

Project #2: Mediathread Documentary Analysis



Image: Still from *Smoke* (Jem Cohen and Peter Sillen, 2000)

Objective

This project asks you to think critically about how documentary filmmakers position themselves in relation to their subjects; how they arrange and present evidence of the historical world; and how their particular constructions of reality contribute to accepted historical narratives about the city/region.

These are big objectives! To approach them with grounded specificity and to create a coherent analytical essay, you will need to do the following, in the following order.

Each of these steps is discussed in greater detail later in this assignment sheet.

1. Describe and analyze how elements of classical rhetoric—including invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery—combine in your chosen documentary to create an identifiable “voice.”
2. Based on your interpretation of the dominant elements of voice, identify which documentary mode your film aligns with most strongly: observational, participatory, performative, or reflexive. (Hint: neither of the given documentaries accords with the remaining categories in Nichols’ taxonomy of documentary—expository or poetic. In fact, these two documentaries have been chosen for analysis in part because they do not operate in those modes. While you may consider the performative and reflexive modes, keep in mind that these are formally and theoretically complex and may cause you more confusion.)
3. Craft an argument about how your film contributes to current understandings of Atlanta and/or the region of the American South. To do so, you will need to consider the various

ways in which Atlanta/the South is and has been understood, and how your chosen film—through its voice and mode—speaks to this construction. Does it augment conventional stories about the city/region? Challenge them? Multiply them?

This project combines analytical tasks that are complex in both rhetorical and technical terms. Careful attention to our readings, viewings, and class discussions will equip you with the knowledge and skills needed to successfully complete—and, we hope, derive some intellectual pleasure from—this project. You are encouraged to ask questions in class, visit Dr. O'Brien or Dr. Yow in office hours, brainstorm with your peers, and/or schedule an appointment at the **Communication Center** if you want assistance with any stage of this project!

Film choices

- *Benjamin Smoke* (Jem Cohen and Peter Sillen, 2000)
- *Sherman's March* (Ross McElwee, 1986)

Key readings

- Selected readings from Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 2010): “What Gives Documentary Films a Voice of their Own?” (67–93); “How Can We Describe the Observational, Participatory, Reflexive, and Performative Modes of Film?” (172–211). [Available on T-Square]
- A scholarly, peer-reviewed source that you locate on your own. It can be about your chosen film in particular or about a topic/issue closely related to your chosen film.

Multimodal Software

You will use the open-source, web-based software Mediathread to identify and break down significant moments in your chosen film, and to compose an essay that synchs (or links) directly to these moments. Think of Mediathread as a digital remote control that facilitates the activity of re-viewing that is so central to film analysis. It allows you to isolate and describe shots, scenes, and sequences in the same space, and to compose essays that refer your reader back to these isolated segments, thereby cementing the argument you're building about the film.

You can access Mediathread [here](#). This is Georgia Tech's installation—DO NOT TRY TO USE WWW.MEDIATHREAD.INFO! Keep a running backup of your notes and drafts in a Word document in case there is a glitch with Mediathread.

Scholarly sources

You must draw on (and correctly cite) two peer-reviewed scholarly sources to support your argument. One of these can be from the course syllabus (e.g. Nichols or any journal articles we have read this semester), and one must be a peer-reviewed article or book chapter (in a book published by a university press) that you locate on your own. You can draw on additional sources (and non-scholarly sources in addition to the required two scholarly ones), but remember that the objective of this essay is to formulate and support your own interpretation of the film; bringing in lots of sources may detract from that goal.

Citation style: Please use MLA style for your citations. You can find detailed explanations of how to cite using MLA at the **OWL** at Purdue. We will review best practices for finding, using, and citing scholarly sources in class.

