

PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF FILM-VIDEO AND MEDIA STUDIES

FILM AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Using a synthesis of filmmaking and writing, this thesis will address the current state of media literacy, specifically in relation to novice filmmaking in non-film/video courses. There has been a rapid growth of film projects assigned to students in all academic disciplines at major research universities across the country and a growing dedication toward providing students with user-friendly film equipment. An explosion of new media is hitting the internet in response. As a result of these changes, it is extremely important to consider the manner in which students are going about their work and the implications of increased access to visual communication. If major research universities are truly dedicated toward improving student literacy, they need to broaden their definition of media literacy to include proficiency in the creation of time-based media.

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VIEW THE DOCUMENTARY

This thesis synthesizes visual and written communication. The written component that follows is influenced and dependent upon the documentary, *Film as a Second Language*. Please watch the documentary before proceeding.

[-THE LINK TO THE DOCUMENTARY-](#)

INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOX IN MEDIA LITERACY

A multitude of factors contributes to the growth of film making in higher education. Editing software is cheaper; film equipment is more accessible; and the internet fosters a distribution outlet for the masses. Teachers see the opportunity to meet their students “where they are” by bringing this user-friendly technology into the classroom and the term media literacy has become a buzzword in education theory.

Yet, with this evolution of technology and thought, people are handling the concept of media literacy differently than they handle the concept of traditional literacy. For example, students in foreign language class, English class and science class can get A’s on their film projects even if all they do is stand in front of a camera and read a script. Good grades on films in these classes do not represent their ability to communicate effectively. If students handed in a written essay with no concept of effective communication, they would see that reflected negatively in their grade or they would be recommended for special assistance to help them become better writers. Conversely, in film production, the justification for low quality work is that non-film students simply cannot make a decent movie. This philosophy contradicts the goal of progressing toward a more literate student body.

It is the ultimate paradox in media literacy education when teachers expect students to make poor media. With this mindset, educators risk raising a generation of media *illiterate* people which has large implications for the future of communication.

FILM AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: THE DOCUMENTARY

As a film student, studying the craft of building a visual message, I am nervous about this progression of student communication. I'm not discouraged by the use of film in the classroom. In fact, I recognize the empowerment that this technology will offer students. However, if educators look past the difference between using the technology and teaching communication students will never fully grasp everything that a movie can accomplish.

Movies combine familiar concepts and foreign conventions to create a complex language. They build upon traditional foundations of structuring written communication while bringing in audio and visual communication to move through time and establish imagined spaces. Educators must provide all their students opportunities to learn and practice this complex language to not only embrace an alternative form of expression, but also to progress the trend towards the most relevant form of communication for modern generations.

In an attempt to communicate the importance of this message, I created a documentary titled *Film as a Second Language*. The film is both a celebration of visual communication and a declaration for the importance of teaching it. In this paper, I could attempt to describe the concepts in the film, but the use of special editing techniques and shooting styles make it nearly impossible to explain the message as effectively as the documentary already does. *Film as a Second Language* must be seen to be understood.

Yet, this paper will do something that the film will not do. In the sections that follow, I will describe the process of creating the documentary. This illumination of process will

demonstrate that filmmaking is equally as work intensive as writing as it builds upon the established foundations of effective communication with the unique aspects of the medium. I hope to demonstrate that filmmaking requires knowing much more than the location of the record button on the camera. If educators encourage the spread of knowledge in film production, filmmaking can be an important tool in communication for everybody.

THE NON-LINEAR PROCESS

In general, the project workflow in Appendix A is accurate to the order in which a documentary maker must go about constructing a message, but the process of making this documentary was not linear as that outline may make it seem. Appendixes B through D reflect the recursive nature of my idea progression. I was constantly going back to the beginning and reevaluating where the project was going. My multiple treatments reflect the subtle evolution of thought and the improvements I made in explanations of the project's thesis. The neat delineations on the project workflow outline became non-linear as my editing, assembling and shooting stages merged. I needed to fill holes in my argument with new interviews and cover empty space on the screen with relevant b-roll. The remainder of this paper will discuss major revisions on the documentary in the areas of style, audience recognition and focus.

