

THE ART OF THE DOCUMENTARY TEACHER'S GUIDE

This teacher's guide to *The Art of the Documentary* will provide screening recommendations and discussion questions for each chapter in the book, to create a 10-week undergraduate course.

Ken Burns: Inhabiting History – Chapter 1

Screening recommendation: *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*

Discussion & essay questions:

1. Burns says, "I know that people get a lot of their history from me. So there's a responsibility for me, always, to do the very best I can each time out." How does Burns's directing style reflect his commitment to impartiality?
2. *Unforgivable Blackness* takes a look at race relations through the lens of one man's struggle.
3. Explain the history of PBS and its role in bringing historical documentaries to a mass audience. What would change if documentary filmmaking were a purely commercial venture?
4. Analyze a segment of one of Burns's films and show how Burns integrates interviews, archival material, music, and other sound elements like effects and voiceover. If one element were removed, how would this affect the storytelling?
5. By Burns's own account, his storytelling is often called "superficial," when compared with scholarly works, for example. Can Burns's films be called history? What are the advantages and disadvantages of treating history in film?
6. How does Jack Johnson's character develop over the course of the film? What do you know about him at the beginning? How has your impression of him changed by the end?

Errol Morris: Revealing Unexpected Realities – Chapter 2

Screening recommendation: *The Thin Blue Line*

Discussion & essay questions:

1. Compare the way Morris tells history with the way that Burns tells history (recreations vs. primary sources, for example). What are the advantages and disadvantages of each method?
2. Discuss the impact *The Thin Blue Line* had on filmic language. Now that his techniques have become so commonplace, does *The Thin Blue Line* have the same effectiveness it did when it was first released?

3. *The Thin Blue Line* presents several different interpretations of the same event. How does Morris privilege certain characters' points of view? In what way does Morris invite us to draw our own conclusions?
4. Morris's films portray a range of idiosyncratic characters. What do they have in common? What draws Morris to them?
5. How does the Interrotron work? What is the emotional effect of having the characters appear to look directly into the camera? Why might a filmmaker want to choose this type of interviewing? When might this type of interviewing be a disadvantage?
6. Morris's films are as highly structured as Ken Burns's, can be considered film essays, and he eschews shooting journalistic-type footage. What are the advantages and disadvantages of working in this way?

DA Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus: Capturing Character - Chapter 3

Screening recommendation: *The War Room*

Discussion & essay questions:

1. What are the stylistic differences between *The War Room* and *The Thin Blue Line*?
2. In chapter 2, Errol Morris says that "style does not guarantee truth," in his criticism of cinema vérité. Whose films are more truthful? Morris's, or those of Pennebaker/Hegedus? Is one style more truthful than another? How might both styles be used in both a transparent manner, and a manipulative manner?
3. In the sidebar, Haskell Wexler discusses the idea that all filmed reality is mediated, and that the presence of the filmmaker necessarily changes the events being filmed. Do you see this happening in *The War Room*? Are there events that would have occurred differently if not for the presence of the camera?
4. How has reality television been influenced by cinema vérité? How has the language of cinema vérité changed the way that we view reality?
5. What is the responsibility of the filmmaker to his or her subject? How might the opinions of the filmmaker influence filming?
6. In the introduction to the book, "Are Documentaries Art?" Hegedus and Pennebaker disagree over the answer to this question. Describe their different points of view, and how these differences might affect their collaboration. How can conflict be a useful element in the creative process?

Lauren Lazin: Making Television with a Conscience - Chapter 4

Screening recommendation: *Tupac: Resurrection*

Discussion & essay questions:

1. What is the MTV style? How has it been influenced by cinema vérité?
2. Lazin perceives a direct connection and relationship between her films and her audience, saying that “a lot of documentary filmmakers are motivated by outreach.” How does her sense of social responsibility play into Lazin’s filmmaking? What are the pros and cons of making films that intentionally present a thesis?
3. How does Lazin face the challenge of creating a documentary about someone who is no longer living? How does her approach in *Tupac: Resurrection* compare and contrast with Ken Burns’s approach in *Unforgivable Blackness*?
4. What is the language of reality television? How does the creation of reality television differ from the creation of traditional documentaries?
5. Lazin has a responsibility to the MTV networks (MTV, Logo, M2) as a studio executive. How might these professional obligations affect her storytelling decisions?

