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The Cinematic Essay: Argumenative Writing and Documentary Film

Zachary Snow
Clemson University, zsnow@clemson.edu

THE CINEMATIC ESSAY
ARGUMENATIVE WRITING AND DOCUMENTARY FILM

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Zachary Michael Snow
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Dr. R. Barton Palmer, Committee Chair
Dr. Aga Skrodzka-Bates
Dr. David Blakesley

ABSTRACT

The cinematic essay, also known as the essay film, is an extension of the documentary genre which replaces the impossible task of objectivity with a more subjective, argumentative approach. The existence of this form arguably dates back to the birth of the documentary, but certainly encompasses more recent endeavors like Errol Morris' investigative work, the experimental features of Chris Marker, and the political exposes of Michael Moore. Until the recent growth in digital technology, which has decreased the financial burden associated with the cost of film stock and other aspects of production, essayistic cinema was mostly created by professional filmmakers, who approach thesis-driven arguments through a visual medium to achieve what documentary pioneer John Grierson described as "the creative treatment of actuality" (Winston, 19). Yet in recent years the development of digital cameras and editing equipment has made it possible for amateur filmmakers, including those involved in academia, to craft essay films with the same efficiency and quality of their professional predecessors. This paper explores the essay film from a theoretical and historical perspective to reveal the similarities between documentaries and the form of argumentative writing which is taught to students in composition courses.

DEDICATION

       This thesis is dedicated to Dr. Palmer, Dr. Skrodzka Bates, and Dr. Blakesley for their support and assistance through the various stages of the paper's development. I would also like to dedicate it to Aaron Pate, for his invaluable advice on how to develop an essay with digital technology, to my father, for years of love and support, and my mother, the late Carol Snow, who instilled in me affection for films and people for which I will always be grateful.

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INTRODUCTION

Halfway through my first semester as an instructor of freshman composition, before my students were even finished with their research papers, I decided to deviate from the generic syllabus to show Peter Watkins' *The War Game* (1965) to both of my classes. The purpose was not to enlighten them on the potential horrors of nuclear war, which are so unforgettably detailed in Watkins' docudrama, but to illustrate the similarities between essay composition and non-fiction cinema. In order to educate citizens of Great Britain about the potential threat of a nuclear strike on the nation's more heavily populated cities, Watkins combined dramatic enactments of possible scenarios with statements from important religious leaders, facts about the effects of nuclear weapons, and speculation on the long term problems caused by radioactive fallout. The result is a harrowing pseudo-documentary which was initially banned by the BBC for its graphic nature, and had more of an emotional impact on my students than months of power point lectures on the rhetorical appeals. Their surprisingly strong reactions to the film were revealed in discussion board posts, where most of the students provided intelligent commentary on Watkins' film and indicated how they could use similar techniques in the video essays I asked them to construct as the final assignment of the semester.

I chose to show *The War Game* not only as an early example of the essay film, but also because of Watkins' often stated belief that the use of film as a pedagogical tool has

too often been neglected by educators. Fearful of what he describes as monoform media, a system which ensures that the perspectives presented on television and mainstream films fit within socially accepted criteria, Watkins has written that "the ideas and initiatives of the public, if absorbed into the creation of the mass audiovisual media, would help break down many of the existing hierarchical forms" which constitute what viewers see on television and in theaters. His call for the public to become more involved with essayistic film production, and to use the form to present alternative perspectives to those in monoform media, was largely ignored for decades because of the high cost of filming equipment and the frequently inaccessible nature of Watkins' own work. Yet with the development of digital film technology and the rising popularity of video upload sites like YouTube, Watkins' vision of amateur film production has become not only possible, but practical and affordable. Instructors of freshman composition, a general education class that teaches students how to use rhetorical appeals to stage an argument, should take advantage of these technological advances with assignments that prompt students to write, film, and edit video essays. By combining the structure of argumentative writing with the visual appeal of cinema, instructors can offer students of the post-digital age a method for developing and sustaining a perspective on any given topic through a medium that offers a larger potential audience than written essays.

As the instructor of two English 103 courses at Clemson University, I used the essay film to teach my students about visual rhetoric by addressing the similarities between documentary and argumentative writing. The first major assignment, of three that were part of the generic syllabus, was a five page paper in which students were asked

to find an example of visual rhetoric in a television commercial or other advertisement, then write about how the ad appeals to a potential consumer's sense of pathos, ethos, and logos. For the second paper, students were asked to expand the ideas generated in that first assignment into a ten page essay in which they use at least five academic sources to support a thesis-driven argument. The textbook *Envision in Depth* was used to teach argumentative writing from a rhetorical perspective and to train my students on the basic requirements of college writing. Those basic requirements are briefly related by David Blakesley and Jeffrey L Hoogeveen in *Writing: a Manuel for the Digital Age*, in which they discuss the importance of

> A descriptive title that suggests the subject and, if possible, the writer's perspective or position. Introductory paragraphs that invite readers into the subject by providing them with background information, context, and a thesis to be argued or a problem to be posed and explored. Body paragraphs that develop the reasons and evidence needed to support the thesis or elaborate the problem. Each body paragraph typically offers a full explanation of one major reason, idea, or example that supports the thesis statement or extends the inquiry. Concluding paragraphs that return to the thesis or problem, explain the implication of the argument or new ideas, or raise questions for future consideration (10).