Struggling with Style

As my idea summary states in Appendix B, before I did any research or conducted any interviews, I had a vision for how my documentary would look. The style I was interested in was an unobtrusive observational style. I wanted to document students struggling with video projects to show their progression from an initial idea to a finished product. Interviews would not be necessary in this style because the repetition of their problems across multiple observations would be enough to reinforce my message. I knew that if I was able to show

consistent struggles with film projects that I could convince an audience, even one that knew nothing about film production, that something was missing in these projects.

From experience on film shoots with first-time filmmakers, I observed that there was a wealth of information that I could have mined from their shoots. Students who have never made a film before tend to have similar struggles bringing their ideas to life in group video projects:

- They try to get all information for a scene in one take.
- They shoot their entire movie in the order that they wrote it.
- They can't conceptualize shot composition beyond fitting everything into the frame.
- They have little to no concern for audio lighting, or set design.

When these first-time student filmmakers figure out that they can't get the desired effect that they have seen in Hollywood movies, frustration accelerates to the point where eventually the main goal becomes just finishing the project. Students know they can get away with making lousy video projects because their teachers do not really know how to grade them for quality anyway.

Documenting all of these blunders in student video would have been a perfect way to shoot my film, but as I have learned with this piece, there is never only one way to deliver that message. Limiting factors forced me to consider shooting this documentary in a different style. Through research, failed attempts and meetings with my advisor, Barbara Bird, I learned about shooting an observational documentary, the difficulties involved with that process and why I needed to consider changing to a different style.

One major problem with using this style dealt with finding subjects. At Penn State there are thousands of students working on video projects, but finding students that were compliant to

letting me video tape them was still a struggle. The students who do not know how to approach their film productions would prefer not to have me, a film student, standing over their shoulder watching and analyzing. I could have possibly found students who were willing to let me document them if I had more time in my schedule.

If I could have dedicated more time to a search for compliant students, I could have accomplished something similar to the documentary *Spellbound* (Blitz, 2002). This documentary was able to carefully select interesting subjects to maximize entertainment with the potentially boring topic of spelling bee preparation. While it is true that students shooting a video are more visually interesting than students preparing for a spelling bee are, I still risked making a boring documentary if I did not take the time to find interesting subjects and I did not have the time to take that risk.

Also, as I learned by watching a documentary such as *Harlan County* (Kopple, 1976), shooting an observational documentary takes a lot of time. All observational documentaries have to gather as much information as possible in the shooting stage in order to later edit in an effective way an accurate representation of reality. Barbara Kopple did not shoot any interviews, but her documentary is driven by conversations that happen between characters. We learn about their collective energy through the way they communicate and handle the situation they are in. This documentary was shot over the course of several years and even in the film's conclusion, a title card explains that more could have been documented. I did not have years to shoot my documentary and because of other obligations, I did not have the ability to dedicate all hours of the day to filming students at work on their projects.

Michael Moore's documentary, *Rodger & Me* (1989) also informed my shooting style decisions. I could have taken a similar approach to Moore with overt bias and narration, but I

wanted to avoid making too much of a presence on this documentary. I avoided voiceover because I wanted to stress the universality of the problem, rather than risk sounding like a complaining film student. I was certain that the images would stand on their own.

Still, even with this allegiance to staying absent, my final interview compromised that contract as I stepped in front of the camera. That this was my last interview reflects the length of time I spent on this project struggling with style. As documentary filmmakers, we make decisions in style to guide us in shooting and editing. Not having a clear sense of my style negatively affected every aspect of the project and left my audience confused despite any changes I made.

Addressing an Audience of Outsiders

Since I anticipated a lot of viewership for this documentary from outside the film community, I had to be hyper-aware of how I addressed the material specific to film production. In order to be successful, this documentary had to make the foreign concepts of filmmaking familiar to everybody. The point of the documentary was that everyone should know these things. It was not the documentary's purpose to teach them, but it was important that the concepts were understandable.

