

Video Essays

8N:145 Spring 2009

Jeff Porter 305A EPB

MW 2:30-3:45 16 EPB

Office Hours: MW 4-5:30

jeff-porter@uiowa.edu

Somewhere between video art and documentary lies the film essay, an in-between genre first introduced by avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter in 1940. For Richter, the appeal of this new genre was the poetic license it granted filmmakers to loosen their imaginations and to transgress the rules of conventional documentary practice in order to make the intangible world of thoughts and ideas visible on the screen. Like the written essays of Montaigne and his followers, the audio-visual equivalent depends on individual subjectivity and prefers to ponder rather than explain. A good film essay is often lost in thought. We'll explore this genre by using digital camcorders and Final Cut Pro to make one or two video essays. We'll also look at representative film essayists, including Alan Resnais, Chris Marker, Agnes Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, Orson Welles, Ross McElwee, Harum Farocki, Errol Morris, and Werner Herzog. As a writerly genre of filmmaking, the film essay defies easy categorization. We'll do our best to map out the genre and single out its interesting issues and aesthetic strategies through selected readings, discussions, and presentations. Our aim is to develop a critical understanding of the genre that can feed our own creative work.

Books:

Rick Young, *The Focal Easy Guide to Final Cut Pro 6* (Prairie Lights)

All assigned essays on our syllabus will be available on ICON in pdf format.

Requirements

essay projects: two video essays—or one video essay and one analytical research paper (20 pp.) on a thematic or aesthetic issue or filmmaker.

short writing exercises (as explained on syllabus)

oral presentations: each student will lead (or team-up for) class discussion of a major film essay (these are marked as presentations on our syllabus). A sign-up sheet for these events will be circulated soon.

screenings: all of the assigned films on our syllabus will be available for screening in our media lab (303 EPB) in a movie bank (a big hard drive) connected to a computer.

participation: this is not a lecture class. Your presence and voice are essential. You will be expected to contribute to class discussions and workshops through your thoughtful comments. Short writing exercises also count towards participation.

attendance: steady attendance is crucial to participation. You are allowed three absences. Every additional absence will lower your final grade by one-third of a letter.

Grading

30% participation—50% video projects (and/or analytical essay)—20% presentation.

Production

Students in need of media equipment can check out camcorders, microphones, and tripods from me through our media lab (303 EPB). All sound recording and video editing will take place on Mac computers (using Final Cut Pro) in the media lab. You will be issued portable hard drives

and media lab keys for your video work and film screening. Tenacity is strongly urged. New technologies often require enormous patience and cooperation. When in doubt, reboot.

M Jan 19	Holiday
W Jan 21	Introduction: The Essay and Its Vicissitudes
M Jan 26	<p>An Extraordinarily Brief History of the Essay Readings: Montaigne, "Of Practice" Gretel Ehrlich, "The Solace of Open Spaces" In-class analysis: 1) contrast Montaigne and Ehrlich stylistically; 2) compare this kind of writing to other forms of nonfiction such as journalism and academic writing.</p>
W Jan 28	<p>Writing exercise: write a two-page-length essay imitating the style of Montaigne or Ehrlich (double-spaced). Two questions for discussion: 1) what does one have to do with thought and language to write like either? 2) how might you convert your experiment into a film? Film Essay #1 Assigned (First-Person Film)</p>
M Feb 2	<p>Language and Voice in Nonfiction Film Charles Wolfe, "Historicizing the 'Voice of God'" Bruzzi, "Narration: the film and its voice" In-class clips: selections from Godard, <i>Letter to Jane</i>; Lorentz, <i>The Plow . . . and The River</i>; Ivens, <i>Spanish Earth</i>; Moore, <i>Roger and Me</i>; Else, <i>Day After Trinity</i>; <i>March of Time</i>; Jonze, <i>Adaptation</i>; and others.</p>
W Feb 4	<p>Discussion cont'd.: language and voice In-class analysis: 1) distinguish between the voice of documentary and the voice of the essay; 2) how wrong or right is Robert McKee in the film <i>Adaptation</i> when condemning voice-over? Writing exercise: explore the advantages and disadvantages of voice-over by composing the same idea in two different voice-over styles (voice-of god and literary/poetic—400-500 words).</p>
M Feb 9	<p>The Film Essay in Theory and Practice Readings: Philip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur: The essay Film"; Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments" In-class analysis: what is a film essay; what does its tradition look like; and how do you make one?</p>
W Feb 11	<p>In-class screening and discussion: Alan Resnais, <i>Night and Fog</i> (32 min. 1955). Resnais chose to treat the difficult work of exploring the holocaust by making an essay film rather than a conventional documentary. Why?</p>
M Feb 16	<p>First-Person: Essay Film and The New Autobiography Patricia Hampl, "Memory's Movies" Ross McElwee, <i>Sherman's March</i> (157 min. 1986) McElwee presentation</p>

