

Biopic vs. Doc:

Comparative Media & Popular Memory

MRTS-4415



Thursday
2:25 – 5:15 PM

RTFP 282

“Why make a biopic if it’s not helping us now? There’s really no point. If it is not informing how we can do things differently now and maybe not repeat our mistakes, than why do this piece about this person or event?”

— **Dustin Lance Black**

Course Overview

This class examines docs, biopics, memoirs, and biographies as we examine the ways in which different media formats mold popular memory and contribute towards modern mythmaking. Using a selection of popular personalities and historical figures that including Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Mister Rogers, among others, we’ll use a comparative media methodology to examine the discourses around each case study and how each medium or aesthetics’ individual affordances contribute towards a collective cultural memory.

Contact Info

Instructor: Dr. Tanya D. Zuk

Email: tanya.zuk@unt.edu

Drop-In Hours: Tuesdays 1-4 or virtually by appointment Fridays

Office: RTFP 266





Assignments

Discussion Lead (1) 20%

Flex Assignment 20%

Either 2 readings summaries (when not leading) or a second discussion lead.

Seminar Paper 60%

Proposal 5%

Annotated Bib 10%

Draft/Peer Review 15%

Presentation 10%

Final 20%

Grade Scale

A+	100-97	B-	82-85
A	96-93	C+	79-77
A-	92-90	C	76-70
B+	89-87	D	69-60
B	86-83	F	59-0

Withdraw Date

The last day to withdraw and receive a “PW” is **November 6th, 2026**. Withdrawals after the semester midpoint are automatically given a grade of “WF.”

Throughout the semester we will use comparative media methodology to examine the affordances and limitations of each variation of the individual (or event) circulating in popular culture, and their relation to popular memory. We’ll ask questions about the relationship between media and history, celebrity and realism, aesthetic and performance, and the representation of minorities through historical fiction and society’s perception of history.

During the semester, we’ll examine political figures becoming pop icons, religious leaders who become media figures, historical leaders, entertainers, social activists and the memory of a “man with a gun.” Before we end the semester with “conference” presentations, we’ll explore the animated doc in relation to live-action biopics and mitigating/emphasizing trauma.

Required Texts

- Required course readings and screenings are available on Canvas for free
- Recommended Texts:
 - Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, 1990.
 - Hughes-Warrington, Marnie. *History goes to the movies: studying history on film*, 2007.
 - Honess Roe, Annabelle. *Animated Documentary*, 2013.

Required Screenings

- *Capturing Reality: The Art of Documentary* (Ferrari, 2008)
- *RBG* (West & Cohen, 2018) Doc
- *On the Basis of Sex* (Leder, 2018) Biopic
- *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008) Biopic
- *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (Epstein, 1984) Doc
- *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019) Biopic
- *They Called Her Moses* (Fernandez, 2018) Doc
- *Tower* (Maitland, 2016) Doc
- *The Deadly Tower* (Jameson, 1975) Biopic
- *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* (Heller, 2019) Biopic
- *Won't You Be My Neighbor* (Neville, 2018) Doc

Resources

UNT Writing Center

There are several small papers, as well as a final project required in this class. You may find over the course of the semester, that you want help revising your work. You can sign-up for a session at: <https://writingcenter.unt.edu>. I've used writing assistance throughout my academic career. No one gets citations or grammar naturally. Use every resource at your disposal!

Media Library

The [Media Library](#) contains the UNT Libraries' non-print, audiovisual, tabletop games, and video games collections. The Media Library also has [The Nest](#), which is an e-sports and game design space. The mission of the UNT Media Library is to support the instructional and [research needs](#) of UNT faculty, staff, and students by collecting, maintaining, and providing access to media materials that represent all academic disciplines and all genres of film.

Discussion Lead

During the semester you will sign up to lead the class discussion for a specific reading. You should come to class prepared with **at least 2-3 open ended discussion questions** that pull specific ideas from the readings that you would like the class to explore.