Kirsten Johnson: Searching the Frame, Exposing the Vision - Chapter 5

Screening suggestion: *Derrida*

Discussion & essay questions:

1. Johnson is drawn to films with overt political content. How do her political convictions influence her filmmaking practices?
2. Describe the filmmaking techniques and storytelling strategies in *Derrida*. How is *Derrida* a biography? How is it an essay?
3. About *Derrida*, Johnson says (in the section introduction) that “there was a lot of experimentation in that project, and it gave me a lot of confidence in the different ways you can film what is real.” Take a sequence from *Derrida* and describe the different ways Johnson shoots her subject. How do different shots evoke different meanings and emotional reactions? How does the juxtaposition of different types of shots develop the character of Jacques Derrida? Would this approach work for Jack Johnson? Tupac Shakur? Why or why not?
4. As a cinematographer, Johnson is always part of a team. How does her role differ from that of the director and the editor? How does Johnson use her position to influence the director?
5. Johnson has also worked as a co-director. How does Johnson view collaboration? What challenges does co-directing present?
6. Cinematography is still an area that is largely male dominated, and Johnson takes her responsibility as a leading female DP very seriously. How does her commitment to mentoring women play out in her decisions and choices?

Buddy Squires: Seeing Intelligently – Chapter 6

Screening suggestion: *After Innocence*

Discussion & essay questions:

1. Cunningham says, “What separates passable camera work from Squires’s artful cinematography is the careful observation and understanding he uses when approaching the search for a ‘telling image.’” What are some “telling images” in *After Innocence*? Choose a sequence in *After Innocence* and show how the cinematography tells the story.
2. Squires stresses the importance of adapting shooting styles and techniques to fit the story being told. How does *After Innocence* differ from *Unforgivable Blackness* (also shot by Squires)? Why has Squires made these choices?
3. Squires describes a sequence in *After Innocence* set over a dinner table, and his desire to capture the “energy and motion between the two” people in the scene. Analyze the way that this scene is shot and explain why Squires made the choices that he did. He also describes the importance of sound in this sequence. How does sound act as connective tissue in the scene? How does the editing of the scene work with Squires’s cinematography?
4. Explain the primary differences between lighting for video and lighting for film. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each format?
5. Squires describes the differences in shooting interviews several very different films. Select a historical figure, and, using the criteria that Squires discusses throughout the interview, create a shooting strategy (lighting, camera positioning), as well as a list of character and story “filters” like the kind Squires discusses in the introduction.

Albert Maysles: Being Present and Experiencing – Chapter 7

Screening suggestion: *Grey Gardens*

Discussion & essay questions:

1. What is “direct cinema”? Why is *Grey Gardens* an example of direct cinema?
2. Maysles says that “love and respect you give to the people and events that you’re filming” is the bridge between subjectivity and objectivity. Yet *Grey Gardens* has been accused of being exploitative. Maysles clearly disagrees. Where is the line between depiction and exploitation? Does *Grey Gardens* cross that line? Why or why not?

3. What is the story of *Grey Gardens*? Do Big Edie and Little Edie have character arcs in the traditional sense? How does the depiction of character differ from that found in *Tupac: Resurrection*?
4. As Maysles puts it, “the films that are called political or social issue films are advocacy films. And once you begin to advocate, then you’re taking sides.” Both *The Thin Blue Line* and *After Innocence* are advocating clear issues with political ramifications. Maysles would call this “propaganda.” Is this the case? How might a filmmaker avoid propaganda while advocating?
5. What responsibilities does a documentary filmmaker have towards journalistic truth? At what point does storytelling overwhelm straight reporting? Do the aesthetics of direct cinema effectively circumvent this potential problem? Why or why not?