W Feb 18	Renov, "The New Autobiography in Film and Video" Agnes Varda, <i>The Gleaners and I</i> (82 min. 2000) Varda presentation
M Feb 23	Written-essay workshop
W Feb 25	Written-essay workshop
M Mar 2	Recording Voice in ProTools Intro to Final Cut Pro
W Mar 4	Editing video essays
M Mar 9	First-cut workshop
W Mar 11	First-cut workshop
M Mar 16	Spring Break
W Mar 18	Spring Break
M Mar 23	Third-Person: Essay Film as Cultural Critique Levin, et. al., "Film as Critical Practice" Travis Wilkerson, <i>An Injury to One</i> (53 min. 2002) Wilkerson presentation
W Mar 25	The Prankster as Critic Catherine Benamou, "The Artifice of Realism in Welles's <i>F for Fake</i> " Orson Welles, <i>F for Fake</i> (87 min. 1974) Welles presentation
	Film Essay #2 Assigned (Third-Person Film)
M Mar 30	Audio/Visual Criticism Crano, "Guy Debord and the Aesthetics of Cine-Sabotage" Guy Deboard, <i>Society of the Spectacle</i> (90 min. 1973) (www.ubu.com) Debord presentation
W Apr 1	Project #2 Pitch
M Apr 6	Visual Essayism Prager, "War and Trauma"

	Werner Herzog, <i>Lessons of Darkness</i> (52 min. 1992) Herzog presentation
W Apr 8	Conomos, "Errol Morris and the New Documentary" Erroll Morris, <i>Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control</i> (80 min. 1997) Morris presentation
M Apr 13	History and Memory Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" Rea Tajiri, <i>History and Memory</i> (32 min. 1991) Tajiri presentation
W Apr 15	Toni Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing" Chris Marker, <i>Sans Soleil (Sunless)</i> , 100 min. 1983) Marker presentation
M Apr 20	Imaging in Photoshop
W Apr 22	Compositing and Animating in After Effects
M Apr 27	Project #2 first-cut workshop
W Apr 29	Project #2 first-cut workshop
M May 4	Project #2 first-cut workshop
W May 6	Project #2 selected screenings

The College of Liberal Arts and Science Policies and Procedure

Administrative Home

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is the administrative home of this course and governs matters such as the add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other related issues. Different colleges may have different policies. Questions may be addressed to 120 Schaeffer Hall or see the CLAS [Student Academic Handbook \[www.clas.uiowa.edu/students/academic_handbook/index.shtml\]](http://www.clas.uiowa.edu/students/academic_handbook/index.shtml).

Electronic Communication

University policy specifies that students are responsible for all official correspondences sent to their standard University of Iowa e-mail address (@uiowa.edu). Students should check this account frequently. (*Operations Manual*, III. [15.2](#). Scroll down to k.11.)

Academic Fraud

Plagiarism and any other activities when students present work that is not their own are academic fraud. Academic fraud is a serious matter and is reported to the departmental DEO and to the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs and Curriculum. Instructors and DEOs decide on

appropriate consequences at the departmental level while the Associate Dean enforces additional consequences at the collegiate level. See the CLAS [Student Academic Handbook](#).

Making a Suggestion or a Complaint

Students with a suggestion or complaint should first visit the instructor, then the course supervisor, and then the departmental DEO. Complaints must be made within six months of the incident. See the CLAS [Student Academic Handbook](#).

Accommodations for Disabilities

A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet privately with the course instructor to make particular arrangements. See www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ for more information.

Understanding Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community have a responsibility to uphold this mission and to contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment should be reported immediately. See the UI [Comprehensive Guide on Sexual Harassment](#) at www.uiowa.edu/~eod/policies/sexual-harassment-guide/index.html for assistance, definitions, and the full University policy.

Reacting Safely to Severe Weather

In severe weather, class members should seek appropriate shelter immediately, leaving the classroom if necessary. The class will continue if possible when the event is over. (*Operations Manual*, IV, [16.14](#). Scroll down to e. h. and i.) *The CLAS policy statements have been summarized from the web pages of the [College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#) and The University of Iowa [Operations Manual](#).)