Documentary Film Assignment:
“Truth, Knowledge, & Documentary Film”

Completed Project Due: December 8, 2015

In our class discussions, we will see how documentary film and epistemology jointly raise and address issues dealing with human knowledge, including such as issues as:

- Cultural and epistemological relativism
- The sources of knowledge
- Whether we ought to trust our senses, our memories, authorities
- Whether we as human beings should pursue truth and whether truth is to be valued
- Whether knowledge or certainty is possible
- The nature of self-deception
- The conflict between truth and wish-fulfillment

Film in fact provides us with another window into central epistemological problems and having to create your own film forces you to reflect on central epistemological issues such as how to convey truth, how to structure the search for truth, how to represent competing visions of the truth. For this course project, your goal is to work as a team to create a 10 – 15 minute documentary film exploring an interesting and relevant epistemological theme. Your final product will publicly exhibit and demonstrate your grasp of epistemological issues, your capacity to work together as a team to produce a scholarly product, and your basic understanding of documentary film techniques (learned largely via osmosis).

A documentary isn’t like a narrative form where you can carefully scrutinize every detail during the scripting process. When you film a documentary, most times there is a degree of uncertainty of how it will turn out because you never know what people will exactly say in an interview or what you will get on film. BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN YOU GO OFF AND START SHOOTING WITHOUT PREPARATION.

Just like a narrative film, you will need to tell a story. The story has to have:
- Drama/conflict/change
- A beginning/middle/end
- A hook that draws the audience in the first few minutes/seconds
- Exposition where the audience learns background information required to understand the story/subject
- The catalytic event/call to action where the audience plunges into the drama of the story
- Rising excitement as we draw closer to the conclusion
- A climax where we have all the information and the dramatic element is resolved
- Resolution where any loose ends are tied up

Although a documentary doesn’t always have a script (some do), it at least has a treatment. A treatment is a plan for how the film will work with enough flexibility to account for the uncertainty of working with reality. A treatment has:
- A purpose or objective
- A target audience
- A subject(s)
- A point of view about the subject(s)
- A story outline discussing the hook, exposition, catalytic moment, a climax and resolution
- A time outline estimating minutes spent on the above
- A list of who will be filmed/interviewed
- A list of events that will be filmed
- A list of potential open-ended questions for interviewees and the expected answers
The Assignment
Each group must create:

(1) A **2-page typed** treatment (double spaced, about 750 words). The treatment will be evaluated on:
- **Complete**: Are the significant questions on the form answered?
- **Comprehensive**: Is there enough detail for the reader to understand the project you are proposing?
- **Compelling**: Is the reader impressed with your preparation for the film? Does it seem doable?
- **Relevance**: Have you selected a topic relevant to the theme of “Truth, Knowledge, & Documentary Film”?

(2) A **10 - 15 minute** film clip uploaded to YouTube. You are responsible for insuring that I am provided with the appropriate link. Review YouTube’s Help Center for useful information on the process of uploading video.

In order to keep you on track and insure a quality project that is completed on time, please observe the following **deadlines**:

1. **October 6**: Submit to me a one page outline of your project that lists your group members and provides a detailed account of how your group plans to complete its project by the final deadline of December 8. When will you be meeting? Who will be responsible for what aspects of the projects? What deadlines will you observe? What research will you be conducting?
2. **October 29**: Submit to me an initial draft of your documentary film treatment.
3. **The week of November 9**: Meet with me to share some of your initial footage and discuss the progress of your project.
4. **December 8**: The final draft of your film treatment is due and your completed film should be uploaded to YouTube.
5. **December 10**: Complete and submit a peer-evaluation form.

Failure to meet these deadlines will result in points be subtracted from your final grade.

**Tips on writing a documentary treatment**
A treatment is your opportunity to convince a third party that your documentary is worth making. More than a proposal, the treatment includes a description of the film itself and in the end will help keep your project focused.

**In general**:

- The treatment should clearly state your idea, clarify your point of view, and convince the reader that you are organized, professional and imaginative.
- Make sure you have access to the people, places, and information necessary to complete the film **before** you propose it.
- Remember that in the beginning, a treatment is what you dream your film to be. In the end, it’s what you can deviate from when your material is actually in hand.
- Think in terms of reaching a meaningful audience, and why this audience will be interested in your film.
- Refrain from including all of the research you have on the subject at hand; focus on the story.

