

Truth, Lies, and Videotape: Documentary Film and Issues of Morality

U2 LinC Course: Interdisciplinary Studies 290

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Office Hours: T, TH: 11:30-12:30, 3:15-4:00 M, W, F: by appointment

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***Please note that email is the best way to communicate with me

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course will explore issues of morality in documentary film as well provide a conceptual overview of the forms, strategies, structures and conventions of documentary film practice. Filmmaking is a universal language which has proven to be a powerful tool of communication for fostering understanding and change. For this course, students will study the history and theory of the documentary film and its relationship to topics and arguments about the social world. Students will be introduced to theoretical frameworks in ethics and media theory as a means to interpret and reflect upon issues presented in documentary film. Weekly screenings and readings will set the focus for debate and discussion on these specific issues. Students will also work in small groups to create short documentary films on particular subject of their own concern. Through hands on experience, students will learn the basics in planning, producing, and editing a documentary film while gaining an in depth insight into a particular issue through extensive research and exploration. The semester will culminate with a public presentation of the documentary films created during the course at the 2006 Student Film Festival in late April.

GOALS: Students will:

- understand the history of documentary film and be able to critically address media related arts in relationship to societal issues.
- gain a deeper understanding of how documentary films are made and the ethical choices that shape the medium.
- become aware of the complexity of moral issues as seen in documentary media and understand the need for informed moral decision-making.
- explore their own values and moral position taking through film analysis and production.
- develop an enhanced capacity for moral discernment, criticism and arguments in relation to various topics explored in documentary film.
- become familiar with the fundamental theories and concepts behind the language of moving imagery and sound.
- become familiar with the basic rhythms of the creative process in order to apply concepts of problem solving as it applies to the filmmaking medium.
- master organizational skills required in planning and making a documentary video production.
- learn the basic technical skills required in film production and be able to creatively apply them in their work.

- **The following is an overview of weekly discussion topics:**
 - How do we define documentary and documentary modes of representation?
 - Primitive film and the origins of documentary
 - Ethics and Point of View: How style and structure can affect documentary story.
 - Filmmaking and Artist Responsibility: The Social Impact of Documentary Films and the Nazi Agenda
 - Film maker as Martyr: Impact Fast food has had on the American Nation
 - Film and Unsolved Mysteries: The Interrogating Reporter
 - Staging Reality in Documentary Film: Fact or Fiction?
 - Footage as evidence: Crime Scene Investigation
 - Confrontation with Film: The Michael Moore Phenomenon
 - Trials and Tribulations of Making a documentary Film: Choosing, Committing, and Making
 - Film making and Social Justice: The Sympathetic Soldier
 - A Documentary about making a Documentary: Searching for the Meaning of Life
 - Reality Behind Reality TV
 - Film as Historical Record: Found Footage as Documentary
 - The Morality Play in Film: A Question of Priorities

FILM PROJECTS:

There will be two film projects in this class. The first will be a short self-portrait exercise which will explore issues of identity. This project will help students become familiar with the tools and process of creating a video while opening up personal inquiry into moral issues and conflicts. The second project will be a 10-minute documentary film on an issue of your choice. This project will take up the majority of the semester. Successful works will be screened at the Student Film Festival in April.

HOME WORK:

Homework will average 6-8 hours a week and will vary from reading material, writing assignments, film shooting, etc. The workload in this class comes in waves. Students should be prepared to spend a good deal of time outside of class due to editing or production demands.

READING ASSIGNMENTS

Outside weekly reading is an essential component to this course which gives students a critical, theoretical, and artistic context in which to develop their own work as well as provide a platform for class discussion on issues pertaining to art, media culture, and moral life. Students should always be prepared to discuss readings in class and students will be assigned to write a brief analytical response to readings in a class journal.

FILM SCREENINGS:

We will be screening one film a week on average. At times, I will assign films to review for homework. Students will need to have a membership to a video rental venue. Along with in-class screenings and homework, we will also try to attend at least one film together as a class.

PAPER AND PRESENTATION:

Students will be expected to write a short research paper on a specific documentary film or film maker of their choice. Students will give a short in class presentation of their topic which will include screening a 10 minute clip of the film. (see filmography)

SKETCHBOOK/JOURNAL:

Students are required to keep a sketchbook/journal. Students should strive to make at least 2 contributions a week which should include technical notes, vocabulary terms, ideas, collages, vocabulary, drawings, useful websites, anything that will enhance performance and work in the class. Students will also be required to write a weekly film review entry. Journals will be collected 2x during the semester.

PARTICIPATION:

Students will be graded on participation in class critiques, discussions, debates, etc. I believe in setting up a classroom community that encourages a healthy, open exchange of ideas. Learning is a collaborative process and every student's input is a valuable contribution. Please note that participation will be counted as 20% of the grade.