Once the first two assignments were used to familiarize students with the basic structure of the essay, I spent the last months of the semester teaching them how to use a similar structure while making short (5-10 minute) essay films.

A major problem associated with multimedia assignments, at least those from composition classes, is a lack of the structure associated with written essays. Students are asked to develop videos which will be presented before a class, though without structural guidelines those films rarely provide valid information or a strong argument. Blakesley and Hoogeveen acknowledge that "like authors of many familiar forms of printed texts, effective multimedia composers take into account the rhetorical situation and audience— the circumstances of writing and communicating to others—as well as the means (ethos, logos, pathos, delivery, style, arrangement, memory) of accomplishing the purpose (to inform, delight, or persuade)" (383). This is notably similar to the oft-stated goal of journalism, "to inform and entertain," though different in the respect that essays are primarily written to persuade readers to accept a certain belief. Though students can and should have fun with these assignments, their videos must also capture the attention of viewers, state an argument, support that argument with the use of credible sources, and reach some insight about the topic addressed.

To impose a basic structure on the multimedia assignment, I first asked my students to find two academic sources from databases like JSTOR and Project Muse which could then be incorporated into the spoken narration of their films. Then, I asked them to find at least two visual sources, clips which could be ripped from YouTube, Google Video, or other online databases to support their central thesis. Students were placed into groups of four or five, and I spent time in class teaching them how to shoot/edit video while providing information on where to access cameras and editing equipment on campus. After the groups selected their topics, they spent the next two

months searching for credible sources, developing an outline to show how those sources support their central argument, and working on a script. Outside of class, they shot additional footage and found clips which were edited together with Windows Movie Maker, Final Cut Pro, and other software which either came with their laptops, or can be downloaded for free online. After they finished shooting and editing the short videos, the groups presented their work to the rest of the class and wrote reflections in which they detailed their individual contributions to the assignment.

Not all of my students particularly enjoyed the essay film assignment and one, Eric Hartigan, felt that "the only reason we are doing this is to fill in the gap in time between the research paper and the end of the semester" (3). His criticism is similar to those of some composition instructors, who feel that video-based assignments have less value and educational potential than written ones. For the most part, however, students responded very positively to the newly structured multimedia project. One of the freshmen, Evan Graczyk, even referred to it as "one of the few school assignments that I have ever and will ever enjoy" (3). Since current college students are among the first to grow up in a post-internet age, one in which they are exposed to new forms of media on a daily basis, the essay film offers a more kinetic and visually engaging way for them to learn the basics of argumentative writing and to retain more of the information they present.

FILM AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

Many scholars have addressed how contemporary students who have grown up in this media-saturated environment respond positively to visual assignments as opposed to traditional written ones. Katherine Hayles, with her article "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes," states that "networked and programmable media are part of a rapidly developing mediascape transforming how citizens of developed countries do business, conduct their social lives, communicate with one another, and—perhaps most significant—think" (187). Her article proposes that changes in the brain chemistry of students should prompt educators to turn to new media, with an emphasis on the visual, as a more kinetic and engaging pedagogical practice. Gunther Kress, in "English at the Crossroads," claims that "the visual is taking over many of the functions of written language" and that "this shift may lead to a fundamental challenge to the form which is perhaps most typical of speech, namely narrative, and its replacement by the visual/spatial display" (68). The essay film, with its emphasis on the visual, offers composition instructors a valuable tool for adjusting to the needs and demands of students in this post-digital environment.

The use of film as an educational tool has frequently proven successful, dating back to the earliest years of the medium. Robert Sklar, in his seminal book *Movie Made America*, references early psychological studies which indicate that film viewers are likely to retain the information they view because of the rapid succession of still images.

Hugo Munsterberg, a psychologist who studied the impact of filmed images on the mind, concluded that "we learn to make the mental and visual adjustments so that what we see accords with our notion of reality; we give to the movie image what in technical fact is not there, and we experience depth and movement because our mind requires them" (Sklar, 125). French philosopher Henri Bergson developed a similar theory about the educational possibilities of film, that the images perceived by viewers "remain still until we give them motion by our process of thought, setting them moving as a projector does and creating an imitation of living reality in our minds" (Sklar, 48). Since the process of film viewing requires subconscious brain activity, viewers are more likely to remember information they process through a visual medium, which may explain why so many people claim to have learned more about WWII from the Discovery Channel than they ever did in a history class.

Although the use of film to convey information has been frequently explored by academics, the pedagogical value of film-making has received less attention. Since the viewing of a video allows for the increased retention of information, the constant viewing of one visual source (which is necessary in the editing process) should ensure that information will be retained by students for much longer than the passive watching of a film permits. While making their essay films, the students in my classes had to observe their sources, whether visual or text, over and over as they edited their projects, so that their reflections and in-class presentations displayed a superior knowledge of various topics. They were also able to enhance their rhetorical skills by appealing to the emotions, logic and ethics of viewers as they sought to convey their information in the

most effective way possible. By applying an essayistic structure to the multimedia assignment, my students indicated that the essay film can help composition instructors adjust to the post-digital academic environment.