There is no one “right” way to write a treatment, but for our purposes here are some guidelines.

I. **Start with an Overview paragraph**. Be sure to include a working title, the proposed length of the film, and a brief review of the story. This is an important paragraph: make sure the reader can grasp the importance of your story in two sentences. Think “TV Guide” – how can you make your story clear and appealing in as few words as possible?

II. **Spend the next several paragraphs outlining how you expect your story to unfold**. Outline the story from beginning to end and include the following:

- Your editorial approach: What is your point of view? What is the story and how do you plan to tell it?
• Who are the characters and what do the viewers see them doing?
• Your visual approach: Help the reader visualize your film. What kind of style will help you tell your story?

III. Close the treatment with a brief summary of your background, and your own reasons for choosing the story. Make the reader understand why the story is important to you – and what you want your audience to take away from their experience viewing your film.

Some of the following questions may be addressed in your documentary film treatment:

1. Who is the audience for the film? Who will watch it?
2. Why will your audience want to watch your film?
3. What is the subject of the documentary? What is it about? Who is it about?
4. Is there a conflict in the story? What is it? OR Is there a change in the story? What is it?
5. What is the point of view you will be showing about the subject?
6. What is your hook? Why will someone continue watching your film after one minute?
7. What happens in the beginning of the film? What is the expositional information?
8. What happens in the middle of the film? How does the story build to a climax?
9. What happens in the end?
10. What new information can the audience take away after the end of the film?
11. How many minutes to you guess the beginning, middle and end will be on screen, each?
12. List the events/locations where you will film.
13. What will you film at each of the events/locations?
14. List the people or types of people you will interview?
15. List at least six open-ended questions for people on your list?

Your Documentary Film

Some Points to Consider, provided by Randal K. West

Dramatic Structure: Every story needs three things, a beginning, middle, and end. You must define where these points exist in your story. Does your story have a great hook that will involve the audience from the outset and hold them? Is it most effective when told chronologically or should it jump around in time? Will your story be narrated, will you write the narration, or will the subjects you interview tell the entire story in their own words? Will it be a combination? You must discover what is most dramatic and engaging about your story and tell it in a way that highlights those points. (Randal K. West)

An Emotional Center: Regardless of your choice of treatment or subject matter, almost every documentary needs an emotional center. The audience needs someone or a group of "someones" to care about. A message or idea is not enough. The characters in your documentary will carry your plotline as strongly as your storyline. Very few documentaries based solely on intellectualism succeed. Give your documentary some heart and some emotion. Give us someone to root for.

Point of View: Whose story is it really? You can choose to not have a "voice" in your documentary and make it "news" style and as impartial as possible, or you can chose the individual or group that is most affected by your story and let it be their story. This doesn't mean you can't explore both sides of an issue; it just means that you are going to put a real face on one side of the issue and allow them to personalize the story. A compelling documentary should not only be factually correct, but it should be engaging and emotionally compelling. You can also personalize both sides of a story. We have said for years in the advertising business, "don't just sell the steak, sell the sizzle." Find the sizzle in your story, because that is what is going to eventually get you distribution, and remember that even a personal story should have some universal appeal.

Finding your Vision: Every documentary should begin as a blank sheet of paper or a canvas to paint upon. What colors you use and what format should come from a combination of you as an artist and the content of your story. Content should always dictate form, but you are in this equation as well and it will be your passion that drives this
project. Five filmmakers could attempt the same topic for a documentary and each would most likely create a piece that only resembles the others by subject matter and that is as it should be. Find what excites you, then find your own means to express it.

**Some links about creating your own documentary film:**

- [How to Make a Documentary Film](#) (3 parts)
- How to Make a Documentary
- Make Your Own Documentary Film
- You Don't Have to Shoot From Scratch
- How to Create a Good Documentary Film
- How to Make a Documentary Film
- Documentary Ideas
- How to write a documentary treatment or proposal
- How to write a film or TV documentary treatment or proposal
- How to write a documentary script
- Writing a doco treatment that sells
- Videography Essentials