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Media in Transition 6

Documentary is the New Black:

Filmic Textbooks

In 1978, Jerry Mander argued for the superiority of books over television, noting the “infinite patience” of a book, whose pages always say the same thing no matter how often they are accessed (*Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Harper Collins). It is the sort of sustained inquiry offered by a book—its repetition of information—that is necessary to foster real learning. A former advertising executive, Mander maintained that the quickly frantic sounds and images of visual media manipulated viewers, who could never pin down the picture or soundtrack in order to really analyze them critically. And, of course, in the 1970’s, he was correct, programming *was* ephemeral and generally did not repeat itself and there was no way to view its message more than once.

In the current world, Mander’s argument simply does not hold. DVD technologies allow for that “infinite patience” that books possess; their tracks always say the same thing no matter how many times you access them. When you add the archiving, clipping and sharing functionality of Web 2.0 tools

(YouTube, ReelSurfer, VooZoo, Kaltura to name a few), you begin to allow users to actually “speak” with these sounds and images in unprecedented ways. And when people can produce as well as consume media—when they can “write” media as well as “read” it, they can attain advanced media literacy.

This paper describes the use of an original documentary film, *Iraqi Doctors: On the Front Lines of Medicine*, as the central text for a university-level course I began teaching in the fall of 2008. *Iraqi Doctors* charts a 2003 exchange between doctors from Baghdad and those from USC’s Keck School of Medicine. A grant from the Fund for Innovative Undergraduate Education allowed DJ Johnson, the IML’s Director of Video Production who created this 30-minute documentary, to join me in class and lend the filmmaker’s point of view, as he gained teaching experience; the collaboration proved extremely fruitful. Using the *Iraqi Doctors* film as a starting point, students conducted research in an area relevant to their major field of study— from broadcast journalism to international relations to health care—and created web-based documentaries of their own, accompanied by citations and statements of purpose.



Background:

In July of 2003, six Iraqi physicians traveled from Baghdad to USC to begin a six month advanced medical training program. It was the first time in

over twenty years that Iraqi doctors could freely participate in a program of international medical exchange. Funded by USC Trustee, Major General William Lyon, and administered by Dr. Randolph Sherman, Chief of the Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, the doctors learned cutting-edge techniques in microsurgery and burn treatment: two areas for which specialized medical knowledge is absolutely critical due to the types of injuries being sustained by the population in this conflict. The doctors' visit to USC was extensively documented, as well as their travel to Washington, D.C. where they met with President Bush and Senator Bill Frist. There are also many hours of video footage from inside Iraq. Footage of Baghdad hospitals, health clinics in the countryside, sewage and water treatment facilities and hundreds of photographs of the civilian population create a trove of media documenting the medical crisis facing Iraq and the efforts of a handful of doctors working to combat it. Although their goal was to help their people, ultimately the doctors fled Iraq, after finding themselves targets of assassins.

DJ Johnson created the *Iraqi Doctors* film out of this media, though he did not shoot all the footage. But employing a linear approach to investigate an issue that is so multi-dimensional and complex seems at best inadequate and, at worst, reductionist. A multimedia-based approach to explore, analyze and arrange this media seemed more appropriate. Multimedia offers an opportunity to investigate the war in Iraq and the medical crisis it has engendered on multiple levels, simultaneously. It offers the author and the audience the

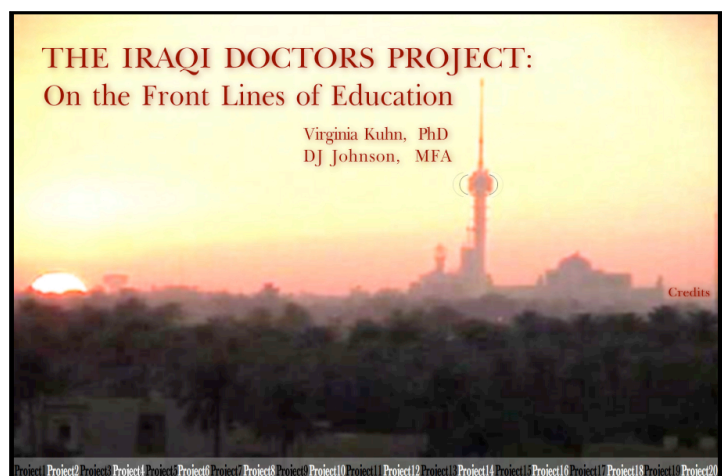
latitude to uncover shifting perspectives and “truths” as medical, political, cultural, religious, national and individual voices collide and morph over time.