One reason film has been underused as an educational tool in the past is that the cost of film stock, editing equipment and other aspects of production ensured that even the smallest scale production would require a substantial budget that few students could afford. What Sklar speculated as "a remarkable event in human history," in which "American men and women could give up their roles as passive spectators before the motion-picture or television screen," has finally come to pass with the development of digital cameras and editing equipment that have made production easier and more affordable than ever before (317). Digital cameras like the HD-DSLR offer image quality far superior to older tape or CD based devices, while editing equipment has also become more accessible, with programs like Final Cut Pro and Adobe Premier used by professional and amateur filmmakers alike. It is now feasible for students to shoot footage with their webcam, rip additional video or mp3 files from the internet, and edit it all together on their laptops. For those who are less savvy with new technology, university media centers with employees who are well versed in digital production are on hand to assist with the various stages of development.

An essay by Elizabeth Coffman, "Documentary and Collaboration," further explores how the rise of digital technology had made shooting and editing video more accessible to non-professional filmmakers. As she details the growth of non-fiction filmmaking collectives in America, Coffman notes how "much of the world has gained

access to lower-cost video equipment, to the Internet, and to uploading content on sites such as YouTube or MySpace," which has prompted the growth of cinematic communities in which socially committed groups use film to address social issues which may be too regional or subversive in nature to be presented in monoform media (62). Coffman addresses not only how the cost of production has declined, but also how the problem of distribution has been resolved by websites like YouTube. Not only can groups make films in which they state and develop an argument, they can also find an international audience by uploading their video essays to the internet.

The relatively unregulated space of the internet opens the possibility for alternative perspectives that stand in opposition to those presented in media outlets like televised journalism and narrative cinema. For the most part coverage of real-world events by news channels like CNN or Fox News may promote alternative perspectives, but given that those news outlets are owned by major corporations their information will almost always reflect a dominant ideology. Even documentary films, made by professional directors for big studios, are subject to the dictates of monoform media— Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) may have stirred controversy among conservative groups, but it still reflected a perspective sanctioned by more liberal Americans. Students who make essay films for the purpose of a grade rather than commercial gain are much less restricted in their choice of topics and their personal perspectives, while they also can address pertinent local or regional issues which escape the lens of mainstream media.

Another reason for the neglect of film as a pedagogical tool is the dominance of narrative cinema, of the style manufactured in Hollywood, and its association with capitalist gain. Critics of the essay film, ranging from Hartigan to tenured English professors, associate the cinema only with escapist entertainment, a terministic screen which has influenced criticism on film since its inception over a century ago. In *Movie Made America*, Sklar states that "under slightly different circumstances the motion picture camera and projector might as easily have become primarily instruments of science, like the microscope, or of education," but that "it turned out differently for one fundamental reason: movies developed during critical years of change in the social structure of American life when a new social order was emerging in the modern industrial city" (3). Since the cinema came about in the wake of the industrial revolution, when new innovations were used to increase profits for the individual or group responsible, it was immediately linked with a form that could maximize profits. The association of film with fictional narratives was secured as early as the 1910s, when a number of motion picture studios in Hollywood focused production entirely on conventional genre films with predictable storylines. Hollywood films were designed to make profits for the studios that manufactured them and promote dominant ideology through familiar genres which rarely confronted the audience with pertinent social issues. Although some narrative movies are more socially conscious today, the commercial success of blockbusters like *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *Avatar* (2009) ensures that cinema's association with escapist entertainment will continue in the twenty first century.

Given the continued association of narrative cinema with mindless escapism, it is important to establish documentary as an oppositional form of film-making to both students and educators. Paul Rotha, an important early documentarian and theorist, was particularly critical of fictional productions and states that "the documentary film has an important purpose to fulfill in bringing to life familiar things and people, so their place in the scheme of things which we call society may be honestly assessed" (26). His view of non-fiction film as oppositional to narrative in its depiction of historical reality is shared by later theorists like Bill Nichols, who claims that "at the heart of the documentary is less a story and its imaginary world than an argument about the historical world" (111). The documentary's purpose is not to coldly relate historical facts, but to offer a perspective on real-world events with a goal of fostering identification among viewers in the same way written essays do.

DOCUMENTARY

Though Robert Flaherty, who made silent films in exotic locals like *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926), may have been the father of the documentary form, non-fiction cinema's link with argumentative writing more accurately begins with the British pictures produced by John Grierson in the 1930s. Rotha, who produced and directed a number of films for one of Grierson's units, explores the importance of the British Documentary Movement in his book on the subject, *Documentary Film.* He memorably states that "the commercial success of cinema has led many of us to believe that the value of a film lies in its power to create immediate sensation," a belief which "has done incalculable harm to cinema and transitory good only to its exploiters" (26). His criticism of the sensationalist nature of narrative film is followed by a subsequent praise of documentary as an oppositional form of cinema which "has materialized largely as the result of sociological, political and educational requirements" (105). Whereas fictional movies promote conformity to dominant ideology with storylines that rarely address pertinent issues, the purpose of documentary is to critique culture and propose solutions to problems faced by a certain group of people.

