

DOCST 101: Traditions in Documentary Studies, Fall 2018
Midterm Essay #1—DUE: Thursday, October 18

Dilemmas in Documentary

Watch Elizabeth Barret's documentary *Stranger with a Camera*. The one-hour film is available on our Sakai site in the "Resources" folder (and at <https://vimeo.com/channels/676200/54465749>). The filmmaker offers a three-tiered exploration of documentary. Barret revisits the story of Hugh O'Connor and Hobart Ison, while examining her own role as a "stranger with a camera," as well as the broader context of the heavily documented "war on poverty."

Consider how several dilemmas inherent to documentary play out in specific ways in the story at hand. Please address two of the following three dilemmas in terms of what makes them so complicated and difficult to avoid and yet necessary to contemplate.

- Documentarians generally seek to provide an objective or accurate account, but there are inevitably multiple versions of the 'truth.' In the film we see the main characters contesting truths such as whether or not Hobart Ison's actions were justifiable and whether the widespread portrayal of Kentucky locals as poor and needy was accurate. What made these issues so emotionally charged and difficult to resolve? What stakes were at hand?
- While documentarians may be motivated by a sincere commitment to social change and a desire to improve the lives of others, the very act of exposing social problems can harm subjects by causing them shame or humiliation. Based on your understanding of the film's stories, can documentarians raise awareness about injustices and inequalities without embarrassing their subjects? Again, sticking to the film, under what circumstances would the ends justify the means?
- There is an inherent power involved in depicting others' lives. Regardless of a photographer's working style or intentions, the camera is a 'tool of power.' Photographers or filmmakers utilize this power in choosing what/how to record, how to edit and sequence footage and photos, how to frame the final story and

how to distribute the finished piece through various channels and to various audiences. (How) did Elizabeth Barret and Hugh O'Connor's team attempt to negotiate the power dynamic between filmmaker and subjects? How did their approaches differ? What, if any, mistakes did they make?

Notes:

- o You are welcome to watch and discuss the film with classmates, but you must submit your own independent work for this reflection.
- o In addressing the dilemmas and questions above, please refer to specific examples from the film. Don't merely summarize the film; instead draw on examples to develop and support your ideas.
- o The reflection should be a total of around 5-6 pages (approximately 2.5-3 pages per part/dilemma). The text should be double-spaced, with normal margins and a 11 or 12 size font.
- o Please include references, and be sure to include page numbers for any direct quotations from written text.
http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

General writing tips—

- Since it's impossible to cover everything in the space of this essay, choose your main ideas, references and supporting examples carefully. Going into depth on a few ideas is better than skimming the surface on twice as many.
- Organization and clarity are crucial. Decide on a few key points and frame your discussion around them. Don't just string together all your ideas; instead, think about how to sequence and integrate your points and avoid repeating yourself.
- Please do not repeat the questions/prompts. Delve right into your response.
- Convey your ideas directly—don't leave us wondering what you're trying to say.
- Try reading your essay aloud—this will help you notice any issues with flow, run-ons, awkward sentences and/or redundancy.
- Avoid using generic masculine pronouns (he, his, him) in reference to all people.

- Proofread your work.

Turning in your midterm essay—

Please turn in your midterm essay in two ways:

- (1) Bring a copy of your essay to class on Thursday, October 18, make sure all the pages are stapled, and make sure your name is on all pages.
- (2) Turn in your midterm essay on the class Sakai site, under the "Drop Box" tab. If possible, please turn in your electronic copy in a way that is editable, such as a Word document (instead of a PDF). This will permit us in some cases to more efficiently make notes electronically in your document.

Midterm essays are due at the start of class on Thursday, October 18.

If you have questions about this assignment, contact Chris Sims at csims@duke.edu.