You should also bring in **one clip from a screenings or other media** (memoir, paratexts, etc.) **assigned for the week**. You may also select a clip from a media text outside of the assigned content that relates to your reading for the class to discuss.

Seminar Paper

Proposal

This is a brief 300-500 word abstract of your proposed paper idea. It can be rough, but needs to have identified a topic and films to focus in on.

DUE: September 17th by 11:59 PM

Annotated Bibliography

You should curate an annotated bibliography of at least 8 items including your two films, 2-3 items from course readings, and 3-4 articles/chapters from your own independent research.

DUE: October 8th by 11:59 PM

Rough Draft

This workshop day you should bring in your rough draft to share with a peer. You'll provide and receive feedback for your papers.

DUE: November 19th by start of class

Presentation

Our last class sessions we'll host a mock-conference where you will each have 10-15 minutes to present your seminar paper to the class. You can use 2 clips up to 3 minutes each or 5 minutes total.

DUE: December 3rd by start of class

Final Paper

Your final paper will be conference length (~2000 words). Papers should use consistent citation style (MLA, APA, Chicago). They should be polished and well thought out arguments.

DUE: December 8th by 11:59 PM

Course Policies

Accommodation Statement

I endeavor to make this class accessible to every student and will do my best to make this class fit your needs. If you need special arrangements for a documented disability, please contact the [Office of Disability Access](#). If you would like to share pertinent medical information, request special arrangements for class seating, or need special assistance in the event of a building evacuation, please contact me in the first week of class. I am happy to alter content formats and provide multiple points of access to course materials.

Basic Needs & Security Statement

Any student who faces challenges securing their food or housing and believes this may affect their performance in this course is urged to contact the [Dean of Students](#) for support. For immediate food assistance, visit [UNT Food Pantry](#). For emergency housing needs, visit here or [Cloud 9 Charities](#). There are additional [Wellbeing and Safety Services](#) through Student Affairs. If you are comfortable, please let me know what is going on. I am ready and able to make course accommodations based on your circumstances and assist in providing resources.

Attendance Policy

As a graduate student you are expected to attend every weekly class session prepared to discuss the readings and screenings for the week. No more than one missed class session is permitted without prior approval from the instructor. If you need to be quarantined, please let me know ASAP and I will arrange remote class attendance.

Instructor Availability & Response Time

I will be available for drop-in hours on Tuesdays 1-4 pm where you we can talk face-to-face, in my office at RTFP 266. You can make virtual appointments of hours by using [Booking](#). Please send emails directly through Canvas or at tanya.zuk@unt.edu. I will generally provide a response within 24 hours if not sooner.

Late Policy

All assignments must be submitted through the appropriate Canvas tool by **11:59 PM EST** on the specified **due date**. Refer to the Assignment Guidelines and/or Rubrics for specific details on completing the assignments in this course.

Academic Honesty

Please note that by staying in this class you are agreeing to abide by all the standards of academic integrity as found in the [Honor Code](#). Please review the policies on AI generated content as developed by the Media Arts department in Canvas. Additionally, you agree to hold to the legal and professional standards set within the media industries in regard to credits.

Subject to Change Statement

The instructor reserves the right to modify the course requirements and other related policies as circumstances may dictate, and with sufficient notification to all students. Even the professor can have an unanticipated emergency, and the university—or the community at large—may experience an emergency that requires changing the class schedule or requirements. I don't expect to invoke this clause, but if I do, you will be notified as soon as possible. Any change will also be posted to Canvas.

Schedule

Weeks 1-3: Comparative Media & Popular Memory

8/20

- Intro to Class
 - How to Read Academic Articles?
 - *Capturing Reality: The Art of Documentary* (Ferrari, 2008)

8/27

- Chesebro & Bertelsen, “Analyzing Media Comparatively: Comparative Media Criticism and the Future of Media Criticism,” in *Analyzing Media*. Guildford Pub, 1998.
- Godmillo & Shapiro, “How Real Is the Reality in Documentary Film?”