The difference between documentary and fictional cinema was later explored by Nichols in *Representing Reality*, one of the first books to detail the use of rhetorical appeals in non-fiction films. Nichols notes that "evidence of and from the historical world may appear in either fiction or documentary film and may have the same existential bond to the world in both," but that in fictional films "it supports a narrative; in [documentary]

it supports an argument" (116). References to the real world may enhance the authenticity of a fictional movie, but the world's purpose in documentary is as evidence to support a particular perspective about historical events and to encourage viewers to identify with the film-makers' take on a particular issue. Early examples of this thesis-driven style of documentary produced by Grierson include *Night Mail* (1936), about the British postal service, and Humphrey Jennings' *Fires Were Started* (1943), about the heroic actions of firefighters during the Blitz. Those films, along with countless others made by the GPO, helped to educate the British public on important issues and to provide perspectives that reflected the beliefs of the filmmakers.

Rotha, along with other documentary theorists like Brian Winston, attributes the growth of the documentary form to Grierson, who had the "good sense" to establish units in a number of different nations and then, "once he has nourished the sprout, to let the tree grow where it list" (331). Grierson's reputation as the Johnny Appleseed of non-fiction film production stems from his decision to set up units in England, New York and Canada, where he taught local filmmakers basic documentary principles which differentiated those films from "other sorts of factual cinema, such as the newsreel, the travelogue or the scientific/nature film" (20). What most sets documentary apart from other non-fiction forms, notably televised journalism, is the necessity of a strong central argument. Winston champions Grierson as a role model to later documentarians, while educators who look to incorporate the essay film into their lesson plans should also look to his pioneering work for guidance. Just as Grierson once moved from nation to nation to help local filmmakers establish documentary units, composition instructors can

introduce the essay film as a means for students to express opinions and deal with

problems outside the scope of monoform media.

OBJECTIVITY IS IMPOSSIBLE

One of the most significant principles established by Grierson is the difference between documentary film and journalism, as represented first by newsreels then televised reports. Winston, in *Lies Damn Lies and Documentary*, explores how the journalistic standard of objectivity violates Grierson's definition of the documentary form as "the creative treatment of actuality," which holds that the subjective presence of the filmmaker is as important as the information presented (4). He states that "documentaries, like journalism, have an elevated need to tell the truth if they are to maintain their integrity; but, far more than journalism, they are also vehicles for personal self-expression" (126). Since the purpose of essayistic documentary is to express a particular viewpoint, to use rhetorical appeals to foster identification among viewers on a specific topic, the demands of objectivity placed on journalists should not extend to documentarians. Whereas journalism is related to history, given the attempts of reporters to relate real events as public knowledge, essayistic cinema is more closely tied to composition, with the purpose of using real-world incidents to shape a particular interpretation of those events from the perspective of the filmmaker.

Though the subjective nature of documentary initially makes the form appear less direct or honest than journalism, the impossibility of objectivity in modern media makes it more ethical. Each cinematic representation of reality, whether presented as a documentary or on the nightly news, features subjective choices in which the camera placement, editing, commentary, and other elements shape a particular version of reality.

As Winston claims, "documentary-makers claiming not 'to edit reality' need to be treated with a great deal more caution" than those who admit that each film works as a terministic screen in which one perspective is privileged over others. Rotha also wrote about the need for subjectivity in non-fiction cinema, stating that "documentary may prefer the unarranged scene and the unrehearsed action but this does not, I think, rule out the license of arrangement if a greater emotional effect can thereby be gained" (151). Reenactments and speculations about real events are acceptable in the documentary medium as long as they are properly labeled as such by the filmmakers and work to advance the argument—as was the case with *The War Game*, which uses facts and interviews to shape an apocalyptic view of England after a nuclear attack.

The subjective nature of non-fiction cinema is what relates documentary more closely to composition, among other English courses, than history or journalism. Like documentary filmmakers, students in composition classes are asked to support their perspective on a specific topic through expert testimonials, established facts, theoretical statements, and other forms of credible evidence. The primary difference between conventional papers and those projects is the strong emphasis on the visual in essay films, which helps to strengthen the central argument more than words alone. Alain Resnais' Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog* (1955) contains actual footage of Nazi death camps taken by Allied soldiers following the liberation, with images of mass genocide that greatly strengthen his statement about the evils of fascism. Errol Morris' multi-perspective reconstructions of the crime scene in *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), coupled with his use of interviews and documents related to the case, made his film so effective

that an innocent man, Randall Adams, was cleared of a murder charge and freed from prison. Those films, along with other documentaries, offer an effective combination of text and visuals that establish a perspective, whether the topic is the mass murder of Jews in the Holocaust or problems with the Texas legal system.