The film became a critical point of departure for the students’ research into a chosen aspect of the healthcare issue within their disciplinary contexts. The course expanded the manner and scope in which a filmic document can be used as a teaching tool in three innovative ways. First, the students had access to *all* of the visual and audio material that was used to craft the documentary. Second, the filmmaker of the documentary was an active participant in the course throughout the semester. Third, and most importantly, the scholarly multimedia projects that the students created address many of the critical dilemmas raised but left unanswered by the open-ended nature of the documentary, thereby positioning the students as active participants in the production of knowledge that advances and broadens the narrative set forth in the film.

Whereas the use of a film or video in a classroom settings is commonplace, what is rare is the opportunity for a student to examine and manipulate, at will, any of the visual and aural media used to create a filmic document, especially one that is assigned an authoritative pedagogical voice. The repository of images, both static and moving, and aural elements can be mapped over the constructed, i.e. edited, film to illuminate for the student the film’s visual and aural syntax. With this wealth of raw materials, the students were able to deconstruct every aspect of the film to ask pivotal questions that

they were then forced to consider in their own multimedia authoring. Why is this image more “powerful” than another? How do these three sentences—a soundbite—out of the hundreds spoken best encapsulate an experience or perspective? How does my point of view(s), my argument(s), shape the manner in which I mediate and manipulate my source materials?

At the end of *Iraqi Doctors*, one of the physicians notes that life if Iraq will improve, “Maybe not now, but in five years.” It was five years later when we began this project and chronological gaps exist between where the film leaves off and the current state of affairs. My students filled some of those gaps by creating scholarly multimedia projects that broke free from the linearity of the documentary film, while simultaneously building upon it. One cannot view *Iraqi Doctors* without bringing the student work to bear on its meaning. Moreover, students in this class had a chance to do work that is alive in the world, and this, they said, impacted the degree to which they felt engaged. Not only did the doctors from the film answer questions posed by the students via email (they have all relocated but we were able to make contact), the projects were also made public in several places from YouTube to the Remix America site, to the Internet Archive. The interface



pictured here will house them all.

Now What?

Although the course was initially run with the *Iraqi Doctors* footage, I have come to believe that its strategies must continue after the *Iraqi Doctors* project ends (even as US intervention in Iraq seems endless!). It became very clear that students need guidance in critically analyzing filmic texts before they can show competent control in critically producing them. Indeed this is an expertise that, it seems, few members of the general public possess. Consider the following example.

In David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's book, *Film Art*, a staple in Film Studies classes, they describe the long continuous camera takes often employed by documentary films, which seem to record reality rather than shape it. This assumed neutrality is particularly the case, they say, with regard to a genre that emerged in the 1960s, *cinema verite*. By way of example, Bordwell and Thompson analyze shot breakdowns of an early example of the genre. *High School* was filmed in 1968 by Frederick Wiseman and consists of scenes of "typical" high school life in the wake of social upheavals of the Viet Nam war.

The film is not a straightforward narrative in that the events shown are not chronological. In the opening scene, the camera films from inside of cars and busses approaching the school, though it is uncertain whose point of view we are witnessing. The next scene is clearly a homeroom class meeting so it seems safe

to say the day is beginning. From there on, however, there is no clear sense of time but only mini scenes of high school life such as band practice, Spanish class, parents interacting with school administrators, staff meetings, and, finally, the last scene features a teacher reading a letter to an assembly of some sort. She received from a former student who is off to Viet Nam and assures her that he is ready, that he has learned what he needs to know to fight for his country.

At first glance this movie is a tribute to the rigors of the U.S. educational system and a testament to its success. In fact, this documentary was initially praised by the Philadelphia Board of Education. Film critics however, tended to see the piece as scathingly critical of secondary education in general and this school system in particular. Why? Well Bordwell and Thompson attribute this ambiguous and varying response to a sort of idiosyncratic reaction on the part of the viewer. I think that is just patently wrong. They also claim that viewers have changed their mind after they read their (Bordwell and Thompson's) analysis. This seems more tenable to me, but the reason for both the initial critical view and for the persuasive feature of the analysis is that some people (mainly film critics and scholars), possess visual literacy—that is, they have enacted a critical engagement with the tenets of film, with the editing techniques, both in and out of camera, and also with the final selective choices about what gets into the final cut. This may seem somewhat obvious but, I would argue, it really is not, for just as technological innovations brought the advent of cinema-verite, so these same innovations are now making it possible to see behind the curtain.