9/3

- Lipsitz, George. “Popular Culture: This Ain’t No Sideshow,” and “History in the Age of Popular Culture,” from *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*.
- Haskins, Ekaterine & Thomas Benson. “Towards a Participatory Memory Culture.” *Popular Memories*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina Press, 2015.

Weeks 4 & 5: Ruth Bader Ginsburg

9/10

- RBG (West & Cohen, 2018, doc)
 - Lerner, “RBG Review”
 - *Notorious RBG Excerpts* (Carmon & Knishnik, 2015)
- French, “Women in the Director’s Chair” in *Female Authorship & the Documentary Image*
- Plantinga, “What is Documentary?”

9/17

- *On the Basis of Sex* (Leder, 2018, biopic)
 - Storm, “Benchmark Judgements”
 - “On Gender Equality” in *My Own Words* (Ginsburg, 2016)
- “Intro & Prologue” from *Whose Lives Are They Anyway* (Bingham, 2010)
 - **DUE: Paper Proposal**

Weeks 6 & 7: Queer Biopics & Docs

9/24

- *The Times of Harvey Milk* (Epstein, 1984, doc)
 - Two Films, One Legacy, Criterion booklet & Director's Notes
- Bell, "Documentary Film & History"
- Landsberg, Alison. "Theorizing Affective Engagement in Historical Film." from *Engaging the Past*. Columbia University Press, 2015.

10/1

- *Milk* (Gus Van Sant, 2008, Biopic)
 - Sanders, Rob. *Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag*. (kids book)
- Erhart, J. "Toward a New LGBT Biopic." Epstein & Palmer (Eds.) *Invented lives, imagined communities: the biopic and American national identity*.

Weeks 8 & 9: Historical Figures

10/8

- *They Called Her Moses* (Roberts, 2018, doc)
 - Clinton, Catherine. Excerpts from *Harriet Tubman: Road to Freedom*.
- Pingree, Geoff. "History is What Remains." In *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film*.
 - DUE Annotated Bibliography

10/15

- *Harriet* (Lemmons, 2019, biopic)
 - Taylor, Whit. *Toward Freedom*. Center for Cartoon Studies Presents, 2021.
- Burgoyne, "The Cinematic Writing of History," 2008.

Weeks 10 & 11: Animating History

10/22

- *The Deadly Tower* (Jameson, 1975, biopic)
- Bignell, Jonathan. "Docudrama performance: realism, recognition and representation." *Genre & Performance: Film & Television*. pp. 59-75

10/29

- *Tower* (Maitland, 2016, doc)
- Honess Roe, Annabelle. "Animated Interviews" *Animated Documentary*, 2013.

Weeks 12 & 13: Mister Rogers

11/5

- *Won't You Be My Neighbor* (Neville, 2018, doc)
 - Warburton, "A Visit with Fred Rogers"
 - Hendershot, "Film Review"
 - *Exactly as You Are* (Tuttle, 2019)
- Castro & Klerin, "Intergenerational Exchange..."

11/12

- *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* (Heller, 2019, biopic)
 - Junod, "Can You Say Hero?" *Esquire*, Nov. 1998
 - Junod, "[My Friend Mister Rogers.](#)" *The Atlantic*, Dec. 2019.
 - *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood: A Visual History* (Lybarger, et al., 2019)
- Rosenstone, Robert. "In Praise of the Biopic" In [Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film.](#)
- Sconce, Jeffrey. "The Biopic is an Affront to Cinema"

Weeks 14: Writing Workshop

11/19

- DUE Draft & Peer Review

Thanksgiving Break

(11/26) NO CLASS

Week 15: Presentations

12/3

- DUE Presentation

Final Paper Due by midnight Dec. 8th

Please Note

Some of the films on the syllabus contain graphic, potentially disturbing content (e.g. sexual violence). It is your responsibility as a student in this course to research the assigned films and ensure that you are willing to watch them. If you have any questions or concerns, I am happy to discuss alternatives.