

Human Rights and the Media

SIS 396-001, American University, Fall 2008

Thursday 5:30pm - 8:00pm

Professor Julie Mertus

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course examines how various means of mass communication – movies, TV, radio, music, the internet, etc. – affect the realization of human rights. Through the close study of documentary films and other audio-visual material, students will be introduced to the concept of human rights and debates about their implementation – such as the effect of U.S. foreign policy on human rights, the role of the United Nations, the use of war to protect or threaten human rights, and the changing nature of human rights activism. Students will also examine how representatives of the media can serve (deliberately or unwittingly) to build a human rights culture, expose human rights violations, become victims of human rights abuses, or facilitate those very violations. The course will be integrated with AU's Human Rights Film Series, and will provide options for both students eager to make their own videos as well as those who prefer more traditional assignments.

REQUIRED READINGS:

Note: The sole book that must be purchased (or borrowed) is below. All other readings will be available on Blackboard for free (see "e-reserves) or distributed in class.

Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford, 2007)

Students wishing to make documentaries and/or engage in video advocacy should consider also purchasing these two books:

Gregory, Sam et. al., eds. *Video for Change: A How-to Guide on Using Video in Advocacy and Activism* (Pluto Press, 2005)

Barry Hampe, *Making Documentary Film and Video, Second Edition* (New York: Holt, 2007)

GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS:

TO BE HANDED IN AT START OF CLASS

Participation Self-Grade Suggestion	10%	(Due date: Last day of class)
Group Assignment	15%	(Due date: October 2 nd)
Project/ Research Papers	35%	(Due date for papers: November 20 th ; for creative projects, December 4 th).

TO BE PUT ON COURSE BLOG

Two Film Papers, plus two to six responses to classmates	20%	(One set of papers and responses must be posted by Nov. 6 th ; another by Nov. 20 th)
Two additional assignments, Plus two to six responses to Classmates	20%	(Assignments are due on the day they are discussed; Sept. 4, 11, 18 and 24; responses are due within a week after each posting)
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Total:	100%	

Participation: This course is designed to provide many opportunities – in and out of class – to interact with other students and myself. I hope that it will be rigorous, challenging, informative, but also fun! Your attendance and participation is essential to this process. The participation grade will be composed of the following elements:

- **Class attendance.** Any unexcused absences will be penalized. More than two excused absences (i.e., advance notice with a good and verifiable reason) will be penalized.
- **Readings and Assignments:** The weekly readings and short assignments are central to what we will be discussing in class and reviewing on exams, so you must do them consistently.
- **Talking, debating, questioning, and participating in class.** There will be many opportunities for you to speak up during class – in small group activities, guided discussions, debates, and question-and-answer formats. Quality of participation counts more than quantity – but you will need to be active.

On the day of the last class, you are to submit to the professor a printed, carefully written one-page document stating your proposed grade for participation and providing three reasons why that grade is deserved. This document will be considered by the professor in fashioning your participation grade.

Group Assignment

The group assignment is not due until noted on the syllabus (about mid-term), however it is a good idea to start ahead, because the project will entail a lot of movie watching at home. The project will be explained in greater detail, but it can be summarized as follows: students work in groups to read and discuss different U.S.-made war movies. Questions to consider include: Do these films condemn or condone violence? Human rights abuses? How? Are there any discernable trends? In addition to producing one report to hand in to the instructor, each group has 20 minutes of class time to show clips of the films they have analyzed and to present their findings.

Research paper / project: This assignment is the most substantial part of your grade, and will be open to your preferences and creativity. The precise topic or project is your choice, but you receive project approval. You have two options:

- Traditional research paper/ power point: Write an original, well-researched, scholarly paper analyzing one aspect of the link between human rights and the media that we discuss during the semester. Paper length: 10 to 15 pages; power point (8 minute presentation)..
- Design a human rights media campaign: Create a short film, music video, website, podcast, school curriculum, game, or other public campaign designed to direct attention to a human rights issue you're concerned about. Get creative! I'm open to ideas, as long as they involve serious thought and effort.

You will be presenting all of your research papers and creative projects to the rest of the class during the last two weeks of the course. Your paper/project will be due on the day that you present it. Your grade will be based upon the paper/project itself, as well as your presentation.

If you are doing a traditional research paper, you must work alone. However, if you are producing a video, or undertaking some other creative endeavor, you may work in small groups of no more than 4 people. *The role of each person working in a small group must be carefully delineated.*

Two assignments::

You are required to post two assignments to the Discussion Board on Blackboard, and to respond to two to four of your colleagues' postings. You will see that four assignments appear on the syllabus, all in the month of September. You need only to post two of these assignments. *Assignments must be handed in AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CLASS for which they are due..*

To respond to other students' blogs, hit "Reply" within their forum. More details will be provided in class. If you have any trouble accessing Blackboard or posting your comments, please let me know as soon as possible. Criteria for grading include: degree of engagement with the assigned readings and your fellow students; demonstration that you understand the subject matter; creativity; clarity; depth of analysis; and professionalism.

