action, and the artistic ambition of elevating story-telling through the organic discovery of original imagery. This course will explore how to meet these challenges through exercises that will stretch the students’ technical and observational abilities in visual storytelling.

The classes will combine focused exercises with discussion of films introducing various techniques and approaches to enhance the conversation.

Grades will be based on the weekly exercises (40%), a paper based on a specific topic brought up in class (20%) and their final 4 minute piece (40%). The professor will evaluate how the student interpreted the assignment, the quality of the video shot and the level of complexity achieved.

The final assignment will be evaluated by how the student integrated the various techniques introduced in class and any creative choices that enhance the visual story. The written assignment will be evaluated by the coherence of the writing and the analysis of the topic.

Syllabus
Visual Thinking: The Role of the Camera
Spring 2013
Kirsten Johnson
Hours:

1. CAMERA MECHANICS

Understanding your camera. Demonstration of the JVC-HYU 100 camera and the HDSLR: Its advantages, limitations and commonalities with other compact HD cameras

White balance, Shutter speed, exposure, focus
Assessing existent lighting conditions
Using existent light to your purposes

EXERCISES:
   a. Follow a person in the street moving from indoor to outdoor conditions
adjusting all elements: WB, Shutter, F-stop, focus
b. Find 3 locations to shoot outdoor: morning, noon, night
c. Using a tripod and work only with available light. Find 5 locations (daylight: an apartment, an outdoor space, a restaurant, a non-office working space; nighttime: anyplace with multiple light sources of different color temperature)

VIEW: ASYLUM, PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL, DARFUR NOW
VIEW AND DISCUSS: student work

2. YOUR BODY AND CAMERA MOVEMENT

How to hold the camera and move through space with it
Using your breath and center of balance to maximize endurance and camera control
Hand-held steadiness, walking forwards and backwards with a camera
Using a tripod
Using a rice bag

EXERCISES:

a. Plan a route and 10 camera positions relative to a person walking from an indoor location to an outdoor location. Execute and list problems.
b. Take a tripod to Times Square. Create a series of shots focused on a particular color. Create a series of shots based on a theme such as love.
c. Take a rice bag to a neighborhood with street traffic. Discover the widest range of shot position possibilities.

VIEW: Derrida, We Came to Testify
View and discuss student work

3. CINEMATIC LANGUAGE

Using the range of shot size necessary to edit sequences
Understanding the axis: one on one interactions, multiple person dialogues

EXERCISE:

a. Film a two person discussion at a table having a discussion. Edit footage to a 2 minute sequence.
b. Take a scene from a story you’re working on. Shoot 5 shots that relate to scene without character in it.

IN-CLASS EXERCISE:

a. Film an eight person discussion around a meeting table.
VIEW: My Dinner with Andre, Twelve Angry Men, The Oath

4. WORKING ALONE

Assessing when to communicate and when to shoot
Understanding sound recording when using a 2 point system dependent on camera position
Intervention and letting a scene play
Shooting a press conference

EXERCISES:

a. Find a situation to follow over a two day period which will include initiation and resolution. Assess potential problems, get relevant permissions and releases.
   b. Shoot situation
   c. List all of the unexpected complications and what you would do differently.

VIEW: Trouble the Water, A Blind Eye, Iraq in Fragments
IN-CLASS CASE STUDY: Election Day

5. WORKING IN COLLABORATION

Working with a sound person
EXERCISES: (Work in groups of two, alternating the sound person and cameraperson)
Follow an action. Working together, keeping the mic out of the shot.

VIEW: Fast, Cheap and Out of Control, Nobody's Business, The White Diamond

6. ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Thinking about the relationship of camera to subject: questions of power, poverty, foreign-ness, language difference
When your subject is complicit but the environment is hostile
When your subject is non-complicit (muck-raking, investigative work)
Assessing the long-term impact of the camera's presence and long-term implications of a film's existence

EXERCISES:

a. Film a scene in which you do not understand the language being
b. Consider a political problem. Imagine a scene which would be revelatory to film but which is impossible to film. Devise a strategy for filming the problem nevertheless.

VIEW: Outrage, War Photographer, From the Frontlines: The Psychological Cost of War-Reporting, Farenheit 9/11, Sick

7. ARTISTIC AMBITION

Integrating intention and execution over a long-term project
Vision for a project’s possibilities
Elevating the individual shot and overall conception

EXERCISES:

a. Build upon the most-successful class exercise. Revisit the location and situation. Make a 4 minute film based on the strongest idea that has emerged from the class.
b. show a sequence from a recent piece you’re working on.

VIEW: The Thin Blue Line, Man on Wire, Iraq in Fragments