SHIFTING FOCUS: VIDEO PRODUCTION AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

OVERVIEW
The term "Video Activist" is a fairly late arrival to the lexicon of progressive struggle and political agitation, but community organizers and activists have been making and using film and video since the Film and Photo League of the 1920’s. The power of the moving image to galvanize public opinion and shape the course of history has not been lost on the generations of social and political activists that have picked up the camera or sat behind an editing machine in the hope that they will produce something that will make a difference. Never has this been more true than today, when rapid decreases in the cost of equipment, the creation of increasingly easy-to-use editing programs, and the ability to distribute video via the internet have inspired literally thousands of people to take up their cameras and begin to document the work and the events they see going on around them.

The course will explore the role of media as an advocacy and/or community organizing tool, by asking what the role of documentary is in social change movements and what types of media actually help to create change. What audiences are targeted by these films? What do we want the impact of the film on these audiences to be? We want to explore the use of varying styles of documentary to observe, document, inform, and impact audiences emotionally, intellectually and politically.

In this course we will put these theoretical questions to the practical test of actually producing, in collaboration with community organizers, short pieces of “tactical media” that the organizers can then use in the course of the ongoing work of social change.

There are, as I see it, five goals to this course:

1. To learn the basics of video production.
2. To better understand how public opinion is shaped and its importance within a pluralistic democratic society.
3. To develop an analysis of how commercial, or corporate, media functions in a democratic society, as well as media that is produced in opposition to these dominant media institutions.
4. To understand why, when and in what form video can and should be used by community activists to further their cause.
5. To take these lessons into the field, and collaboratively produce a short video piece,
which can be used by a community activist organization to further their work.

**EXPECTATIONS AND GRADING**

In this class you will be asked to do a lot of work as a team, on your own time. The amount of time and effort that you put into that project will be a critical factor in your grade, as will your reflection paper at the end of the semester. In addition, there will be short writing assignments throughout the semester. But probably the most important thing you can do is to show up to class prepared and to participate in discussion. Grading is always somewhat subjective and varies from professor to professor, so here’s a guideline for how it works in this class:

**Attendance and Participation: 20%**

**Come to class, on time, prepared, and participate:** The class meets only 13 times in a semester, so one absence is significant. Two is bad. Three is almost 25% of the class, which would be devastating to your grade. Three late arrivals (more than two minutes) will count as one absence. So, show up on time and prepared to participate. As far as excused absences, I make a simple and clear rule: its excused if you have a note from a doctor or a parent in the case of illness or family emergency/religious observances. Otherwise, the absence is just plain unexcused. Sorry, no exceptions.

**Papers: 40%**

**There will be significant written work for the class.** Most of the written work will come in the form of response papers, which will be 2-4 page papers in response to assigned readings. These are due at the beginning of class, printed, double spaced. Late papers are graded accordingly. I have posted sample response papers on Blackboard to give you a sense of what I’m looking for. In addition you will write a 7-10 page reflection paper at the end of the semester, examining and evaluating your educational experience in the class and your performance in it.

**Final Project Work**

- Research, Proposal, and Treatment- 60%
- Footage- 40%

**Results matter, but so does process.** In the end, the quality of the work that you do is what will make you proud of yourselves, and that’s what matters more than any grade. But how you get there, the preparations you make and the process by which you make it all come together is something that I will pay attention to.

Finally, collaboration, collegiality and respect for one another are required. Students in one group may receive differing grades if it becomes clear that they are doing more or less work. I reserve the right to grade students separately from the rest of their group based on their contribution to the project.

**PLAGARISM WILL NOT BE TOLERATED**

More than three words in a row without citation is plagiarism and it will result in an automatic zero on the paper.
FINAL PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND TIMELINE

Over the course of two semesters, students will learn how video is and can be used as a tool of persuasion and advocacy in the advancement of a social or political goal. There is therefore in this course the very concrete goal of producing something that will be of use to a worthwhile cause; something appropriate to screen in public and broadcast over public access cable.

*Video Production:* Each team will be required to produce a video, or several videos, in collaboration with an organization, or that could be used as a tool by organizers. The content of this piece will be entirely up to the teams and organizations involved, but will be arrived at over the course of the school year with the input and advice of the instructor and fellow students. A public screening of the work will be scheduled for the end of the Spring semester, which will be an event open to the public.

*Community Organizing:* This is not a straightforward documentary film production class. Although we will study the documentary film tradition, and much of what students will produce will be rooted in that tradition, what is being produced for this class will be for the purpose of organizing people to take action of some kind or another.

For the Fall semester teams will focus on (a) selecting an organization to work with and developing a strong relationship with that organization; (b) developing a strong proposal and treatment for their videos, and (c) shooting footage that they will use in the video.