Schedule and Deadlines

- Wednesday, Oct. 12: in-class discussion of SBS; tutorial on finding and annotating scholarly sources
- Friday, Oct. 14: group work and Friday Writing to develop thesis statement/argument
- Monday, Oct. 17 at noon: Peer review of shot-by-shot (SBS) description of two scenes + + annotated citations of two scholarly sources. Provide a complete and correct bibliographic citation for each of your sources, using MLA style. See the [OWL at Purdue](#) for citation details. Refer to the instructions and our discussion of how to find and cite scholarly sources from class on Wed. Oct. 12. Complete your SBS in Mediathread by carefully annotating each of your shots. Copy/paste these annotations into a Word doc (or take individual screen shots of them and paste them into a doc), include your annotated citations, and submit to T-Square by noon on Monday. Bring your laptop and all materials to class for peer review.
- Wednesday, Oct. 19: Thesis statement workshop
- Friday, Oct. 21: Submit thesis statement and first draft of essay to the T-Square folder by noon on Friday (copy/paste from Mediathread into a Word doc, or click on the “W”/Word icon in the Composition space to download a Word version to submit). Bring your laptop and all materials to class for peer review.
- Sunday, Oct. 23, 10 pm: Essays due in Mediathread and as exported Word files on T-Square. (Instructions: In the composition space in Mediathread, next to “+/- Author,” add your instructors so that we can view and grade your composition; Click on the blue Word icon to download a Word version of you essay—save this to your computer and submit it to T-Square.)

Grade value

- This project is worth 15% of your total grade in the course. Of this,
 - SBS, thesis statement, annotated sources, and participation in peer review = 25%
 - Final essay in Mediathread = 75%

Detailed Description of Project Stages

1. Shot-by-shot description in the “Collection” space

If you’ve just watched Sherman’s March and/or Benjamin Smoke, you’re likely feeling flummoxed and wondering how in the world you’re going to complete this assignment. If undertaken with careful attention, this first stage will help you find your way; do it well, and you will be on your way towards creating a successful project.

First, select two scenes or sequences from your chosen film. Each scene/sequence should have a duration of roughly two-three minutes. Shorter segments are acceptable if they are relatively complex/dense in rhetorical terms; you may likewise choose a long take (a shot that has a longer than normal temporal duration), but your description will need to account for the entire duration of the shot. When making your selections, look for moments in the film that introduce motifs, oppositions, and/or anomalies that may be suggestive of larger meanings; another useful strategy is to look for scenes that complement or contrast with one another in pointed ways. If you are at a loss, choose the two scenes/sequences that you find most baffling; diving into description

should help you make sense of them.

In order to lay the groundwork for your analytical essay, you will create a shot-by-shot description of your two scenes/sequences in the “Collection” side of Mediathread. (Here are [handy definitions of “shot,” “scene,” and “sequence”](#); we will be using “scene”/“sequence” interchangeably.) To create your descriptions, you will use the “Selections” tool in Mediathread to isolate and describe EACH SHOT from your scene and briefly describe ALL of the five elements (or categories or departments or proofs or canons) of classical rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style*, memory, and delivery. The categories of invention and style break down into further categories: invention is composed of ethos, logos, and pathos, while style is made up of mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound. Watch your scenes several times, focusing on these two departments and their constituent elements. Determine which element emerges as dominant within the scene and focus your description on it. Thus, for example, your description of style in a scene could be all about cinematography (not on all four elements of style) while your description of invention could focus on pathos (not on all three elements of invention).

In the collection box for each shot, you should organize your descriptions like this:

- Invention (ethos, logos, OR pathos): rich descriptive notes
- Arrangement: rich descriptive notes
- Style (mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, OR sound): rich descriptive notes
- Memory: rich descriptive notes
- Delivery: rich descriptive notes

Keep in mind that elements—particularly stylistic ones such as camera distance—may change within the shot and be sure to note any changes. By that token, some elements may carry over from shot to shot; in these cases, simply note the repetition or copy/paste from shot to shot. Your descriptive notes can be just that—notes; complete sentences are not required.