Two film reviews:

You are required to write reviews of two of the Human Rights Film Festival films and to respond to two of your classmates. To the extent possible, refer to other films in the festival (thus providing evidence that you have seen all the films. Film reviews are to be posted to the Discussion Board by at least three days after the showing of the last film.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Note: With the exception of the *Short Introduction to Documentaries* all readings will be available on Blackboard (see the “E-Reserves” link) or as a handout.

AUGUST 28: COURSE INTRODUCTION

Readings:

“Introduction,” Chapter 1 in International Council on Human Rights Policy, *Journalism, media and the challenge of human rights reporting* (International Council on Human Rights Policy: Geneva, Switzerland, 2002).

Film:

Good Kurds / Bad Kurds

SEPTEMBER 4: INTRODUCTION TO HUMAN RIGHTS—PART ONE: FRAMING A CAUSE AS A HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERN

Reading:

Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 in *Understanding Human Rights* (Sage Publishing: Thousand Oaks, CA, 2008)

“Human Rights and the Media in History” Chapter 2 in International Council on Human Rights Policy, *Journalism, media and the challenge of human rights reporting* (International Council on Human Rights Policy: Geneva, Switzerland, 2002).

Please consider the following questions when reading:

What are human rights? How does the international human rights system work, and what are the various ways in which human rights are enforced? What are the actions someone can take when they believe their rights have been violated? What is the role of U.S. foreign policy, the U.N., and military intervention in human rights enforcement? In what situations can media organizations either promote or threaten human rights?

Films/Media:

Out of the Silence

The Corporation

Youth for Human Rights—30-second PSAs

Assignment 1: Your Rights -- Create the script to a PSA promoting a human right, or create actual PSA. Explain the choices you make in creating the PSA.

SEPTEMBER 11: THE RIGHT TO [ACCURATE] INFORMATION AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Readings:

“Bias, Advocacy and Precision,” Chapter 5 in International Council on Human Rights Policy, *Journalism, media and the challenge of human rights reporting* (International Council on Human Rights Policy: Geneva, Switzerland, 2002).

Barry Hampe, “Credibility,” and “Documentary Ethics,” Chapters 14-15 in *Making Documentary Film and Video, Second Edition* (New York: Holt, 2007)

Please consider the following questions when reading:

Is “objectivity” in the media realistic? In your opinion, are certain media outlets more “biased” than others, either deliberately or unintentionally? If so, how does this affect the protection of specific human rights, and what are the media’s responsibilities for reporting human rights issues?

Films:

Historic HUAC Propaganda

Rwanda Film

Assignment 2: Television Show -- Explain how a TV program’s ideological biases affect how it covers human rights issues.

SEPTEMBER 18: HOW THE MEDIA CAN BE USED TO ADVANCE HUMAN RIGHTS

Readings:

Gilian Caldwell, “Using Video for Advocacy,” pp. 1-19 in Sam Gregory, Gilliam Caldwell, Ronit Avni and Thomas Harding, eds., *Video for Change* (London and Ann Arbor, 2005)

Katerina Cizek, “Storytelling for Advocacy: Conceptualization and Preproduction” pp. 1-19 in Sam Gregory, Gilliam Caldwell, Ronit Avni and Thomas Harding, eds., *Video for Change* (London and Ann Arbor, 2005).

Barry Hampe, “It Looks so Easy,” and “Conducting an Interview,” Chapters 1 and 27 in *Making Documentary Film and Video, Second Edition* (New York: Holt, 2007.)

Clifford Bob, “Power, Exchange, and Marketing,” Chapter 2 in Clifford Bob, *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media and International Activism* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

Please consider the following questions when reading:

How has the wide dissemination of video technology affected activists' ability to witness human rights violations? What kinds of filmmaking and storytelling strategies are effective? What are the best ways to target a specific audience or reach a mass audience?

Assignment 3: NGO-- Analyze a particular human rights organization's use of media to address human rights abuses.

Sept 25 HOW THE MEDIA AFFECTS HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION.

Readings:

Chapters 1, 3 and 5 in *Compassion Fatigue*, by Susan D. Moeller, Routledge, 1999.

"Introduction" by Mark Thompson and Monroe E. Price in *Forging Peace*, Indiana University Press, 2002. (Blackboard)

Julie Mertus, "The Legality of Information Intervention" in *Forging Peace: Intervention, Human Rights the Management of Media Space* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2002) (Monroe E. Price and Mark Thompson, eds).

Please consider the following questions when reading:

What role does the news media play in encouraging or limiting humanitarian interventions? What specific role do visual images, satellite communications, cable news formats, and other media trends play? Does sensationalizing suffering induce "compassion fatigue"? What kinds of interventions are legitimate when the media is being used to incite human rights violations? What are the arguments for the legality of "information intervention?"

Assignment 4: Compassion Fatigue – Identify the elements of "compassion fatigue" and make an argument supporting or challenging its prevalence. In so doing, use the example of a recent decision to use/not use military force.