Yet, even though my ideal audience was outside the film community, the first audience to see my documentary was a group of fifteen other people who were also making documentaries. They could not completely put themselves in an outsider's position, because they were filmmakers themselves, but they were able to help guide me in the right direction. They were able to tell me that if they did not know film language they probably would have been confused with some of the terminology that I was referencing in the documentary. Although, they were

seeing an extremely raw rough cut reflecting my first six months of work on the project, their feedback was extremely important toward helping me figure out how to connect to my audience.

In my second rough cut, two months later, I had addressed these concerns but uncovered a different problem. Eliminating the confusing film language left me with a bunch of outsiders as the main talkers in my documentary. None of them were talking directly about the topic that I needed them to talk about. The audience was left reeling for meaning as no interview was being very directive with what they thought the problem was or how the problem should be fixed. The only thing that this cut reflected was how confused everyone was with the incorporation of filmmaking into the classrooms. In a strictly observational documentary, this confusion may have sufficed to illuminate the troubles; however, in an interview driven documentary this was a huge problem.

The talking head interviews get a lot of power in my documentary since they are composed in a way to give the speaker authority. This means that even if the speakers have no idea what to do about film in the classroom, when I present them as a talking head interviews, suddenly, the images code them as some kind of authority. My audience gets confused when the authority doesn't even know how to deliver the point.

To solve this problem I needed to go to the one place that I had been reluctant to go to the entire time; I had to go talk to the experts. I had wanted student voices to drive the point forward even if they did not know what they were doing. They were the important voices, not the well-trained filmmaker who knew how to make films. It seemed as though including filmmakers would completely kill my original vision and I was reluctant to admit that this was exactly what needed to happen to clarify what I was trying to convince my audience.

Accepting Focus

The interviews of the experts talking about film production not only helped show my audience that there is a direction that film production education can head in, but also helped strengthen my focus. I could now eliminate a bunch of other teachers who were only half talking about how to incorporate video into their classroom which meant I could eliminate a point in the film that was pulling my focus apart.

My focus was being hurt by trying to incorporate all of the many barriers that exist in the incorporation of video into the classroom. A short documentary could not address all of these issues, so I had to pick the most important issue and make it stand on its own. With the expert interviews, I was able to do so. The result was a tight and concise message that demonstrated my point with little excess.

Short documentaries about important complex issues are always going to be incomplete to a certain extent. They are starting points for where further research can go. Specifically, my documentary is not going to teach how to fix video making in education, but it is going to effectively demonstrate that there is a problem. Now, my strategy will be to make sure the right people see and hear it.

CONCLUSION

The work involved making *Film as a Second Language* entertaining and informative was an intense process. It took me about nine months to make this eight-minute observation. Occasionally the production completely consumed my life, but as a film student, I intentionally put this workload on me. Students who are not film students will never be as dedicated to designing a visual message as I am and that's fine! I don't think that the way I made this documentary should be a model for students who just need to make video for a class project or

want to make their own movie to post on YouTube; however, I do think that students need to understand the basics of how to do what I do. Filmmaking is power. Filmmaking is communication.

THE NEXT STEP

Considering the layers of complexity in shifting communication norms, it is not surprising that teachers are handling video in an improper way. The problems are not the result of people not wanting to take filmmaking seriously, they are the result of misunderstandings and slow moving bureaucratic structures. In an interview I conducted with Mark Tucci, the director of Centre Learning Community, he said, “it’s a challenging time because kids have so much to learn.”

Filmmaking may seem like one more thing that students have to learn, but the truth is that filmmaking is actually a combination of many things they already know. They have art classes where they learn frame composition and basic art concepts. They have writing classes where they learn how to write a thesis and how to tell a story effectively. They know how to work the new camera and editing technology because it is user-friendly and they often are using similar technologies on their own time. Some lessons on bringing these skills together with some of the unique aspects that “time-based media” offer would allow the final piece in the puzzle for the ultimate convergence of knowledge. Teaching how to make better media is an opportunity to teach students to apply and challenge their skills with projects relevant to the way they understand the world.

