

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Writers House

FALL 2014

Instructor: Rebecca Haimowitz (rebecca.haimowitz@rutgers.edu)

Tuesdays, 9:50am-12:50pm

Murray Hall, MU038

Office Hours: Every other Tues, 1:00 - 2:00pm, MU 035

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING FOR WRITERS

TEXTS: (Chapters on Sakai):

DV Filmmaking From Start to Finish

By Ian David Aronson

Shut Up and Shoot Documentary Guide

By Anthony Q. Artis

Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction

By Patricia Aufderheide

Documentary Storytelling

By Sheila Curran Bernard

Making Documentary Films and Reality Videos

By Barry Hampe

Story: Substance, Structure, Style and The Principles of Screenwriting

By Robert McKee

Introduction to Documentary

By Bill Nichols

Representing Reality

By Bill Nichols

Directing the Documentary: Fourth Edition

By Michael Rabiger

Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos

By Alan Rosenthal

*composing
more clearly
emphasized*

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

In this course, documentary films are understood to be character driven non-fiction narratives created from the selecting, organizing and presenting of factual material. This course focuses on the importance of story-telling in documentaries and teaches students about the various filmic techniques, elements and choices needed to create their own successful short film.

Students will learn how to conduct an interview, a fundamental component to documentary filmmaking. This process allows the storyteller behind the camera to establish a relationship with a real life character. Students will be trained to be good listeners for it is with the recorded words of a real life character that students compose their stories. Students will also learn how to film visual material and b roll, utilize archival footage, and layer sound, music and image into a compelling film.

This course provides students with the opportunity to employ basic documentary film theory and dramatic film structure to produce original 4-8 minute documentary stories. Specific attention is paid to use of frame, lighting, composition, placement of dialogue and sound to drive a documentary narrative. Through in-class group exercises, film screenings, and referencing assigned readings, students will become conscious of filmic techniques that they can employ to assemble a non-fiction story for the screen. Each student will then write the treatment for a story of a real life person with accompanying interview questions. The rest of the class will consist of creative workshops in which student documentaries, shot and edited outside of class time, are reviewed and re-edited in class. During creative workshops we review how the material students are capturing from the real world can be shaped into a narrative structure.

Mid-semester, a quiz will be given based on the readings to test students understanding of basic concepts in documentary theory, history and ethics and film structure. At the end of the semester, each student will write a 3-5 page paper analyzing their film process and explaining how theory discussed in class was applied in their filmmaking.

We will be editing our digital stories with Adobe Premiere editing software. Students are required to register for one of the Video Editing Labs that are offered to all students through the Mason Gross School of the Arts. If you are not signed up for an Editing Lab, please speak with me.

Students are also required to plug in your own hard drives to edit – one suggestion for a good portable drive is the Western Digital USB 2.0/3.0 drive, or something similar. Look for an email with links to suggested drives. Your hard drive needs to be mac formatted, but it is typically cheaper to buy PC drives and format them for Mac.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS and GRADING CRITERIA

One Minute Collaborative Project:

See separate hand-out

10% of Final Grade

Film Treatment with Interview Questions (2-4 pages)

This assignment consists of a two-page description of your film, focusing on your main character (who he/she is) and a description of his or her story as you understand it. Describe what the film is about -- the beginning, middle and end -- and how you will tell this story visually. You can also detail what your biggest challenge is or any questions you are still working out. Include a list of questions you intend to ask your main character in your first videotaped interview. These questions should be designed to elicit a full and complete telling of your character's story.

10% of Final Grades

First Character Story Presentation (including full transcript of interview)

At this time, you will present your first edit of your character interview. This edit contains Act I of your character's story built from interview bites with supporting images. You will also submit a transcript of your character's entire (unedited) interview at this time.

