

# THE ESSAY FILM

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ENGLISH 256 / FILM STUDIES  
REGISTRATION #329028 SECTION JR  
MONDAYS AND WEDNESDAY EVENINGS 6:30-9:40  
CONDUCTED IN ROOM 88 ALUMNI NORTH CAMPUS

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

The word "memory" is derived from the Latin *memor*, "to be mindful" *mens*, "the mind" - yet when we think of memory, how do we imagine the past? Who writes history? Who thinks memory? Is reality mediated by time, and does time alter our conception of media? How does a representation of an event in the past differ from our perception of an event in the present? How do these differences act on our images of the future?

This course investigates the intricate relationship between various films and evolving historical narratives by posing questions such as these. We will explore the works of various directors by examining the nuances of memory, history and representation with special emphasis on the relationship between reconstructive visions of time and events in the essay film, documentary and imagined past. Together, we will seek out the means, methods, and madness of images of the past.

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

Presence, active inquiry and informed participation in class discussion are essential. Each student will be responsible for introducing one film by presenting a short (two-page) essay to the class and distributing a copy to each participant. These introductions should integrate a range of secondary sources (reviews, essays, artists' statements, etc.) and discuss the essential theoretical, historical and cinematic aspects of each film. It is not necessary to view the film prior to composition. You may choose to make this the groundwork for your final extensive essay of at least 8 pages on one film, director or theme. You will be asked to write short responses to the screenings and readings. All materials must be typed in MLA format - no exceptions. Students must come to class prepared, and take notes during all screenings and discussions. There will be occasional tests and pop quizzes. If you miss a screening, it is your responsibility to acquire and view the film on your own time. Absence from class does not excuse you from any corresponding written assignment. Many of these films are extremely rare, and difficult to obtain. Some are available at Mondo Video <mondofausto.com>

## **STRUCTURE:**

This seminar is limited to thirty students. We will meet for 6 weeks on Mondays and Wednesdays between the hours of 6:30 and 9:40 PM in Alumni 88. Presentations should begin with an objective introduction to the film, then segue into a particular theme, passage, scene, or motif for discussion.

## **GRADING POLICY:**

UB uses a lettered grading policy, A - F, including + and - grades. Your final grade will be calculated according to the following breakdown: An incomplete grade may only be given to students who have (1) fulfilled the attendance requirement for the course and (2) completed all but one of the written assignments. Engagement: 15% Participation begins with attendance. All students are expected to take responsibility for their own attendance, so as to avoid negative academic repercussions. Both absences and tardiness will affect this portion of your grade. Arrival in class after 6:45 PM constitutes an absence (although it is better to show up late than never). You are allowed one absences without penalty. A second absence will result in the reduction of your final grade by a full letter grade. A third absence will result in the reduction of your final grade by two full letter grades. A fourth absence will result in a failing grade for the course. You are responsible for contacting a fellow class member or me in the event of a missed class due to unforeseen circumstances, and to get the assignments in advance if you intend to miss a class. In either instance, you are expected to be fully prepared for the next class session. Major Assignments: 85% Critical Responses include homework, mid-semester essays and final.

**PLAGIARISM:**

Plagiarism is using another person's words and ideas as though they were your own. It is easy to avoid plagiarism: simply put the material you have taken from someone else's writing in quotation marks and cite the person's name and publication in your paper. Plagiarism is a serious offense that can result in expulsion from the University. A paper that contains any plagiarized material at all will receive an F; two such plagiarized papers will result in the student receiving an F for the course. (Note: plagiarism is not restricted to the use of published work; the passing of another student's work as your own is also a case of plagiarism.)

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

*Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film* edited by Charles Warren (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996).

*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* by Joseph Gibaldi (New York, NY: The Modern Language Association of America, 2003).

**ADDITIONAL TEXTS:**

Here is a short bibliography of texts that may be relevant to your particular area of research. While I encourage you to do independent research and make extensive use of the library, these books might help you get started. Most are available in Lockwood Library <ublib.buffalo.edu>.

Benjamin, Walter *Reflections and Illuminations*  
Bergson, Henri *Matter and Memory*  
Boyarin, Jonathan (ed.) *Remapping Memory: The Politics of Time and Space*  
Boym, Svetlana *The Future of Nostalgia*  
Cadava, Eduardo *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*  
Finkelkraut, Alain *The Imaginary Jew*  
Fussell, Paul *The Great War and Modern Memory*  
Hutton, Patrick H. *History as an Art of Memory*  
Kern, Stephen *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*  
Locke, John *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*  
Matsuda, Matt K. *The Memory of the Modern*  
Nietzsche, Friedrich "Uses and Abuses of History"  
Nietzsche, Friedrich "Memory's Forgetfulness"  
Olney, James *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life Writing*  
Rosenstone, Robert A. *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*  
Schivelbusch, Wolfgang *The Railway Journey*  
Terdiman, Richard *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*  
Tarkovsky, Andrey *Sculpting in Time*  
Warnock, Mary *Memory*  
Yeats, Frances A. *The Art of Memory*

**LINKS:**

Some vital links for literary and cinematic events in and around Buffalo:

The Eastman House in Rochester <eastmanhouse.org>  
Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center <hallwalls.org>  
Market Arcade <dipsontheatres.com>  
Squeaky Wheel <squeaky.org>

# SCHEDULE

## WEEK 1 POLITICAL DOCUMENTARIES

MONDAY MAY 22<sup>ND</sup>

Introductions. Review the syllabus. Short writing exercise.

