

WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY ESSAY?:

"the essay is in constant pursuit of new forms of presentation" -Theodor Adorno in Nora Alter, "Memory Essays" *Stuff It*, p. 13

"the film essay enables the filmmaker to make the 'invisible' world of thoughts and ideas visible on the screen. Unlike the documentary film that presents facts and information, the essay film produces complex thought-reflections that are not necessarily bound to reality, but can also be contradictory, irrational, and fantastic." -Hans Richter in Nora Alter, "Memory Essays" *Stuff It*, p. 13

We are reading several texts and viewing many films and videos that explore the range of approaches to the documentary essay.

- Paul Graham's article, "The Age of the Essay," uses several terms to describe what makes an essay an ESSAY:

>the word ESSAY comes from the French verb ESSAYER, which means "to try". An ESSAI is "an attempt." "An essay is something you [make] to try to figure something out", or in which you reveal your process of figuring something out. In the piece you model a way of thinking and approaching the world that embraces SURPRISE connections between ideas, that moves through an idea like a RIVER meanders (Graham).

>Preparing an engaging essay requires skills of PRECISE OBSERVATION, and often the observation of things others don't usually pay attention to—the mundane, the forgotten, the outcast or rejected, the inappropriate. According to Graham, creating a good essay requires your DISOBEDIENCE of standards that deem certain things to be more "important" or "worthy" of examination than others. For example, Graham tells us he's always been fascinated by hair comb-overs. Fantastic.

- Peter Thompson tells us about Kracauer's comments on "the sleuthing motif." The documentary essay may be as much about the process of *finding out about something* as it is about that *something*. In this way the documentary essay in some way acknowledges the constructedness of documentary truth, and the contingency and contextual nature of all knowledge.

- READ CAREFULLY the *Stuff It* essays and additional articles on the essay form. WATCH CAREFULLY the films/videos we screen in Tuesday class, and try to attend at least one Wednesday afternoon optional screening. Screen work with your Peer Group outside of class. Take good notes, keeping in mind that these writings are helping you form your ideas for your piece and your paper. DISCUSS WITH YOUR PEER GROUP these readings. Hash them out, make lists, notes, maps.

- Like many of the readings mention, the Documentary Essay is a malleable form. It invents its own language by combining various modes of address.

1. Paper (5-7 pages): DUE beginning of WEEK 6 [Tuesday, 8 FEB in lecture]

- analysis paper
- Must include <close analysis> of at least 1 film/video from class, and can incorporate another/others viewed in or outside of class
- Must draw from at least 2 course readings
- **DUE [WEEK 4/WEDS 26 JAN]:** Bring 2 copies of your 1 paragraph description of paper to seminar. Give one to your faculty, and you will discuss your paper ideas w/ a partner (preferably members of your peer group) in seminar that week for approx. 30 min (15 min/ea)
- **DUE [WEEK 5/WEDS 2 FEB]:** outline/rough draft due in seminar for discussion with partner/s
- Use MLA style. [if you are not sure what MLA style is, consult a peer or use the writing center] Cite all sources. Provide a complete bibliography and filmography.
- in a <close analysis> you engage with a film or video in detail, exploring its visual and sonic language. You may choose to focus on 1 or 2 sequences, or 1 or 2 scenes, etc., based on the complexity of the piece/s.
- Your task is to explore HOW the film/video uses conventions of the documentary essay form, grounding your discussion in course texts and providing your own analysis based on these texts.
- **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED SUPPLEMENTARY READING FOR BOTH PAPERS this quarter:**
A Short Guide to Writing About Film by Timothy Corrigan
- this is a more 'formal' analytical essay, so it will help you to think about WHO you are writing this to or for. Who is your audience? USE YOUR PEER GROUP TO WORKSHOP YOUR PAPER. Think of them as your audience. Use the paper to explore ideas/approaches you are using in your documentary essay. Let the paper inform your creative practice and vice-versa. THIS WILL REQUIRE A MEETING WITH YOUR PEER GROUP WEEKS 4 and 5. You should bring copies of drafts of your work-in-progress to give each member of your group.
- **PLEASE PROVIDE your seminar faculty with copies of these drafts or other evidence of these workshopping meetings.**

OPTIONAL >> *in consultation with your seminar faculty* (a conversation in office hours guided by the written paragraph you bring that describes the approach you want to take), you may elect to approach this essay in a *more creative-critical mode*, following design models outlined in course readings and essay examples. If you turned in all papers in fall and if they were consistently well-written, demonstrating your ability to address all of the week's readings and provide adequate synthesis/analysis, you are free to use this approach. Talk to Julia for more details.

2. Documentary Essay Video/film project: *DUE* end of WEEK 8 [Thursday, 24 FEB in Wkshp]

Length: 6 min MAX (can be shorter, of course)

Production Format: Video, Film, Audio

Who?: Peer group of 4 people: 2 in Wkshp A, 2 in Wkshp B

What?: A Documentary Essay. Your piece must include at least 2 visual strategies, languages or approaches. You might choose to be self-reflexive or at least present/visible in the piece, revealing your 4 voices (4 "I"s) or a "we."

Read: Sherry Millner, "Cheap Media: taking control of our image and lives" (Paper Tiger TV)
Besides being a great read, this short MANIFESTO gives some essential suggestions for how to structure collaborative work: meeting, delegating, researching, etc.

<http://www.papertiger.org/index.php?name=roar-chap4>

Production Schedule:

>WK 2, Thurs Salon: Peer Group finalized

>WK 3, WK 4: Thurs Workshop: In-class planning sessions

Weekends: Peer group documents an event (may be incorporated into essay)

>WK 5, WK 6: Production weeks and weekends

>WK 7, Workshops: Work-in-progress screening and feedback. Come prepared with specific questions for the group preferably on comment cards/forms/questionnaires

>WK 8, Thursday: All-program SCREENING + CRITIQUE of FINISHED PIECES

Production Documents: [each group member should create a portfolio for project docs]

- At least one "idea map" that visualizes your ideas (useful to do this on large piece of paper or posterboards)

- Research materials on your subject/s. This may include an annotated bibliography and filmography, notes, essays, etc.

- storyboards/scripts

- DUE WEEK 4 in WORKSHOP: short *treatment** and production schedule

- DUE end of WEEK 10: **PRODUCTION PORTFOLIO**: includes:

>1 page (at least) written reflection piece/artist statement from each group member (similar to the writeup you did for your CAE performance in fall. See Fall Mediaworks website for those guidelines)

>treatment

>storyboards

>production schedule

>other planning and research documents and notes including IDEA MAP/S

[* Your group's *treatment* should be a 1-paragraph to 1-page description of the piece that includes working title, themes/issues/ideas, and a description of the aesthetic approach/es you will use. Talk about the **CONTENT** and the **FORM** (the *what* and the *how*)]

START MEETING WITH YOUR GROUP REGULARLY AS SOON AS YOU FORM. Set up a regular time and a comfortable space. Involve food, games, or singing when possible.

YOU WILL BE SPENDING A LOT OF TIME TOGETHER. Discuss your expectations, communication needs, schedules.

DELEGATE TASKS WHEN POSSIBLE. Use each member's strengths to the group's advantage. Who is an ardent researcher? Who is a great list-maker or schedule-keeper? Who's best at facilitating group discussions?