15% of Final Grade

Second Character Story Presentation (including audio/visual transcript of edit)

This presentation should include at least Acts I and II of your character's story with supporting visuals. You will also submit an audio/visual transcript of your current edit (examples of such transcripts can be found on the Sakai site for this course).

15% of Final Grade

Final Character Story Presentation (including audio/visual transcript of edit)

This presentation contains all three Acts, a complete beginning, middle and end, with supporting visuals. You will also submit an audio/visual transcript of your final film at this time.

20% of Final Grade

Quiz on Assigned Reading

You will be expected to articulate key film theory concepts based on the readings.

15% of Final Grade

3-5 Page Paper

Analyze your work using theory discussed in the readings and in class to describe filmic choices you made throughout semester. How did you apply documentary film theory into your filmmaking process? What types of film language and grammar did you use?

15% of Final Grade

ATTENDANCE:

Class attendance is mandatory and will impact your final grade. Any student who misses more than 2 classes will receive a penalty of a 10% drop in their grade. Missing 4 classes is an automatic fail.

LEARNING GOALS

Students will gain theoretical and practical experience creating a short documentary for the screen using video cameras and editing software.

Students will implement documentary film theory into the making of a short documentary based on a model of dramatic structure.

Students will develop the skills to work collaboratively and cooperatively with others while communicating their ideas to the group.

Students will gain confidence in multi-media expression by creating new meaning through the juxtaposition of images and sounds.

CRITERIA AND PROCEDURES FOR ASSESSING LEARNING GOALS

1. Students will be required to take a quiz that will assess their understanding of readings and key film concepts.
2. Original student documentary films will be reviewed and graded 3 times based on implementation of documentary film theory, technique and ethics. Instructor will evaluate each student's technical, editorial and theoretical understanding by comparing the development and progress between presentations.
3. Students will write 3-5 page papers summarizing how documentary film theory, ethics and narrative film structure was applied during filmmaking process. Instructor will grade each paper based on depth of understanding and involvement of each student.
4. Students' completed films are judged based on a comprehension and command of film language, editing grammar and technical ability to tell non-fiction stories visually, economically and artistically. Attention is paid to the progress and evolution of each film over the course of the semester – how the filmmaker listened to class feedback and implemented those ideas into their work.

Semester plan for INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

Week 1 – Sept. 2nd:

What is a Documentary?

Elements of a Documentary Narrative

- Picture – interviews, b roll, graphics, action footage, reenactments, archival footage, blank screen
- Sound/Music
- Voice (from interviews or narration)
- Text

Importance of Storytelling:

- Character (and character development)
- Narrative Structure (3 Acts)
- What's the journey your viewer is going on?

Choosing your real life character:

- How do we choose a subject?
- Which subjects are best for documentaries?
- Researching a subject and character

Reading Assignment:

- Rabiger: Chapter 3 and 4
- Aufderheide: Documentary, a Very Short Introduction
- Friedmann: Chapter 8, Documentary and Non-Fiction Narratives (types of doc)
- *OPTIONAL: Documenting the Documentary: ch1 (Nanook) and ch 2 (Vertov)*

Production Assignment:

Be prepared to discuss your film idea next week!

Week 2 –Sept. 9th:

Basic Video Camera tutorial

T3i and Vixia (auto and manual setting, monitoring audio input)

The Evolution of Documentary Filmmaking

Nanook of the North, Man with a Movie Camera, Wiseman, Maysles

Types of Documentary Films

Expository

Observational

Participatory (Interactive)

Reflexive

Performative

Pre-Production

Research and development

Scripting (interview questions, ideas for scenes)

Storyboarding

In-Class Discussion –

“Pitch” your film idea. Provide feedback to fellow students.

Reading Assignment:

- Artis: 7 & 8 (interviewing)
- Rabiger : Chapter 24 (interviewing)
- Rosenthal, 12 (interviewing)

PRODUCTION ASSIGNMENT:

You will be paired up with a partner for your collaborative films. This will be presented week 4.

