



Filming the Past

Spring 2014
Prof. Hicks

Thurs 5-
7:40, E1
Rm 121

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Course Description:

How does history become known, and how do certain accounts become popularized as the truth or "common knowledge?" What role do visual media, particularly films and documentaries, play in the process of creating and understanding our shared past? How can film be a force for uncovering and popularizing "hidden" histories that upset our assumptions about the past?

This course takes a novel approach to less-well-known chapters in history, by looking at how films and documentaries can be tools for disseminating historical knowledge and how they can also be activist interventions in how we understand the past and its relationship to the society we live in today. Throughout the course, we will watch films and documentaries that try to answer the questions posed above, and we will read historical accounts of the events they try to convey. Students will also learn how to write a short history from primary documents and then transfer it into an audio or a visual medium. This will result in 2 projects: a short podcast and a short documentary film on a historical topic. During the course, you will be asked to engage with your classmates and the wider public in a variety of web media, as part of the process of participating in public discourses on history and media.

Grade breakdown:

Class participation and in class exercises: 20%

Podcast/audio documentary exercise: 10%

Midterm: 20%

Script/Storyboard assignment: 10%

Final Project (short film or audio documentary): 20% (passed in on last day of semester—no final exam during exam period)

Academic Honesty:

Read the Student handbook section on Academic Honesty and be sure you understand it. Cheating, plagiarism, or any other kind of academic dishonesty is grounds for a failing grade in the course. All work is expected to be your own unless you have explicitly been assigned to collaborate with others.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Policy Statement:

Reasonable accommodations will be made for students with documented disabilities. In order to receive accommodations, students must obtain a letter of accommodation from the Center for Disability Resources. The

Center for Disability Resources (CDR) is located in 3424 S. State St., room 1C3-2 (on the first floor), telephone: [312.567.5744](tel:312.567.5744) or disabilities@iit.edu.

Course materials and tools:

The readings for this course will be provided on Blackboard. There will however be additional materials you will be responsible for procuring. These include films (you can rent, purchase, or in some cases ILL these), software packages and apps, and in some cases other materials. These will be necessary to fulfill the course requirements: please approach these in the same fashion you would approach required readings. The budget for these items will be less than \$60. Please do the readings and assignments listed on the syllabus for the day they are listed—**in other words, do the readings listed *before* coming to class that day.**

For this course you will need to have the use of an iPad or smartphone, a set of earbuds or earphones, and a relatively recent computer that can stream and edit audio and video content. Audio recorders and videocameras will be available for your use throughout the term, but you will need to download software on your computer to edit your audio and video projects. Audacity (free) and Garageband (comes with most Macs) are two useful editing packages. VLC is a good, free media player.

In addition, since this is a course that is fundamentally about public discourse, and bringing academic insights into the realm of public knowledge by using new media, there will be an emphasis on interacting with your classmates, and the wider public, in online spaces. You will be asked to discuss films and share audio and video projects in class and online. To that end, you will each need to have a Twitter account and a YouTube account that you feel comfortable sharing with your classmates. (For some people this may mean signing up for a different Twitter or YouTube account for class, rather than using your existing personal accounts.)

You will also be asked to work in groups throughout the term—in part due to the limited availability of equipment, and in part due to the fact that the collaborative nature of this course will be an essential part of the learning process. This is a course that is as much about the transmission and popularization of academic insight as it is about traditional modes of academic learning and we will be adjusting our classroom activities accordingly. During the second half of the course, you will have several “lab” periods in class during which you will work on your own short documentary films.

Class schedule:

Jan 16

Class 1: How is documentary film useful to the study of history?

In class: Introduction, syllabus, discussion, film viewing (*Sex in a Cold Climate*).

Jan 23

Class 2: The Medium and the Message

Before class: Watch *Philomena* (in theaters now) OR *The Magdalene Sisters* (online) and come to class ready to compare one of these fictional accounts to *Sex in a Cold Climate*. (If you can, I suggest going to see *Philomena*--now playing at the Landmark and other theaters--even though it's slightly less convenient, because it has gotten good reviews.) Also do the readings on Blackboard for the Magdalene Laundries and read Chapter 1: “The Medium is the Message” from Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*.

In class: Discuss storytelling techniques, use of documents, historiography, oral history. In second half of class we will: set up Twitter and YouTube accounts; follow classmates; tweet one insight about Magdalene Laundries or material from class; read classmates’ tweets at #filmpast; follow documentary feeds and look for/share resources from the field of documentary studies. Resource guide will be handed out.

Jan 30

Class 3: Memories of Empire: Film as a medium for social consciousness

Before class: Watch the film *Caché* (dir. Michael Haneke)—rent online individually, or group viewing. AFTER watching the film, read the selections on Blackboard in folder marked “Caché/DBB”—the articles contain “spoilers.”