OCTOBER 2: INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTARIES

Guest Speaker: Professor Patricia Aufderheide

Readings:

Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford, 2007)

Barry Hampe, "What is a Documentary?" and "What is not a Documentary??" Chapters 2 and 3 in *Faking Documentary Film and Video, Second Edition* (New York: Holt, 2007)

Film:

Iraq in Segments

OCTOBER 9: THE WAR STORY IN U.S. FILM

Note: Students who must miss class today for Yom Kippur should sign up for one of the two groups which will present on Nov. 6th.

Assignment 3:

Students are divided into six groups. The task of each group is to identify trends and themes in the portrayal of war in American cinema. You must include the starred films, but the others are only suggestive and you may add additional films. During class each group will have 20-30 minutes to present their findings. Groups are encouraged to integrate video clips into their presentations.

Films:

Group One: *The U.S. Civil War*

**North Country*
The Civil War (Ken Burns)
Gettysburg
Gods and Generals
**Glory*
The Horse Soldiers

Group Two: WWII/Korea

**The Bridge on the River Kwai*
A Bridge Too Far
The Longest Day
Pork Chop Hill
Flag of Our Fathers
Letters from Iwo Jima
The Thin Red Line
**Saving Private Ryan*

Group Three: Vietnam

**Born on the 4th of July*
Platoon
The Deer Hunter
**Apocalypse Now*
Rambo --- First Blood
We were Soldiers

Group Four: Post-Vietnam

~ **Black Hawk Down*
Tears of the Sun

Top Gun
**Iron Man*
Rambo (any)
The Peacekeeper

Group Five: Afghanistan and Iraq

**Jarhead*
This is War: Memories of Iraq
Three Kings
Combat Diary: The Marines of Lima Company
My Country/ My Country

Group Six: Critique

**Why We Fight*
Iraq for Sale
Redacted
Uncovered: The whole Truth about the Iraq War
No End in Sight

OCTOBER 16: FIRST HR FESTIVAL FILM

Reminder: Each of the four films in AU's Human Rights Film Series will be open to the public, and followed by a short discussion.

Banished: American Ethnic Cleansings. A Film By Marco Williams (2007, 87 min.)

A look at three U.S. cities, which were part of many communities that violently forced African American families to flee in post-reconstruction America. (NOTE: Screening may include visit with Marco Williams, TBD)

OCTOBER 23: SECOND HR FESTIVAL FILM

Ballad of Esequiel Hernandez, in collaboration with P.O.V. (Kieran Fitzgerald, 2007, 90 min.)

Tommy Lee Jones narrates the story of Esequiel Hernandez, a young American man who was murdered by U.S. Marines on the border between Texas and Mexico. (NOTE: screening may include visit with Kieran Fitzgerald, TBD)

OCTOBER 30: THIRD HR FESTIVAL FILM

At the Death House Door, with visiting filmmaker Steven James and/or Peter Gilbert (2008, 90 min.) Told mostly through the eyes of Reverend Carolle Pickett, who served as the Huntsville death row chaplain from 1982-95, the film revisits the wrongful death of Carlos DeLuna, who was executed in Texas on December 7, 1989, after prosecutors ignored evidence inculcating a man, who bragged to friends about committing the crimes of which DeLuna was convicted.

Note: First Film Paper due

**NOVEMBER 6:
JOURNALISM – LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW TECHNOLOGY**

Note: Two groups from the October 9th assignment will present on this day

Readings:

“The Professional Environment and The Editorial Process,” chapters 3 and 4 in International Council on Human Rights Policy, *Journalism, media and the challenge of human rights reporting* (International Council on Human Rights Policy: Geneva, Switzerland, 2002).

Jeffrey McCall, “This is Not News” and “Television News or MTV?” in Jeffrey McCall, *Viewer Discretion Advised: Taking Control of the News Media* (Lanham, MD, 2007).

Svknyu Pilly, “Video as Evidence,” chapter 6 in Sam Gregory, Gilliam Caldwell, Ronit Avni and Thomas Harding, eds., *Video for Change* (London and Ann Arbor, 2005)

Video:

Investigative Reports in the Child Sex Trade

NOVEMBER 13: FOURTH HR FESTIVAL FILM

When the Levees Broke, with Visiting Filmmaker Sam Pollard (directed by Spike Lee, produced/edited by Sam Pollard, 2006, 255 min.)

As the world watched in horror, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005. Like many who watched the unfolding drama on television news, director Spike Lee was shocked not only by the scale of the disaster, but by the slow, inept and disorganized response of the emergency and recovery effort. Lee was moved to document this modern American tragedy, a morality play witnessed by people all around the world. The result is **WHEN THE LEVEES BROKE: A REQUIEM IN FOUR ACTS**. The film is structured in four acts, each dealing with a different aspect of the events that preceded and followed Katrina's catastrophic passage through New Orleans.

NOVEMBER 20th PRESENTATION OF CLASS PROJECTS AND RESEARCH PAPERS

Note: Second “film paper” to be posted to Discussion Board by this time.

NOVEMBER 27TH: THANKSGIVING

DECEMBER 4TH: PRESENTATION OF CLASS PROJECTS AND RESEARCH PAPERS