DOCUMENTARY STYLES

The four styles of documentary defined by Nichols in *Representing Reality* are the expository, observational, interactive and reflexive. Though it is possible to divide these into sub-categories, and the potential for overlap between styles is inevitable, those four approaches prove useful as a classification system to define both professionally-made documentaries and student projects. Timothy Corrigan's *The Essay Film*, one of the first books to fully explore the essayistic nature of documentary, also features a classification system which corresponds with that defined by Nichols and is useful as a guide of potential approaches for students assigned to make video essays. To understand how these categories will help composition instructors add structure to multimedia assignments, it is important to examine each of the styles individually and how most non-fiction films, ranging from professional documentaries to short student projects, can be identified within them.

The traditional documentary is known as the expository film, in which the documentarian introduces a problem and offers solutions through facts, statistics, commentary, and real-world footage. Nichols characterizes this approach as featuring "voice-of-God commentary and poetic perspectives sought to disclose information about the historical world itself and to see that world afresh," which is similar to the early style of thesis-driven cinema pioneered by Grierson and Rotha in the 1930s (32). Nichols is critical of this style, since the problem/solution format leaves little room for alternative perspectives and prompts viewers to access the argument through the same terministic

screen present in journalism. Winston is also critical of exposition films, given their attempt to "disguise documentary as journalism" and attempt an objective, one-sided account of events that viewers presume to be accurate (42). This style of documentary has fallen out of favor with many critics and theorists, but continues to thrive when the primary purpose of filmmakers is to make one perspective dominant. Davis Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2007), in which Al Gore addresses the dangers of global warming, helped to educate many viewers about climate change, while Lucy Walker's *Countdown to Zero* (2010) similarly disillusioned audiences who felt that the dangers of nuclear warfare came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union. These films, along with many others, introduce an issue that the filmmakers feel has been neglected by modern society and attempt, through rhetorical appeals, to prompt the viewer to action.

Corrigan describes the expository style as an "essay as editorial," in which the primary goal is "not only to activate a thinking subject before the empty screen but also to propel that thinking as an intellectual and concrete action within the historical unfolding of events" (164). The goal of each film is to propel viewers to action—in *An Inconvenient Truth* viewers are asked to adopt a more eco-friendly lifestyle, while in *Countdown to Zero* and *The War Game* they are prompted to demand nuclear disarmament from world leaders. The purpose of those editorial/expository films is not to entertain a passive spectator, but to implicate the viewer as an active agent who must take steps to solve a particular problem, whether it's global warming or nuclear warfare. Some of these films, like *An Inconvenient Truth*, even provide information on how the viewer

can get involved in their credits--to join an activist organization, or petition change from politicians who can alter national policies. Given the urgency of this approach, as well as the similarities with journalism, most student videos will inevitably feature some editorial elements.

One student project from my 103 class which closely resembles the expository approach is "Unhealthy Eating Options in College," which was made by Meghan Weedon, Lamonda Pete, Mitchell Appleby, and Marcus Lawrence. Though their chosen topic, the scarcity of healthy dining options at Clemson University, may lack the urgency of a film about nuclear warfare or climate change, the video was still an effective editorial about a topic that concerns Clemson students but would likely be ignored by mainstream media. The group combined footage of the campus dining halls, factual information related through narration, and interviews with students to strengthen their argument. They even exposed a broken link to the university's nutritional website, which was supposed to have information about dining services. Though their video is unlikely to attract widespread attention outside the Clemson area, it was still a well-developed editorial which can help to raise awareness of the scarcity of healthy food options in Clemson's restaurants and dining halls.

A second video made in the expository style, with a more comedic tone, is "The Truth of Santa Claus and the Effects on Your Kids," which was filmed by Gina Wessinger, Ryan Lyle, Timothy Ahlgren, and Mason Dillard. Dillard tackles the role of a psychiatrist who claims, with academic sources to offer support, that lying to children about the existence of Santa can cause problems when they grow up, including cognitive

dissonance. The video featured fictional scenes of adults who still believe in Santa, statements from former mall Santa-turned-psychiatrist Carl Anderson, and written sources related through narration or on-screen text. Other student projects used editorials to explore topics like the overuse of smart phones, underage drinking, and the difficulty of maintaining a high GPA. The purpose of those videos, like professionally made documentaries, was to compel the viewer to action. Viewers are encouraged to complain about Clemson's dining halls, tell the truth about Santa to children, or campaign for a lower drinking age. Though the student films were less polished or serious than professionally made documentaries, each used similar tactics to identify a problem and propose a solution with the use of statistics, expert testimonials, and other factual information. Although most students chose to work in the expository style, the limited perspective of that approach and its close relation to journalism is problematic. Because of this, students and educators should be encouraged to look to the other three styles for alternative ways to approach topics which still permits the filmmakers to maintain a strong central argument.