DUE NEXT WEEK: CHARACTER STORY AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**Week 3 – Sept. 16th:****The Art of Listening:**

Telling a story using someone else’s words.

Interviewing Techniques – dos and don’ts

Preparing questions for your interview to elicit a complete telling of your character’s story.

Directing Participants

The importance of **Location**, Framing an interview, Foreground and Background, Lighting for an interview, Characters in Action

In-Class Exercise -

How a filmmaker’s purpose/perspective influences content

HAND IN: CHARACTER STORY AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**Reading Assignment:**

- Artis: Chapter 3, 6 (digital video how-to)
- Rabiger: 21 (lighting), 22 (sound)
- *OPTIONAL: Aronson: Chap 2 + 3 (to learn even more about digital video techniques)*

PRODUCTION ASSIGNMENT: COLLABORATIVE FILMS DUE NEXT WEEK.

Week 4 – Sept. 23rd:

PRESENT Collaborative Films

The 3 Act Structure in Documentary Filmmaking

Reading Assignment:

- Bernard: Chapter 2, 3, 4, (storytelling, narrative and approach)
- McKee: Chaps Intro, 5, 6, 7, 8

PRODUCTION ASSIGNMENT:

VIDEO TAPE and TRANSCRIBE CHARACTER INTERVIEW

Week 5 – Sept. 30th:

Steps towards shaping narrative:

Radio Cut, Rough Cut, Fine Cut, Final Cut

In-Class Workshop:

Using Interview footage and transcript, construct First Act

Reading Assignment:

- Bernard 5, 6 (structure & time)
- Friedmann: Chap 9, Dramatic Structure and Form

Week 6 – Oct. 7th:

PRESENT First cut of Character Story

This cut must include the First Act built from edited interview.

HAND-IN INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Reading Assignment:

- Rabiger: 17 (missions and permissions)
- Nichols: Intro to Doc: Ch 1 (ethics)
- Hampe 7 (ethics)

Week 7 – Oct. 14th:

Text and Image:

Layering ideas and information/The Art of Montage: building and enhancing meaning through the interplay of images, sounds and words.

The Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking

Access and Trust: The relationship between filmmaker and character. Allowing the subject to be an active participant.

Filmmaker Intervention – when is it necessary?

REVIEW READING – QUIZ IS NEXT CLASS

PRODUCTION ASSIGNMENT: continue to work on your “Radio Cut”

Week 8 – Oct. 21st:

QUIZ ON ASSIGNED READING

In-class workshop time. Preparing for second cut of film.

Week 9 – Oct. 28th:

PRESENT: Second cut of Character Story

This presentation must include Act I and II of your character story. This cut should also include supporting visuals (stills, B-roll of character in action, archival footage, etc).

HAND-IN AUDIO/VISUAL TRANSCRIPT

Week 10 – Nov. 4th:

PRESENT: Second cut of Character Story

This presentation must include Act I and II of your character story. This cut should also include supporting visuals (stills, B-roll of character in action, archival footage, etc).

HAND-IN AUDIO/VISUAL TRANSCRIPT

Week 11 – Nov. 11th:

The Illusion of Time:

Real Time VS Compressed Time

Condensing and Expanding a Documentary Narrative

The power of the Soundtrack.

Sound Effects and Music as Narrative Elements

Week 12 – Nov. 18th:

Non-Linear Documentary Story Structure

Transitions and Filters: How Digital Effects Change Meaning

In-class workshop of your films (as needed)

Week 13 – Nov. 25th: NO CLASS (THANKSGIVING WEEK)

Week 14 – Dec. 2nd:

FINAL PRESENTATION of Character story with final Audio/Visual transcript

Week 15 – Dec. 9th:

FINAL PRESENTATION of Character story with final Audio/Visual transcript

Comparing Documentary Styles

We will compare and contrast the creative choices students made when interviewing, shooting and editing their documentaries.

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