*** A note about style:** As discussed in class, one of the main commonalities between fiction and nonfiction films is that the experience of viewing them is often filtered and discussed in terms of film style (though many would argue that style functions differently in the two types of film). Style includes

- mise-en-scène: all the material stuff as it is arranged in front of the camera performers and their movements, props, lighting);
- cinematography: literally, the “writing of the camera,” or the way the camera composes shots (camera angles, scale, and movement);
- editing: the way shots are put together to produce scenes, sequences, and ultimately an entire film;
- sound—all of the noises, dialogue, and music that emanate both from the world of the film and the film itself.

As someone who has grown up in the 21st century, you very likely have a sophisticated sense of film (and televisual) style, if not the vocabulary to describe it. You are not expected to describe style in exhaustive, technical detail in your SBS; rather, identify what seem to be the most striking or important elements of style, and describe them using precise language and with reference to this [handy guide](#) or this even more [concise breakdown](#).

Technical how-to: Go to [Mediathread](#) and click on “Collection” and the film you’ve chosen.

Dismiss the small help window on the right. In the “Item” tab, click “+ Create a selection.” Cue the video file up to the start time of the desired shot, click “Start Time” (the timecode will appear), let the video play until the shot ends, and click “End Time.”

Tip: Mediathread’s toolbar for cueing up shots is not very responsive, and your selections will be imprecise (it is all but impossible to hit “start” and “stop” exactly at the cuts between shots). Try to get close, but don’t worry if there’s some lag. It is easier to cue up shots with the screen is maximized.

Give the selection a title that clearly describes the shot, and tag it with three-five tags (the tags should be words that describe rhetorical elements or identify conceptual links). Then, in the “Notes” box, itemize the shot’s rhetorical elements in terms of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.

Once you’ve described all of the rhetorical elements, review your SBS carefully and decide which element (or, at most, two elements) is/are most significant. Place an * by it/them in each shot description, and add any additional details that emerge on second view. The idea here is that you are identifying the most important or dominant rhetorical elements of the film; you will focus on this/these element(s) in your essay.

Your descriptions can take the shape of notes with occasional incomplete sentences. Try to adopt a neutral descriptive approach when writing your descriptions, as the goal for the SBS is not to seek out evidence that supports a preconceived argument, but rather to write detailed, attentive descriptions that—once you’ve reflected on them—will lead you to an argument. Striving for “neutral” descriptive prose does not mean your writing should be boring! Use vivid, engaging language—you’ll thank yourself when when you begin writing the essay and can incorporate this wording. Challenge yourself to use the verb “to be” no more than once in each shot description, and do not use the passive voice AT ALL.

2. Analytical essay in the “Composition” space

Word count for final composition: 1200-1500 words.

The good news is that you’ve done all the legwork in creating your SBS! Now it’s time to formulate an argument about the larger rhetorical value of the film, and write an essay that supports this argument with analysis of your chosen shots. Your thesis statement should:


- Identify one or two rhetorical departments that are central to the film’s “voice” [tip: which department(s) became most important in doing your SBS?]. Establish which mode the documentary aligns with.
- Develop an argument about how the documentary, which is in _____ blank mode, helps the viewer to understand Atlanta or the South in a different way than they might have before they saw the film.