Film as a Second Language takes a small step toward improving student literacy, but it will take compliance and understanding from educators to see this positively affect media literacy. It’s not impossible. Schools have already begun to adopt the technology and some of

them have even adopted classes to teach film concepts. The way that we approach these courses should be reflective of their importance. Just as we would not call a course in writing *Word Processing 101*, filmmaking classes should not be afterthoughts labeled as audio/visual classes. They should be labeled as courses to teach communication. Teachers should teach their students to experiment with medium specific conventions. Lessons in the tools of visual communication such as juxtaposition, focal length alteration, montage, and audio manipulation are as important as lessons in a structuring a paragraph, writing a thesis or concluding a paragraph.

I made this film and wrote this paper because as a film student who also works as a writing tutor, I know that students can communicate great ideas in their papers. Their films should be no different. I want to see students get excited about communicating and I think film offers an opportunity for that to happen on a wide scale and in an extremely effective, relevant and compelling way. Filmmaking is soon becoming the dominant communication and we cannot ignore the implications of being media illiterate anymore.

APPENDIX A: Documentary Project Workflow

IDEA

Brainstorm, journal, feedback

ORGANIZE

Treatment, to-do list, budget

RESEARCH

Watch, read, talk, pre-interviews

Set up interviews, find locations

ASSEMBLE ELEMENTS

Shoot Interviews

Gather b-roll

Gather archival material

Gather audio material

DOCUMENT ELEMENTS

Transcribe interviews

Log Footage

Do 'paper' edit

ROUGH ASSEMBLY EDIT

Begin 1st BIG rough cut

Get feedback

Do pick ups

FINE CUT EDIT

Refine rough cut

Get feedback

Prepare credits

Do color/sound correction

Get feedback

MASTER and OUTPUT PROJECT

Picture/Sound lock

Make master/safety master/DVD master and menus

MARKET PROJECT

Plan festival/distribution plan

APPENDIX B: Idea Summary

This thesis will address the current state of media literacy, specifically in relation to novice video making in non-film/video courses. There has been a rapid growth of video projects assigned to students in all academic disciplines at major research universities across the country. There has been a growing dedication and investment toward providing students with ample video making equipment and editing software and an explosion of new media hitting the Internet in response. As a result, it is extremely important to consider the manner in which students are going about their work. Should a major research university dedicate more time and resources toward media literacy? Should it be required by all freshmen to take an "introduction to media creation" course? I anticipate my research to follow three avenues of study: Education theory, social theory and technical history (the growing accessibility of video making). The presentation of this data will be driven by an observational analysis of multiple student groups in the process of completing video assignments. Ultimately, this research and observation will culminate in a video documentary, a very appropriate medium for the subject matter.

I hope to discover that a student's ability to communicate through video making is related to a student's ability to gain more educational benefits from an assignment. I hope that this work will shed light on the current issues of media literacy at Penn State. As an undergraduate student, I experience first-hand the effects of these media projects, but I fear that the top ranking policy makers in the university are becoming distant from a rapidly changing aspect of the academia. This documentary and research could potentially be used to form a better system for handing media creation courses at Penn State. I believe my voice is merited to be heard as I study Film & Video production and understand the current problems at the undergraduate level.

APPENDIX C: Documentary Treatment 1

Working Title: Editing Education

Director: Davey Rockwell

Working Hypothesis:

Since it is now so easy to be a participant in the media, students and educators need to understand the ways in which we produce media in order to prepare people to communicate in the 21st century.

Theme:

A plethora of accessible media outlets and cheap video making equipment doesn't necessarily offer a complete understanding of how to communicate effectively through the medium.