The second approach defined by Nichols is the "observational style," which prompts filmmakers "to observe the activities of others without resorting to the techniques of exposition that turn the sounds and images of [the subjects] into accomplices in someone else's argument" (41). This fly-on-the-wall, non-intrusive brand of documentary, also known as Direct Cinema or Cinema Verite, was first popularized in the 1960s by Richard Leacock, DA Pennebaker, and other innovative filmmakers working for Drew Associates. With successful films like *Don't Look Back* (1967) and

Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* as classic examples, filmmakers moved among their subjects, captured reality as it occurred, and saved all judgments for the editing room. This approach corresponds with Corrigan's definition of the "essay as diary," in which filmmakers record even the most benign events in the hopes of later constructing a non-fiction narrative.

The most obvious example of the diary essay is *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), a film compiled by Jonas Mekas from hours of home movie footage which detail his life, and that of his family, after moving to America. Corrigan's definition of the "travel essay," with a focus on events that occur at a set location, is also very similar to this approach, but should be differentiated from the travelogue for its emphasis of theme over location. More recent examples of the observational approach include Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus' *The War Room* (1993), about the first presidential campaign of Bill Clinton, as well as Hegedus' exploration of the rise and fall of GovWorks, *Startup.com* (2001). Those films forsake narration and commentary, so prominent in expository films, so that the primary goal of the filmmaker is to turn the camera on during important, revelatory moments in the lives of their subjects. Only when they edit this footage, choosing what to remove and keep, do the filmmakers make subjective choices as non-fiction storytellers.

Of the student videos from my 103 class that fall into this category, the most significant is "Docu Skit," made by Kevin Kuckuk, Danielle DeMario, Ethan Schaeffer, and Charl Coetser which explores the wastefulness of modern society. In addition to finding news footage of garbage dumps and landfills, the group walked around Clemson after the final football game against Wake Forest to capture video with their smart

phones. They synthesized shots of overflowing dumpsters, post-game clean-up crews, and trash littered all over campus with facts and statistics about the wastefulness of modern society, as well as a brief skit enacted in the cinema verite style in which a trio of students contribute to the problem by throwing away food rather than eating it. "Relationship Problems as a College Student" was made by Justin Sanford, Beau Brown, and Joel Moore, and features verite-style reenactments of relationship problems faced by college students, with the additional use of text sources and visuals to support all claims. Other student videos also bore traces of the observational style and proved effective because of the regional nature of the arguments--the problem they address is *here*, with footage shot on the Clemson campus.

Observational documentaries, whether made by professionals or students, are best characterized by their ability to let footage, rather than extensive commentary, define the central argument. Pennebaker never attempted to stage events for his camera, but instead followed Bob Dylan, Bill Clinton, and his other subjects around long enough to capture enough real life on film so that his argument about each subject could be developed in the editing room. My students, similarly, didn't stage a football game to emphasize their argument about the wasteful nature of modern Americans, they were just on hand with smart phones to capture footage of post-game clean-up crews and overflowing dumpsters. The non-intrusive nature of Direct Cinema makes it the most objective form of documentary, with the actions of subjects and footage of revelatory images used to make an argument without commentary. Yet the style also limits the extent that filmmakers can

present their vision on-screen, and because of this is less effective as a form of essay than the interactive or reflexive approaches.

The third documentary mode defined in *Representing Reality*, "the interactive style," is one which "extends beyond passing acknowledgments to the point where the dynamics of social exchange between filmmaker and subject become fundamental to the film" (50). The most obvious examples of the interactive documentary are the exposes of Michael Moore, who aggressively confronts subjects like former GM president Roger Smith in *Roger and Me* (1989), NRA leader Charlton Heston in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), and President George W. Bush in *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). Errol Morris provides a more subtle, but no less enthralling variation on the interactive method with his films about subjects who often dwell on the fringes of accepted society. Though Morris rarely makes his presence known through appearances in his films, in documentaries like *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter Jr.* (1999) and *The Fog of War* (2003) he relentlessly interviews his subjects and asks them to defend their decisions and actions. This style corresponds with Corrigan's definition of "the essay as inter-view," in which "the simultaneous enactment of and representation of a destabilized self" is the "primary aim of the documentarian" (80). By interviewing subjects of considerable controversy like Holocaust denier Fred Leuchter and former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Morris is able to destabilize their frequently deluded self-perceptions while also unsettling the view that the audience may have of his subjects. Moore and Morris are the most famous practitioners of this style, which extends back to the deeply personal films

of Jean Rouch (*Jaguar* [1967]) and Emile de Antonio (*In the Year of the Pig* [1968]) that also feature some form of confrontation between the filmmaker and subject.

Though many of the multimedia assignments from my classes featured interviews with students and faculty members, the most prominent example of the interactive style was "How Extracurricular Activities Affect Clemson Students." Made by Jay Shaw, Heri Mumma, Chase Burley, and Jimmy O'Connor, that video asks a series of questions of Clemson students who are involved in extracurricular activities, most notably whether or not their grades have been negatively affected. The subjects had a variety of answers, but revealed more about themselves than the activities they participate in through their responses. Some of the students take responsibility for their lack of academic success, some claim that extracurricular activities haven't affected their GPA at all, and some use football, color guard, or other activities as a scapegoat for their problems in school. By probing a collection of students about their college activities, the film was able to reveal more about the students, through the excuses they come up with to explain academic shortcomings, than the initial topic.

