



WRD 309-101 (21240)
New Media Studies 509-101 (21775)

Writing for Film: The Documentary

Professor: Darsie Bowden

Autumn Quarter 2009

Thursday 6:00-9:15

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Office hours: Th 4:00-5:45 and by appointment



OVERVIEW: This course is intended as *an introduction* both to the contemporary documentary film and to documentary film writing. We'll explore the modern documentary, which grows out of a long tradition of documentary filmmaking, and consider the new media documentary, which is starting to come into its own. As an integral part of this study, students will work on developing documentary projects, including proposals, treatments and screenplays, and, as appropriate, storyboards. The course will be run in the seminar-and-workshop format.

TEXTS AND MATERIALS:

- ✚ Rosenthal, Alan. *Writing, directing, and producing documentary films and videos*, revised edition. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002
- ✚ Hampe, Barry. *Making Documentary Films and Reality Videos*, New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2007
- ✚ Other readings (on Blackboard)
- ✚ We'll be seeing at least 8 documentary films during the quarter. Some are available at the DePaul library; many are available at public libraries. You might also purchase an online subscription to Netflix or Blockbuster. The New Media documentaries are available online.

PROJECTS:

- **Proposals** – These are short, relatively informal one-page proposals that articulate your subject/topic for a film –what you plan to cover and why it’s important or compelling (in other words, why make it). One for a short (10-15 minute) film; one for a longer (50 minute film)
- **Treatments** (2) – These are longer, more detailed, researched treatments that provide depth and breadth to the proposal.
- **Screenplays** (2) – These screenplays (in an appropriate format) lay out the plan, including audio and visual of what you intend to capture in your film project.
- **PSA** (1) – a treatment or script for a 30 or 60 second public service video
- **New Media project** (1) – an adaptation of one of your documentaries to new media format.

Final Portfolio: Students should submit all materials produced during the quarter. Any screenplays can be revised (and I strongly encourage this). The other materials need not be revised. Included in your portfolio should be a reflective essay that comments on and assesses the progress you feel you’ve made over the quarter both in terms of your understanding of the documentary genre and your progress as a writer.

SOME COURSE GUIDELINES

Attendance: Being in class and participating in all aspects is an integral part of our work this quarter. More than one absence will reduce your final grade.

Late Work: Because the quarter is so short, late work will reduce your final grade as well. Have something to turn in, whether you are proud of it or not.



COURSE OUTLINE

Each evening, we’ll be working on two separate but related strands: first, we’ll look at and discuss a particular documentary film, examining its genre (music, social commentary, historical) and its form: narrative structure, interview style, pacing, narration, and visual and sound components). Second, we’ll explore and work on the writing and pre-production of our own projects.

Thursday, 9/10

Introduction

What is a documentary?

Types of documentary films

In class, a sampling: *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty), segments from *The Secret Life of the Brain* (PBS), *Powaqqatsi* (Godfrey Reggio), docu short films.

Thursday, 9/17

Sports Documentary

Due: Bring three ideas for a documentary film project.
Read: “Defining Nonfiction Film” (Barsam) on .pdf file;
Hampe, part I; Rosenthal, ch. 2.
View: *Hoop Dreams*

Thursday, 9/24

Social Documentary

Due: Treatment for short film
Read: Hampe, pp. 163-199; Rosenthal, ch. 3, 4, 5, 6.
View: *My Country, My Country*

Thursday, 10/1

Historical Documentary

Due: Short Screenplay
Read: Hampe, ch. 20; Rosenthal, ch. 7, 8, 19, 22
View: *Civil War (Ken Burns), disk 1*

Thursday, 10/8

Nature Documentary

Due: Bring two ideas for longer documentary film
Read: Rosenthal, Ch 15 (Narration)
View: *Winged Migration*

Thursday, 10/15

Music Documentary

Due: Treatment for longer film
Read: Rosenthal, Ch. 12 (interviewing), Hampe, Ch. 27
View: *Buena Vista Social Club*

Thursday, 10/22

In-Your-Face Documentary

Read: Rosenthal, Ch. 9, 10, 11 (PreProduction)
View: *Bowling for Columbine* or another Moore film, tbd

Thursday, 10/29

Public Service Announcements

Explore: www.adcouncil.org and google “public service announcement videos”
Due: Screenplay for longer film
Due: 2-3 ideas for public service announcement

Thursday, 11/5

Explore New Media

For next week, look at what’s available on the web in the category of NM documentary (some sites listed below). Be prepared to talk about differences and similarities between traditional and NM documentary.

Reading: from Manovich, *Understanding Meta-Media and Cinema as Cultural Interface* (websites on Blackboard)

Due: treatment or script for 30- or 60- second PSA

Thursday, 11/12

No class

Thursday, 11/19

New Media Documentary – Design Workshop

(note: this is a make-up class and occurs during exam week, in lieu of a final exam)

Due: Bring a treatment for your NM documentary to class, either in text or electronic format. Using the computers in this classroom and the nearby computer lab, we'll work in small groups on revising and "writing up" the New Media documentary, using either screenplay format or storyboards (Feel free to use templates or organization frameworks of your choice).

Monday, 11/23

Final portfolios: Due.

Useful Websites:

- Documentary film website (some history):
<http://www.filmsite.org/docfilms.html>
- International Documentary Association - <http://www.documentary.org>
- Chicago Media Works – template for documentary screenplay -
http://www.chicagomediaworks.com/2instructworks/3editing_doc/3docedit_s_criptmpl/3editing_doc2colscript.html
- PBS trailers
<http://www.pbs.org/pov/tvschedule/?gclid=CMu-4O3DzpwCFRkMDQodyIVVKQ>
- Documentary Films.net - <http://www.documentaryfilms.net/>
- HBO Documentary Films – Monday nights at 9:00 -
<http://www.hbo.com/docs/>