Geof Bartz: Crafting Cinematic Television – Chapter 8

Screening suggestion: *Dwarfs: Not a Fairy Tale* and *Living Dolls*

Discussion & essay questions:

1. Bartz likens editing a documentary to screenwriting. What are the principles of narrative storytelling? How do these principles apply to documentary storytelling?
2. How has Bartz been influenced by direct cinema/cinema vérité? How has he moved beyond? Why does Bartz see limitations in direct cinema as traditionally practiced? What vérité techniques do you see in *Dwarfs: Not a Fairy Tale* and *Living Dolls*? What departures do you find?
3. Bartz says that “editing is all about manipulations.” How do *Dwarfs* and *Living Dolls* manipulate the audience? Do you find yourself resisting being manipulated? Does it work? Why or why not?
4. What is exposition? How does Bartz deliver exposition in *Dwarfs* and *Living Dolls*? How would these films be affected without use of exposition?
5. Bartz feels that the fast cutting style developed primarily by MTV has had a negative effect on storytelling. Compare *Dwarfs* and *Living Dolls* with *Tupac*. What are the stylistic differences between these films and Lazin’s film? Do you agree with Bartz? Why are longer takes dramatically effective?

Paula Heredia: Finding Structure, Inventing Form – Chapter 9

Screening suggestion: *Unzipped*

Discussion & essay questions:

1. *Unzipped* brings together disparate film formats. Analyze a sequence in the film, describe the different sources Heredia is cutting together, and discuss the way that Heredia's cuts draw out the meaning and aesthetics of the different types of footage.
2. Cunningham writes about tension and style. What responsibilities does the editor have towards the raw footage? What kinds of questions does the editor ask? How do these questions differ from the questions that a cinematographer would ask?
3. Editors must find a careful balance between objectivity and involvement, as Heredia found while cutting *In Memoriam: New York City 9/11/01*. What are the advantages and disadvantages of objectivity and involvement? Is one more important than the other? Why or why not?
4. Heredia calls the films she has made about subjects who are still living "portraits." Both *Tupac: Resurrection* and *Unforgivable Blackness* deal with characters who are deceased. How would these films be different if the subjects were still alive? How would *Unzipped* be different if Isaac Mizrahi were not still alive?
5. The ability to understand people, to be perceptive of their character and emotional makeup, is an important tool in Heredia's editing arsenal. In *Unzipped*, how does Heredia use editing to reveal Mizrahi's character? How does she use editing techniques to give her own take on Mizrahi?

Larry Silk - Using the Mystery of What Comes Next - Chapter 10

Screening suggestion: *American Dream*

Discussion & essay questions:

1. Look at the Lou Ferrigno sequence from *Pumping Iron* and analyze how the editing tells this particular story. What cuts are made that develop the relationship between Ferrigno and his father? Describe the overall structure of the sequence, and discuss how it develops from beginning to end.
2. Silk's filmmaking has been strongly influenced by his politics. Where do you see this in *American Dream*? How might an editor with opposing politics have approached the film differently?
3. When *Sit In* was produced, as Silk puts it, it "was the heyday of television trying to serve the public interest." By presenting graphic images of violence (such as are pictured) television played a role in ending segregation. In *The Thin Blue Line*, Morris's storytelling led to a reversal of Randall Harris's conviction. If a documentary film is successful in changing history, does it continue to have a life apart from being an historical artifact? How does "knowing the ending" affect the viewing of a documentary?

4. Regarding the characters in *American Dream*, Cunningham asks Silk, "How did determining those personality dynamics allow you to develop dramatic conflict in the film? What personality dynamics are at play? Choose a sequence from where character differences determine conflict and scene rhythm and structure, and demonstrate how it works, and how the story within the sequence is developed through the scene progression.
5. At the end of the interview, Cunningham responds to the impact of *Plan B* by saying "So it's the story of a *person*, it's not the story of an issue. It's the story of a real person, and it's satisfying." All of the films selected for screening to accompany this guide fit those criteria. Which film accomplished this most successfully for you? Which film was least successful? Why?