The interactive style is the most compelling form of documentary, since it presents a clash between the inquiring filmmaker and the subjects who are presumably held accountable for their actions. Moore was never granted an interview with Roger Smith in his first film, but his attempts to confront the GM CEO reveal much about his subject's lack of concern for the laid off workers in Flint, Michigan. Morris never gets McNamara to take responsibility as the "architect of Vietnam" or Leuchter to admit that his research on the death camps is inaccurate, though he gets both men to reveal much

about their beliefs and ambitions with their guarded answers to his questions. Similarly, my students were unable to get their subjects to acknowledge fault for their declining GPA's, though by providing extracurricular activities as a possible scapegoat for their shortcomings they made a statement about how the often ill-advised actions of college students, and their reluctance to admit to wrongdoing, causes problems for many as they drift through their courses. Though the subjects in interactive documentaries try to guard what is said before a camera, what they inadvertently reveal in interviews, especially when confronted with past mistakes, ultimately makes the form one of the most engaging and successful for students and documentarians.

The final type of documentary defined by Nichols is the reflexive film, which he claims gives "emphasis to the encounter between filmmaker and viewer rather than filmmaker and subject" (60). He states that this ironic, self-referential brand of non-fiction cinema focuses the "attention to [it's] own patterns so consistently that [it] evolves into a poetic or essayist mode of representation," and that the emphasis on form in such films calls into attention the subjectivity inherent in all documentary representation (70). Corrigan's definition is the "essay as refractive cinema," in which films overlap "representations of other artistic and aesthetic experiences with their own cinematic processes and frequently [reflect] those processes as a reflection on film itself" (181). These are the most post-modern of documentaries, ironic and complex productions in which the filmmaker's role as an artistic agent and subjective presence is just as significant as the argument itself.

The master of the reflexive style is mysterious French director Chris Marker, whose cinematic essays combine argumentative elements with the filmmaker's idiosyncratic trademarks, among them feline imagery and references to the thrillers of Alfred Hitchcock. Marker's ambitious *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977), a three hour exploration of the rise and fall of socialism, is perhaps the greatest example of a reflexive essay. He opens that film by splicing together footage of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), a fictionalized account of events which led to the Bolshevik Revolution, with images of American, French, and other protesters from the sixties. This opening "hook," which confronts the viewer with similarities between political unrest in pre-Soviet Russia and capitalist states a half century later, leads into shots of neo-Nazis, unscrupulous American politicos, and a soldier who casually massacres North Vietnamese citizens from his helicopter. To support his central argument about the need to preserve the ideals of socialist democracy, Marker combines found historical footage, interviews with key political figures, and occasional poetic commentary into an extensive essay on the subject. In the two parts of his documentary, titled "Fragile Hands" and "Severed Hands," the director addresses everything from the Prague Spring to the assassination of Salvador Allende. He then concludes his film with the image of wolves being tracked by hunters from a helicopter, eerily recalling the initial scenes of Vietnam while offering hope for socialist democracy even with the continued rise of late capitalism.

Sans Soliel (1983) is a more ambiguous film from Marker which takes on a number of functions—as a travelogue which spans from Japan to San Francisco, as an

essay about the divide between personal memory and collective culture, and as an aesthetic triumph with images of cats and shots of the location where Hitchcock shot *Vertigo* (1958). Again Marker cut together stock footage, poetic commentary, and striking images to fashion one of the more complex variations on the reflexive essay. Though he is the most notable and acclaimed refractive filmmaker, evidence of the style can be detected as far back as the Soviet films of Dziga Vertov like *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), which similarly calls attention to the subjective presence of the filmmaker. Some of Jean-Luc Godard's films, made with a collective known as the Dziga Vertov group, also fit within this category; among them *Letter to Jane* (1972), in which Godard and fellow filmmaker Jean Pierre Gorin discuss the notorious photograph of Jane Fonda in Vietnam (which remains the sole image featured in their film for the entirety of its duration).

The reflexive style has the potential to appeal to students who have grown up in a post-modern age in which irony and self-reflexivity have infiltrated popular culture. In my class, freshmen Graham Aldinger, Bryson Fuller, and Ray Matsumoto made an untitled video about the ongoing debate on whether or not video games increase violent tendencies in teenagers. They indicate that it does, with various YouTube clips of kids overreacting after repeatedly losing games, although the video itself was staged with Halo characters, which allows the students to add humor and irony to the well-worn concern. The two central characters presented in the film are news reporters who offer commentary on violent games, even as explosions and shootings occur around them. By critiquing the violent nature of modern games while calling attention to the form of first

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person shooter games in general, the students made an effective essay that satirizes both sides of the debate.

A second reflexive video, "The Power of Advertising," was developed by Graydon Blakeslee, Anthony Self, Levi Mills, and Alan Ramirez. The video begins with a number of fictional scenes in which three different characters fail at socializing, playing sports, and meeting girls. They each take a drug called 'Tigerol,' described in the video as a placebo, and are subsequently able to succeed where once they failed. By setting up their video initially as a mock-commercial, my students were then able to critique how advertisements (especially those for prescription drugs) appeal to consumers with unrealistic promises of a particular product's effectiveness. They followed the mock-commercial sequence with facts and statistics about advertisements which target the insecurities of teenagers and young adults, effectively critiquing the unscrupulous nature of drug advertisers through an exaggerated parody of the form coupled with information from various articles. There were even interviews with students about the effects of advertising on their own choices as consumers, staged as a refractive parody of confrontational documentary practices.