PROJECT DEADLINES

October 8th- Organizations Selected

October 29th – Initial Video Proposal

November 12th – Video Treatment/Plan

December 10th –Footage and Plan Presentations

Bear in mind that, as this kind of work is bound to be less than predictable, a team may find itself shooting a lot of footage before proposals are due, or a team may find that they are not able to wrap shooting until later than called for. We will all try to remain flexible and open-minded throughout the process. Good Luck.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

**09/10 - Introductions and Overview**

- Define goals, discuss structure of course. Describe nature of collaborations/expectations and fill out questionnaire. What do we want to see changed in society?
- View previous student work and/or "The Pie's the Limit."

09/17 - **How Does Change Happen?**
- Discuss Burstein and Alynsky. How does change occur in a pluralistic democracy?
- Discuss possible collaborating organizations
- Breakout sessions
- **Reading:** Burstein and Alynsky (on Blackboard)
- **Writing:** Response Paper #1 due
- **Video:** Research orgs

09/24 - **Mass Media and Social Movements**
- How has mainstream media covered social movements? What lessons have organizers and activists learned from their encounters with mass media? We’ll take a look at some specific examples as well as some general observations about the interaction between the media and movements.
- Discuss collaborating organizations. Decide on orgs.
- **Reading:** Molotch, Gitlin, and Ryan
- **Writing:** Response Paper #2 due
- **Video:** Make decisions orgs.

10/01 - **Propaganda, PR: Managers vs. The Many**
- In a complex world, what should the role of the public be in determining the course of a nation, and what role should, and does, the mass media play in shaping public opinion?
- Watch Manufacturing Consent excerpts
- Go over camera check out procedure. Basic Camera function workshop.
- Go over video what video proposal and plan are
- **Reading:** Bernays and Chomsky
- **Writing:** Response #3 due
- **Video:** Make contact

10/08 - **Documentary and Social Movements- GASLAND SCREENING**
- Meet in Gallatin Student lounge unless otherwise informed
- Documentary film has had a long and complicated history with movements for social change. We’ll watch the film the Oscar-Nominated film Gasland and discuss it with director Josh Fox.
- **Reading:** Barnouw, Rabiger,
- **Writing:** Response #4 due
- **Video:** Have initial meeting with organization and begin work on proposal

10/15 - FALL BREAK

10/22 - **Documentary Production 101- 102**
- We’ll cover the basics of documentary pre-production in some detail, through examples and in-class exercises, as well as basic shooting tips.
- Lighting workshop and audio workshop if time
- Report backs from meetings
- Individual meetings with teams
- Go over in-camera edit assignment
- **Reading-Rabiger, Harding**
- **NO PAPER DUE**
- **Turn in initial video proposal**

10/29 - **Movement Media 101 and 102**
- From the Film Photo League to Deep Dish TV to the birth of Indymedia, how have organizers and artists have collaborated to create change? As video gear and post-production costs have come down, the rise of the video activist as a political actor was almost an inevitability. We’ll spend some time unpacking just what that term means, and how it is or isn’t different from a documentary filmmakers, and watch relevant excerpts from various films and discuss role of the moving image within social movements.
- Go over in-camera edit assignment
- **Reading:** Krinsky, Harding
- **Writing:** Response Paper #5 due

11/05 - **Web 2.0 activism**
- Has social media made activism more powerful and real change more possible than ever, or has the internet isolated and atomized society and made real bonds of solidarity harder than ever to forge.
- **Reading:** Zandt and Gladwell
- **Writing:** Paper #6

11/12 - **Witness Video**
- Guest Lecturer to discuss use of Video as legal tool
- Discuss Video Treatment
- **Reading:** Harding, Witness

11/19 - **Case Study: Every Mother’s Son**
- Made in the wake of the Amadou Diallo shooting, and several other homicides committed by the NYPD in the late 1990’s this film examines the underlying policies that make this kind of killing more likely. Director Kelly Anderson will discuss the distribution plans that she and Tami Gold created for the film.
- **Reading:** Distribution plan for Every Mother’s Son, TBD
- **WATCH:** Every Mother’s Son at Avery Fischer Center

11/26 - **In-Camera Edit Crits**
- Time to watch each other’s work and critique it.
12/03- **Manufacturing Dissent: Using the Master’s Tools**
- A new generation of activists have become critical of what they perceive as the
  older left’s preoccupation with “enlightenment principles.” Rather than viewing our hyper-mediated, irrational culture as a problem, they argue, let us see it as an opportunity to advance progressive values. In a sense, their position is closer to Bernays than Chomsky. Steve Duncombe will be our guest.
- **Reading:** Duncombe, Lakoff
- **Writing:** Response Paper #7
- **Video:** Turn in Video Plan

12/10- **Case Study: Blue Vinyl**
- Judith Helfand’s poignant and funny environmental odyssey to try and understand the perils of vinyl siding, and convincing her dad to try something else. Judith later went on to found Working Films, and she will speak to the class.
  - **Reading:** TBD
  - **Video**

12/12- **Final Crit**