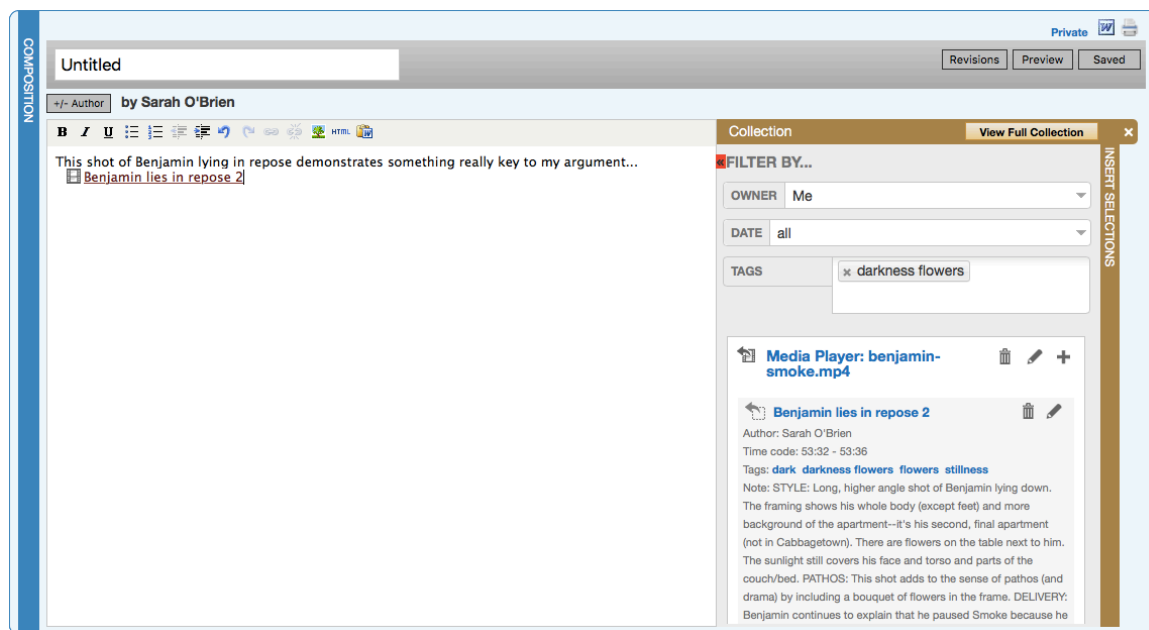
Keep in mind that thesis statements can be more than one sentences; when making a two-part claim (as you are), doing so in two sentences is often best. Thesis statements usually appear at the end of your first paragraph, though this placement is not set in stone. Using the passive voice in your thesis statement is the surest way to get off to a confusing start!

Technical how-to: When you are ready to compose your essay, go to the main page of Mediathread and select “Create Composition” from the pull-down “Create” menu in the Composition space. **DO NOT CREATE AN ASSIGNMENT OR DISCUSSION.** Start writing!

The reason you’re composing in Mediathread is that it will allow you to refer directly (that is, to cite or embed) shots that you want to use to support your analysis. The body of your essay will consist of analysis of these chosen shots—they are your evidentiary support. Keep in mind that your reader will be viewing the shots as she reads your essay, so you do not need to exhaustively re-describe them. Rather, you want to guide your reader through your own analytical breakdown of the shot, highlighting the rhetorical importance of what is happening in it.

To cite or embed your shots: All of the class’s 700+ shot selections are accessible via the brown-framed column in the right-hand column. Ideally you would be able to call up just your shot selections by clicking your name in the “Owner” menu. Alas, the glitch. The sorting function of the “tags” menu is working, so you can call up your shots by the distinctive tags you’ve just given them.

Once you’ve got your shot called up, use the back-arrow button  to embed it into your prose. You should embed a minimum of three of your shots (NOT entire scenes) into your composition. If you realize that a shot that you did not describe in your SBS would be useful to you as evidence, you can use it—just go back to the Collections space and make a selection of it (you do not need to write a full description).



VERY IMPORTANT FINAL TASKS:

- Give your essay an evocative title.
- Proofread your essay! Mediathread lacks robust formatting functions, so keep your formatting simple and do not worry overly much about it. Mediathread also doesn't spell check, so run your essay through Word's spell check. Manually check that you have spelled everyone's name correctly—not doing so hurts your ethos.

- In the upper righthand corner of the composition, next to “+/- Author,” add your instructors so that we can view and grade your composition.
- Click on the blue Word icon to download a copy of your essay–save it and submit it to T-Square.
- Your grade will suffer if you fail to do any of these steps!