The reflexive style is marked by both an ironic allusion to form and stylistic flourishes that reflect the visions of the filmmaker(s) responsible. Marker's love of cats, admiration for Hitchcock, and belief in socialist principles guide all of his work, which results in films that stage a central argument while always reflecting the views and obsessions of the creator. Fuller acknowledged a love of video games which compelled him to use Halo characters to stage his argument, while his group members offer

commentary by voicing their on-screen avatars. Self, Ramirez, and Blakeslee used their own insecurities as college freshmen to develop a video critique of unscrupulous advertisers that exploit those insecurities for profit. By taking on the roles of students who depend on Tigerol to overcome their problems with girls, social interaction, and college sports, they offered a satirical critique of how students like themselves are too often taken in by commercials that promise more than their products are capable of delivering. In both videos the students, like Marker, were able to inject a personal style into their film without deviating from the central argument.

CONCLUSION

Although I didn't cover Nichols' four types of documentary in any of my class lectures, each of the student projects fell within at least one of the categories, while many contained traces of each style (the journalistic commentary of editorial films, spontaneous verite of observational, interviews of interactive, and self-reflexivity of the refractive style can all be detected in "How Extracurricular Activities Affect Clemson Students"). Many students chose to upload their videos to YouTube, where their projects have a much larger potential audience than would have been possible for a written essay. YouTube, Google Video, and various other tube sites are less regulated than traditional media outlets like mainstream documentary and news organizations, which may have larger budgets but are also restricted by corporate sponsorship and other factors related to the commercial potential of a program. This regulation is less prevalent on the internet, which gives students the opportunity to develop their own perspectives, whether they are addressing a regional issue that escapes the gaze of mainstream news and documentary outlets or stating a perspective that falls outside the limits of monoform media. Though not all of these videos will be revolutionary or even technically competent, the best of the lot can help to raise awareness of a particular subject and give students a sense that they have contributed to a real world debate.

Though not all my students found the multimedia project to be engaging or helpful, a majority commented that they preferred making videos to writing papers in the reflections on their work. Their films varied in technical quality depending on the

students' level of past experience with shooting and editing digital video, but each proposed a central argument that was supported by visual and academic sources. The assignment helped students to develop and sustain an argument through visual rhetoric, which they did using techniques and structures that have also been utilized by documentary filmmakers since the early years of the medium. A decade ago, due to the costly nature of film stock and other equipment, these techniques were mostly used by professional filmmakers working in the essayistic form. Yet given the development of digital cameras, as well as editing software like iMovie and Windows Movie Maker, students can now make technically proficient, cleverly edited video projects with a higher technical quality than ever before. By guiding these freshmen filmmakers through a process which includes the development of an outline, writing of a script, shooting of video, use of online clips, and editing of newly shot and found footage, instructors can build their students' skills with argumentative composition and ever more advanced forms of digital technology.

Although the English department at Clemson encourages the incorporation of a multimedia assignment in composition courses, the failure of the department (among others in most universities) to explain how those projects relate to the subject is problematic. Teaching students to design websites, Prezis, and other multimedia assignments has value, but no other form helps students develop skills in visual rhetoric quite like the essay film. By looking to documentary forms which have developed over the course of the past century, instructors can provide a structure to these assignments that is similar to argumentative writing, since both forms encourage students to defend a

perspective with the support of sources that are typically written by academics who share their view on a topic. Although the essay film will never replace the written paper, given that some complexities of thought and theoretical concepts are best expressed through words rather than images, the pedagogical value of this form should merit its use in first-year comp courses.

If non-fiction cinema is linked with composition, there are a number of potential benefits for many different groups. In addition to providing students with a more visually stimulating and collaborative method to develop ideas, the essay film offers them the opportunity to become amateur filmmakers with the potential to get their opinion on a particular issue recognized on a wider scale. The linkage of non-narrative cinema to a general education course, required for every college student to receive a Bachelor's Degree, will also enhance the importance of Media Services Centers to all universities. Since many students will need guidance on how to construct their videos, an increase of funding for Media Services is necessary, which will provide stable work for both documentary and narrative filmmakers. Whereas independent directors in the past have often struggled to fund their projects, employment at a Media Center gives ambitious filmmakers ready access to filming and editing equipment—they can help students by day and shoot their personal projects at night. Although the association of cinema with mass entertainment has tainted the medium's potential use as a pedagogical tool, the use of the cinematic essay in composition courses should provide a way for humanities instructors to engage their students and for independent filmmakers to secure a steady source of income. Students themselves will benefit most of all, since the assignment will

make them more aware of visual rhetoric and how it can be used to develop and express

their ideas on any number of pertinent issues.

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