TEXTS:

Main text for readings on documentary film to support discussion topics:

Nichols, Bill. (2001). Introduction to Documentary.

Nichols, Bill Representing Reality, Issues and Concepts in Documentary

Support text for making a documentary film

Hampe, Barry, Making Documentary Films and Reality Videos : A Practical Guide to Planning, Filming, and Editing Documentaries of Real Events

Students are encouraged to purchase at least one technical text on Final Cut Pro for personal reference. – Here are my suggestions...

Diana Weynand, Final Cut Pro 4, Editing Professional Video

Apple Computer, Inc. Final Cut Pro User's Manual.

Lisa Brennells: Final Cut Pro Visual Quickstart

Richard Harrington and Abba Shapiro, Final Cut Pro 4: On the Spot

OTHER SUGGESTED READING:

Please see attached bibliography

MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT:

The school has six digital video cameras available for checkout.

The most expensive item to purchase is an external hard drive. Video takes up a tremendous amount of space on a computer system. Because of limited space on the school's computers, we are encouraging students to purchase an extra drive for storage.

- A notebook (can be your sketchbook) specifically for this class in which to take notes and write down assignments
- A folder specifically to hold reading handouts and technical information sheets
- Mini DV tapes – 3-5 60 minute Standard Play for digital camera
- DVDs for storage and Final Portfolio
- Headphones – long enough cord to plug into computer jack

OPTIONAL

Tripod, lighting, microphones, and other "shooting" equipment (also available to checkout)

Flash Drive

ATTENDANCE:

Students are expected to attend every class. If students are more than 15 minutes late, they will be marked absent. Missing 3 classes (unexcused) automatically drops the grade one letter. Students grade will continue to drop a half a letter with every absence after three. More than 6 absences constitutes a failing grade or may result in an instructor withdrawal. Students who anticipate being absent or late due to illness or other legitimate reasons, please call, email, or talk to me in person. **IF YOU ARE LATE OR ABSENT, IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO FIND OUT WHAT YOU MISSED.** Incompletes will only be allowed in the case of severe illness or emergency.

GRADING:

Students' progress will be assessed at several times during the semester where specific deadlines are set for preproduction, production, post-production. Students will also be assessed through frequent critiques, classroom projects, homework assignments, and paper/presentation, film review sheets. Again, it is important to note that students will be graded on class participation, especially during critique sessions. Students will be made aware of the expectations for each assignment in terms of grading.

Video Projects

Both the **form** and the **content** of work will be evaluated on each project, as well as *effort, originality, personal progress, and timely completion of assignment*. While competency in basic skills can be objectively determined, creativity and aesthetics is more subjective. The instructor reserves the right to apply qualitative judgments in determining grades.

GRADING CRITERIA IN VIDEO:

- MASTERY OF TECHNICAL SKILLS AND CRAFTSMANSHIP
- COMPOSITION AND DESIGN
- CONTENT/ SUBJECT MATTER/ CONCEPT/ IDEA/ CREATIVITY
- FULLFILLMENT AND UNDERSTANDING OF ASSIGNMENT CONCEPTS AND REQUIREMENTS
- EFFORT AND ENGAGEMENT

- "A": Excellent, outstanding achievement and mastery of skills
- "B": Good- average attainment – may need some minor improvements in certain areas
- "C": Adequate understanding of essentials – fulfills assignment but lacking in content, effort, and/or skill.
- "D": does not fulfill assignment and exhibits little skill, effort, and thought.
- "F": Failure, no credit
- "I" Incomplete

Documentary Film Project	30%
Video Project 1	10%
Journal and Writing Assignments	30%
Paper/Presentation	10%
Class Participation	20%
TOTAL POINTS	100

LATE ASSIGNMENTS:

I will mark down all late projects one letter grade for each class period they are late unless you give me a satisfactory reason (in my estimation) for their lateness.

DISABILITY STATEMENT:

If you believe that you need accommodations in this class, you are encouraged to contact the Learning Services Office as soon as possible to enhance the likelihood that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion.

ACADMEMIC HONESTY POLICY:

Please refer to the Moravian College policy in the Student Handbook.

CLASSROOM RULES AND EQUIPMENT:

We will discuss lab rules and equipment checkout rules in class.

OTHER RESOURCES:

MAGAZINES/NEW PAPER/ TV- The Art Department also has a selection of periodicals that you may browse through. Many of these feature articles on video art and film.

***Check out: *Wired, Flash Art, Aperture, Art News, Art Forum, World Art, Communication Arts, Photoshop User, Art Review, Digital Photographer, Res*

Internet- The web is the newest venue for independent filmmakers and video artists.

Go to Google or another search engine and search for various topics pertaining to documentary film.

Be observant and critical of what you see in the media. Bring to class any interesting finds that pertain to course topics.