



The Rough Draft of History: Film and Video Documentary (ASEM)

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My ASEM presents an historical study of documentary film and video, from the earliest films we now place in the documentary tradition to several contemporary examples. In addition to several longer and more formal writing assignments, I require weekly screening reports on the films and accompanying reading assignments that are 2-3 double-spaced pages in length. These are written in response to specific questions with which I conclude my introductory lectures and I also post them on Canvas each week. The purpose of the screening reports in general is to promote student engagement with the course material and to prepare students to be more active and thoughtful participants in class discussion.

The assignment I've chosen to analyze is based on material I taught the final week of class. Here is the assignment:

The film for this week is *The Hunting Ground* (Dick, USA, 2015). When you watch the film and subsequently write about it in your screening reports, here are some things to think about:

- What is this film about? What is its purpose or argument and what are the rhetorical strategies and/or techniques used to make its argument?
- What is Emily Yoffe's critique of the film? Do you think it's valid? How do the filmmakers and Crowdus respond to Yoffe's (and similar) critique?¹

¹ The articles referenced are:

Crowdus, Gary. "Transforming Trauma into Political Activism: An Interview with Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering." *Cineaste* (Summer 2015): 43-49.

Yoffe, Emily. "The Hunting Ground: The failures of a new documentary about rape on college campuses."

In addition to the general goals of the screening report assignments described above, I was hoping that students would be able to apply the analytical skills we had been developing all quarter to this specific film, that they would be able to identify the specific reasons one writer was critical of the film and the ways in which the filmmakers and a more sympathetic interviewer responded to this critique, and most importantly, that they would be able to come to some conclusions about the film based on these readings and their own experience of it.

I received a full variety of responses to this assignment, ranging from those who addressed all aspects of the prompt (and even went beyond it) to those who ignored certain facets of it (not discussing specific techniques the film uses to make its arguments, not fully addressing the readings, or even not addressing them at all). I should mention at the outset that the subject of the film is sexual assault on college campuses, a topic that affected most of the students in the class quite emotionally. For example, one (male) student wrote,

This film was without a doubt the most difficult film to watch all quarter. Of course I was aware of the problem of campus sexual assault before watching this film but *The Hunting Ground* added even more gravity to this topic. I think there are very few people on a college campus today who haven't been affected by this in one way or another. I have not been affected directly but I know people who have been on both sides of the system. I know people who feel that they were wronged by the system both as an accuser and as an accused. The film is not perfect but it absolutely serves to call attention to one of the most frightening problems we face as college students.

Another (female) student began her essay,

Within the first 5 minutes of *The Hunting Ground*, I was surprised to see my university on the screen. I had heard of DU being a part of this film, but seeing the Ritchie Center, Sturm, and the sports complex up on that screen hit me hard. I have loved coming to this school; I consider it one of the best decisions I have made, but to see my school included in a film about campus rape is eye opening. It brings the problem that much closer to home. In fact, it makes me that much more furious. To know that an institution that I have benefited so much from is failing other female students is heartbreaking to me.

http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2015/02/the_hunting_ground_a_campus_rape_documentary_that_fails_to_provide_a_full.html

In general, I feel that this high level of involvement in the subject matter aided students' ability to do this assignment. Because I anticipated these kinds of reactions to the film (and those of students even more directly affected by its content), I permitted students to watch the film on their own on CourseMedia instead of coming to the in-class screening.

While most students were able to identify the overall purpose and argument of the film, the better essays were more specific, for example,

The Hunting Ground exposes the issue of sexual assault on college campuses but it is also about how the administration and other officials at and around the university mishandle the reporting of rape. This film demonstrates that the physical and mental safety of students on campus is not a priority because they want to protect their reputation and continue to bring in money from various programs, such as fraternities and sports.

Similarly, the better papers identified specific strategies and techniques used by the film to make its arguments. Several students mentioned the opening of the film, as in this example:

The Hunting Ground opens with a sequence of young women's reactions upon learning they were accepted into their dream college. Although joyful content, I couldn't help but feel sad as I knew the story of the film was about sexual assault. How many of these young women will be assaulted during the college career they were so thrilled about starting? I felt the purpose of this opening was to evoke those exact emotions from the audience.

Others mentioned the narrative structure of the film (following two victim/survivors who become advocates), the use of interviews, written statistics, re-enactments, TV news clips, university promotional videos, and music. The weaker papers focused solely on the subject matter of the film without attention to the material it uses or its rhetoric.

Because most of the students were deeply affected by the film, the Yoffe article evoked much anger. Several of the students thought her insensitive to and belittling of the victims of sexual assault. The best papers, however, were able to go beyond this anger to accurately summarize the writer's specific critique, for example,

Emily Yoffe's critique of the film is that it does not fairly represent both sides of the story and that labeling the problem of sexual assault as an epidemic has led to an overreaction to try and correct the situation. In addition, she critiques the fact that there is no universal definition of sexual assault across college campuses and believes that it is problematic. She also states that it infringes on the rights of men who are falsely accused and then

punished, saying that they are refused an education by kicking them out of school. She believes that the statistics presented in the film are misrepresented and the issue is not in fact an epidemic. She also defends the punishments of fines and writing papers presented in the film as being acceptable of fitting a crime that includes pressure for contact such as kissing.

This writer then describes how Crowds and the filmmakers respond to this critique, weighing the various arguments and coming to her own conclusions. Weaker papers were very vague about the nature of Yoffe's critique, did not discuss the response of the filmmakers, and/or did not state any opinions about whether they considered any aspects of Yoffe's critique to be valid.

Additionally, however, the best papers went beyond the questions I posed to connect the film, the readings, and the exercise of evaluating them to some of the larger issues raised by the course, such as the (constructed) nature of documentary representation. After describing Yoffe's critique, for example, one student wrote,

I understand that point of view after taking a class that discusses how documentary can create a subjective truth and how Yoffe utilized legitimate research and statistics to prove her counterpoint to the argument of the film. Thus I believe it is a valid and interesting critique but I still stand on the side of the documentary perhaps due to how powerful the individual testimonies are and the fact that I personally believe no rape is acceptable.

Another concluded,

Given the amount of extensive citations and discussions with a vast amount of people, I find myself in more support of the argument presented in the film rather than suspicious of it. However, it is still important to remember that documentaries are a construction of the truth, something made apparent by Emily Yoffe's argument.

These essays, I believe, are engaging in best kind of intellectual work and writing: the ability to weigh contrasting opinions and evidence and come to one's own conclusions, and the ability to draw from the recognition of documentary's constructed nature a response other than cynicism. Yes, I recognize, these essays seem to say, that no documentary can fully capture the messy complexity of reality, but we can still make judgments about a nonfiction film's relative merits and act upon those judgments.

In conclusion, I'm happy that I showed *The Hunting Ground* and accompanied it with readings that offered both support and critique for the film. I realized I was taking a risk with this

subject matter, but the overwhelmingly favorable response from students made me glad that I took that risk. As far as this particular writing assignment goes, I definitely would make one small adjustment: for the second series of questions I would reverse the order so as to ask the students about the nature of Yoffe's critique, then about the response of the filmmakers and Crowdus to Yoffe's critique, and then ask them to evaluate whether they thought Yoffe's critique had any validity. In other words, if I want them to weigh the different arguments and state their own opinions I shouldn't bury the part of the question that asks them to do so. This also would have the advantage of asking the students to conclude their essays in their own voices rather than by summarizing others' responses. Additionally, since I was so pleased with the responses of those students who made connections between this assignment and some of the larger issues raised by the course I might explicitly ask all the students to make those connections, especially if I teach this film again at the end of the quarter.