Intended Audience:

The nature of this subject matter will interest educators more than anyone. It is largely theory based and told mostly from the perspectives of educators, but there is potential for this material to be interesting to anyone because almost everyone can relate to being a media producer these days. As a result, I hope that this documentary is not only viewed by educators and administration, but also by filmmakers and students.

This documentary is foremost intended to meet the requirements for my Schreyer Honors Thesis, but will also see life beyond the honors college. I hope to have distribute the video to educators so that a discussion can open up on the best practices for video making in the classroom and submit the documentary to festivals to promote media literacy to a wider audience.

Structure:

This story will build from the current issues of media in the classroom and look toward the future potential of students and educators using digital media in beneficial ways. The current situation will be illustrated by interviewing educators and administrative officials. Observations of student projects will drive forward the narrative by offering tangible examples of the theory being discussed. I anticipate the talking head audio to both support the observations of student work and cause tension to arise between what the educators are declaring and what the students are actually doing. Finally, the solution of this situation and conclusion of this documentary may lie in teaching the elementary educators and preparing them to teach students at a very young age to understand the power of media as communication. For this final act in the film, I will focus on school programs that have completely embraced digital media.

Style:

Talking head interviews will explain digital media from many different perspectives, including student, professor, digital media helpers etc. Found footage of student projects and observation on student project production will add concrete examples that the talking head interviews will be

referring to. I hope this style helps keep the information entertaining and relevant as it will combining theory and practice.

Format: length and shooting format

This documentary will be around 15 minutes and will be shot on HD video, a length and format to guarantee the most potential for a festival life.

Point of View:

This story will come from the perspective of students of educators. I don't think either one of these sources can offer the complete story, but together these two will give all relevant information for illustrating the situation.

Timetable:

I will gather talking head interviews from relevant faculty at Penn State and at least two different public schools offering opportunities for students in video production. I will gather b-roll as needed during these interviews.

Throughout the time when I gather these talking heads, I will also be searching for students who are willing to let me observe their process. I would like to have at least two student groups to illustrate the different problems that students face and the ways they address the production process. I will also be asking students to sit down with their video projects and explain why they chose to do the project the way that they did and what they think they gained from it.

Editing will consume most of my time during the spring semester. I will still be gathering footage as needed, but mostly I will be editing the piece together.

Budget:

I have submitted a grant request for about \$160 for travel to different schools, a high capacity HD hard, a back-up hard drive and organizational supplies.

Documentary Treatment 2

Working Title: The Grammar of Aesthetics

Director: Davey Rockwell

Working Hypothesis: For many people, it is assumed that making a movie is as easy as watching one. In the classroom, this misconception causes serious problems when the teachers/administration see the importance and benefits of teaching media, but have little to no experience with the grammar of filmmaking.

Theme: The same way high school students or undergraduates learn how to write an essay, they should also be taught how to compose a video. Students unexpectedly end up working countless hours to try and edit a video project together with little to know direction.

Structure: The different sections of this documentary will be labeled with film making concepts (montage, mise en scene, 180 degree rule, frame composition and the match action edit.) In addition to each section addressing the concept mentioned in its title and its misuse, overuse or lack of, it will also address a specific aspect or concern in regards to video making, i.e. average time investment, video help services (Media Commons), the importance of media literacy, the future of video in the classroom, etc.

Style: Talking head interviews will form the majority of my documentary. I also plan to include my own voice and narration because of the somewhat self reflexive nature of the topic, a video being made about video making. I have gathered examples of student work from both YouTube and Penn State students, which I will include along with their commentary on the work and more importantly their teachers commentary on the work.

Format: length and shooting format

This documentary will be around 15-20 minutes and will be shot on HD video, a length and format to guarantee the most potential for a festival life.

Point of View:

I have an interesting perspective on the issue because I have made film in both film classes and non film classes. I have been taught by both film makers and high school shop teachers. In addition, I am interested in how the composition of film making (and writing) is taught. As a result, I would like to tell the story from my perspective because I anticipate that it will resonate with many people my age who have experienced similar issues.