The Yes Men

Dan Ollman and Sarah Price [2005, USA, 82 minutes] [Mondo DVD](#).

A comedic documentary which follows The Yes Men, a small group of prankster activists, as they gain world-wide notoriety for impersonating the World Trade Organization on television and at business conferences around the world.

WEDNESDAY MAY 24<sup>TH</sup>

The Weather Underground

Sam Green [2004, USA, 92 minutes] [Mondo DVD](#).

The Weather Underground is a feature-length documentary that explores the rise and fall of this radical movement, as former members speak candidly about the idealistic passion that drove them to “bring the war home” and the trajectory that placed them on the FBI’s most wanted list.

## WEEK 2 POLITICAL ESSAY FILMS

MONDAY MAY 29<sup>TH</sup>

Supersize Me

Morgan Spurlock [2003, USA, 96 minutes] [Capen DVD](#).

Spurlock treks across the country interviewing a host of experts on fast food and an equal number of regular folk while chowing down at the Golden Arches. Spurlock’s grueling drive-through diet spirals him into a physical and emotional metamorphosis that will make you think twice about picking up another Big Mac.

WEDNESDAY MAY 31<sup>ST</sup>

Roger and Me

Michael Moore [1989, USA, 91 minutes] [Lockwood DVD](#).

When Michael Moore’s hometown is devastated by the plant closure of an American corporate giant the filmmaker tries to turn his camera on General Motors Chairman Roger B. Smith, the elusive Roger of the title, and the film is loosely structured around Moore’s odyssey to track down the corporate giant for an interview.

## WEEK 3 HISTORIC ESSAY FILMS

MONDAY JUNE 5<sup>TH</sup>

The Gleaners and I

Agnès Varda [2000, France, 82 minutes] [Lockwood VHS](#).

*The Gleaners and I* is a deliberately self-conscious documentary, taking the form of a cinematic poetic essay, where the filmmaker herself is very present in an unusual way. The film is ostensibly about people who “glean” or collect, from the ground, the remnants of a harvest. The literal translation of the title is “The Gleaners and the Gleaner” (feminine).

WEDNESDAY JUNE 7<sup>TH</sup>

Sherman’s March

Ross McElwee [1896, USA, 152 minutes] [Mondo DVD](#).

Ross McElwee sets out to make a documentary about the lingering effects of General Sherman’s march of destruction through the South during the Civil War, but is continually sidetracked by women who come and go in his life, his recurring dreams of nuclear holocaust, and Burt Reynolds.

WEEK 4

## EXPOSITORY ESSAY FILMS

MONDAY JUNE 12<sup>TH</sup>

Sans Soleil

Chris Marker [1982, France, 100 minutes] **Personal VHS.**

"History is essentially longitudinal, memory essentially vertical. History essentially consists of passing along the event. Being inside the event, memory essentially and above all consists of not leaving it, staying in it and going back through it from within." —Gilles Deleuze

WEDNESDAY JUNE 14<sup>TH</sup>

Tokyo-Ga

Wim Wenders [1985, Germany, 92 minutes] **Mondo VHS.**

"If in our century something sacred still existed... if there were something like a sacred treasure of the cinema, then for me that would have to be the work of the Japanese director, Yasujiro Ozu. He made fifty-four films. Silent films in the Twenties, black-and-white films in the Thirties and Forties, and finally colour films until his death on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1963, on his sixtieth birthday." Wim Wenders on *Tokyo-Ga*.

### WEEK 5

#### THE TRUTH HURTS BUT LIES HURT MORE

MONDAY JUNE 19<sup>TH</sup>

Punishment Park

Peter Watkins [1978, England, 88 minutes] **Mondo DVD.**

In a desert region in California, a civilian tribunal passes penal sentences on groups of dissidents but offers the alternative of 3 days in 'Punishment Park'. Peter Watkins' film vividly imagines a world where political dissidents are hunted down by the forces of law and order in a deadly game of cat and mouse.

WEDNESDAY JUNE 21<sup>ST</sup>

First draft of final paper due. Revision Workshop.

### WEEK 6

#### WHO SPEAKS? THE DOCUMENTARY DOCUMENTED

MONDAY JUNE 26<sup>TH</sup>

Grizzly Man

Werner Herzog [2005, Germany, 50 minutes] **Mondo DVD.**

A docudrama that centers on amateur grizzly bear expert Timothy Treadwell. He periodically journeyed to Alaska to study and live with the bears. He was killed, along with his his girlfriend, Amie Huguenard, by a rogue bear in October 2003. The films explores their compassionate lives as they found solace among these endangered animals.

WEDNESDAY JUNE 28<sup>TH</sup>

Final Course. Reflections. Presentations. Evaluations.