In class: Watch *Drowned By Bullets*. Discuss and compare the films—one is a fiction film, one is a nonfiction documentary. How does each portray, interact with, and produce a “history”? What does each one teach us? Class exercise: Search the *Times* of London. What does this tell us about how much people knew at the time about the Algerian war for independence, generally? And about this incident in particular? What can this teach us about our own context and historical perspective? What tensions arise between trying to tell a dispassionate, unbiased (hi)story, and using film to arouse emotions and thereby foster interest and engagement?

Feb 6

Class 4: Listening and Doing: Learning the basics from audio documentaries and storytelling

Before Class: Listen to three “This American Life” radio shows (tal.org), three “Moth” podcasts (themoth.org), and three “99% Invisible” podcasts (99percentinvisible.org). (*Total time to listen to these will be about 4 hours.*) Think about how these shows 1) choose their topics, 2) construct their narratives (what similarities do you see in all Moth stories? Or all TAL episodes?), 3) use audio production techniques to make their points more compelling. Read second chapter (Hot and Cold Media) from Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*.

In class: Revisit McLuhan’s ideas. Discuss copyright, rights-free music, audio production. Get to know the available audio recording equipment by playing with provided Roland R-O5s by practicing interviewing. Come up with an idea/topic you would like to explore in a short audio documentary that you will make, either alone or in small groups. Rudimentary storyboarding exercise. Goal is to leave class with a draft of podcast. (For this exercise, go with what you know, not a topic that requires extensive research.)

Feb 13

Class 5: Memories of Race, Empire, Civil Rights

Before class: Read selections in Baldwin folder (Baldwin, Moody, Angelo, others) and listen to BBC Civil Rights podcasts linked in folder.

In class: Watch *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*. Discuss articles. Timeline of Civil Rights Movement. How does this week’s unit show us a more complex narrative of the Civil Rights Movement than is often popularized? How can film be a tool for showing the complexities of history, rather than flattening it out? What can this documentary tell us about narrative, using interviews, and filmmaking technique?

Feb 20

Class 6: Taking stock of what we’ve learned

Before class: Complete your audio documentary. Upload it to YouTube. Put the link to it in a comment on the class blog (mariehicks.net/blog), with a short description of your topic, why you chose it, and your argument.

In class: Listening lab, discussion, brief midterm review. Preview of final project assignment. Watch *The Punk Singer* if available.

Feb 27

Class 7: Bringing Documents into the Mix

Before class: Perform searches in the *Times* of London, the *IIT News* archives, or other full-text newspaper sources available from Galvin or the Chicago Public Library. Come in with at least 5 news articles and 2 opinion pieces on your topic. Also search for one scholarly article on your topic in JSTOR (or other similar databases of scholarly articles available through Galvin—no Googling, please) and bring that article in with you to class.

In class: Watch “A Story for the Modlins.” Exercise in revising podcast to be visual documentary (hypothetical). Pointers on using documents in a visual medium. Copyright issues of mixing, mashing, and photographic artwork. Crediting materials. Storyboarding of narrative, sound, and images (preliminary).

March 6

Class 8: MIDTERM EXAM

March 13

Class 9: Final Project Topics

Before class: In class we will discuss your final documentary project and potential topics, sources, and techniques. Come to class having thought about what you are passionate about understanding—in particular, what topics or issues are you curious to find the historical roots of?

In class: Discuss above. Brainstorm sources and techniques. Get started on research: instruction from library staff.

March 27

Class 10: Understanding the positive and negative connotations of “revisionist” history

Before class: Take at least 1-2 hours to start research on your project. Visit the library. In addition, watch *12 years a Slave* (available to buy or rent online, check www.canistream.it for sources) and read the first chapter of the book on which it is based, available at: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/northup.html>

In class: Discussion of “revisionist” history and the politics of historical research and historical narrative. Viewing of *Mister Death*. Regroup to finish discussion on revisionism and discuss techniques for subtlety in storytelling.

April 3

Class 11: Class will not meet today. Instead, take this time to work with your group on your project. Come to class with storyboarded project and some primary sources.

April 10

Class 12: Creating your history, part 1

Before class: Work with your group on your project. Come to class with storyboarded project and some primary sources. Reading TBA. Bring headphones, laptops, etc. to class.

In class: Lab, work in class with documents and recording equipment.

April 17

Class 13: Creating your history, part 2

Before class: In your groups, choose a documentary to watch and compare/contrast it with the documentaries we have studied so far, in terms of theme, content, and technique. Collaboratively write a 5 page paper and prepare a 10 minute report to present to the class on your findings. Bring headphones, laptops, etc. to class.

In class: Oral reports on the assignment above. Discussion of issues and roadblocks encountered. Lab section in class.

April 24

Class 14: Creating your history, part 3

Before class: Continue group work on your project: finish anything you need to finish that is standing in the way of you leaving class today with a finished version of your film. Reading TBA. Bring headphones, laptops, etc. to class.

In class: Finish rough cuts, leave class with a final or near-final cut that needs minimal editing.

May 1

Class 15: Screening of Final Projects

Before class: Make sure your film is ready to screen in class today.

In class: Final projects screened. Feel free to invite your friends to sit in the audience if you like!