Timetable:

I will gather talking head interviews from relevant faculty at Penn State and at least two different public schools offering opportunities for students in video production. I will gather b-roll as needed during these interviews.

Throughout the time when I gather these talking heads, I will also be searching for students who are willing to let me observe their process. I would like to have at least two student groups to illustrate the different problems that students face and the ways they address the production process. I will also be asking students to sit down with their video projects and explain why they chose to do the project the way that they did and what they think they gained from it.

Editing will consume most of my time during the spring semester. I will still be gathering footage as needed, but mostly I will be editing the piece together.

Budget:

I have submitted a grant request for about \$160 for travel to different schools, a high capacity SD card, a back-up hard drive and organizational supplies.

APPENDIX D: Production Plan

Title: *The Grammar of Aesthetics*

Production Team:

Director: Davey Rockwell

Camera: Kylie Nellis

Audio: Arielle Goft

Editor: Davey Rockwell

B-roll Actress: Arielle Goft

Equipment:

Camera: JVC HM100U

Mics: Lavalier

Lights: Kino DIVA

Drives: 1.5T WD Passport

Hypothesis and Synopsis:

For many people, it is assumed that making a movie is as easy as watching one. In the classroom, this misconception causes serious problems when the teachers/administration see the importance and benefits of teaching media, but have little to no experience with the grammar of filmmaking.

The same way high school students or undergraduates learn how to write an essay, they should also be taught how to compose a video. Students unexpectedly end up working countless hours to try and edit a video project together with little to know direction. My documentary will show the current situation, ponder ways to rectify the problem and consider possible future solutions for creating a better environment for media education, specifically the art of filmmaking.

To Do List

Research:

- Watch relevant documentaries and perform analyses
- Research a bit on the education of film making, the technical progress of cameras and editing software and the social situation the makes watching and creating film so powerful.
- Relevant media theory will also be important to consider how we view/create media and why knowing how it works is so important.

Archival footage:

- Rip videos from YouTube
- Obtain permission to use people's school projects in documentary.
- Digitize footage from the early days of cinema (*Before the Nickelodeon*)

Interviews:

- Ryan Wetzel, Digital/Media Commons
- Gail Boldt, College of Education
- Mark Tucci, Centre Learning Community
- Mitchell, student at CLC

- Heather Burt, Media Teacher HN High School
- Heather's students
- Students involved with video making on campus
- James Morgart, English 15 Instructor, Filmmaker
- Professor Hagopian, Film Historian
- Teachers in Foreign Language Program
- Photography Professor
- Student in College of Education

Calendar:

- Finish Interviews by the end of February
- Finish B-Roll gathering in first two weeks of March
- First Assembly Edit due February 10th
- Rough Cuts due throughout March
- Fine Cut due April 13th

Budget:

- I have submitted a grant request for about \$160 for travel to different schools, a high capacity SD card, a back-up hard drive and organizational supplies.

Filmography

Album (Barbara Bird, 2002) 30”

All American High (Keva Rosenfeld, 1987) 59”

Born into Brothels: Calcutta’s Red Light Kids (Zana Briski, Ross Kauffman, 2004)

The Bridge (Eric Steel, 2006) 94”

Commune (Jonathan Berman, 2005) 78”

The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara (Errol Morris, 2003) 107”

Grey Gardens (David and Albert Maysles, 1976) 94”

Handmaidens (Barbara Bird, 1995) 33”

Harlan County U.S.A. (Barbara Kopple, 1976) 103”

Man on Wire (James Marsh, 2008) 94”

Murderball (Henry Rubin and Dana Shapiro, 2005) 85”

No. 4 Street of Our Lady (Barbara Bird, Judy Maltz, Richie Sherman, 2009) 95”

Roger and Me (Michael Moore, 1989)

Team Red (Ann Alter, 2000) 14”

Spellbound (Jeffrey Blitz, 2002) 97”

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