The film, as I said, is made up of seemingly innocuous moments in high school—a day in the life—however, there is no way that all the events that occur could have happened in a single day—logistically speaking, all the activities portrayed in *High School's* 37 segments could not have occurred in one school day. As such, the film consists of a composite of events that Wiseman wants to show and the choices are quite deliberate. Further, the segments never include students talking with other students, nor do they show students at home or with their parents. There are parents present, but only in the context of their concerns with the school, and these concerns are consistently shown being neutralized at the hands of authoritarian administrators.

Nearly every scene concentrates on the regimented nature of the situation, whether in a physical education or a literature class. Drill style education is pictured. For example, one scene shows a teacher reading a poem but the student discussion that ostensibly follows, is cut. Teachers are shown diffusing confrontation by flattering or cajoling students in a benevolent yet dictatorial way; rules are rules after all. These elements become far more apparent in looking at the actual graphic portrayal of screen shots included in the *Film Art* text, which can now be easily captured for use in the classroom.

Capturing stills can show how each constituency is portrayed. When not shown in full body-length shots, teachers are nearly always shown as heads, faces or hands. The close shots featuring their heads or hands makes clear that they are the ones who think, speak, and act in the world of the film and, by

extension, in the world of the school. Their authority is secure. If teachers are shown as "heady," students are shown as legs and torsos—compliant bodies.

The last image of the strip to the left shows the typical view of students. They are anonymous and disconnected body parts; one student stands for any and all students. Wiseman is also playing with formal elements of cinema by using the shot/reverse shot. This shows the principal walking from behind (first frame in the strip to the right) and then the next shot shows what he sees; this technique allows the viewer to see through the principal's eyes. But then note the crooked style of frame three, and, if the next frame is again seen through the principal's eyes, he looks at the student with a sort of deviant gaze. Clearly Wiseman, in such moments, is commenting on the lopsided nature of this environment and suggesting a view that is perhaps more ominous. Moreover, the ending scene is this teacher reading the letter from the ex-student who says not to worry about him, since "I am not worth it, I am only a body doing a job." This is followed by the last line of the film as the



Fig. 11.71



Fig. 11.72



Fig. 11.73



Stills from Frederick Wiseman's documentary, *High School*, 1968.

principle says “when you get a letter like this, to me it means that we are very successful at Northeast High School. I think you will agree with me” (qtd in Bordwell 415).

In this light, it is easy to see how the Board of Education came to view *High School* as inflammatory, and how film critics, practiced in such analysis, immediately recognized it as such. This example may seem dated, for surely in a culture that is increasingly visually saturated, the average person is far more savvy at such readings. That does not seem to be the case, and according to my next example, even film critics seem less savvy.

In the spring 2008 issue of *Mediascape*, the e-journal published by UCLA, Eric Faden makes a case for deploying scholarship that uses text, image and

sound. He does this in a textual article, “A Manifesto for Critical Media,” but the very next article in the issue is his video piece “The Documentary’s New Politics.” Faden traces the rise of documentary films, linking it to the trend of reality television, whose rise, in turn, resulted from

a writers’ strike. Focusing on Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 911*, Faden comments upon the lack of critical engagement with the *form* of the film, even as many attacked Moore’s bias. As this clip from Faden’s piece shows the one critic who engages the Moore’s form, which shapes the content even as the critic Dave Kopel notes that Moore has technically told the truth. Faden notes, “For Kopel,



the film equals a deceit because viewers are unable to read the complex visual syntax of the film” (19:34). Although Faden does not agree with Kopel’s analysis (see Kopel’s “Fifty-nine Deceits in Fahrenheit 9/11 <<http://www.davekopel.com/Terror/Fiftysix-deceits-in-Fahrenheit-911.htm>>), his singular response reveals “a crisis of criticism, a crisis of media literacy” (19:58). This fact, above all, argues for using film footage as course texts in university classrooms.

Given the ubiquity of image based information—video archives, documentary films, online news, web based television, animated tutorials—this model holds implications for nearly every academic discipline and indeed for the world outside the ivory tower.