

Teaching “Ideas and Culture: Making Documentary History” in the Department of History, Carleton University.

By Michael Ostroff

As a documentary filmmaker of some forty-years I've not had reason – until recently – to pay attention to academic concerns and anxiety about the future of history, the divisions within the discipline, and the discussions about the loss of a public audience.

While I do have a degree in history and political science, it is from a university with such a poor academic reputation that its name has been thankfully erased from memory, but for the occasional wickedly sardonic references made by Mordecai Richler.

So I was surprised to receive an email a couple of years ago from Professors James Miller and Audra Diptee asking if I would teach a course with the grandly expansive title of “Ideas and Culture: Making Documentary History” for the Department of History, Carleton University.

This was not to be a course in which students would view documentaries concerned with historical subjects – such as The Civil War series of the American filmmaker Ken Burns – and then write academic critiques about the works. Instead Miller and Diptee suggested that I use my experience as a director of narrative historical documentaries to guide fourth year history students through an appreciation of the genre and, with the assistance of Carleton's Instructional Media Services, to oversee the production of their own short narrative historical documentaries.

I believe this course is unique in Canada.

The challenge for me was to deconstruct my method of working to articulate the principles and fundamentals of the craft to a class of students from the Department of History and the School of Journalism.

I started by reminding myself of some first principles: documentary should not be synonymous with dullness. When we go to the movies, we want to be awed by the intimacy of a story, the beauty of the images, and the magic of this visually orientated medium; to be overwhelmed by that flush of emotion – when the image, language, movement, and music merge; to be entertained.

Narrative historical documentaries are no different. The audience for these films is intellectual non-specialist, people who enjoy reading history or watching documentaries for enlightened entertainment.

Among the first lessons the students consider is the nature of film and how it differs from the work of academic history. Film does not allow for a rigorous intellectual communication. It is an

emotional and visceral experience. As a filmmaker you need to bring a scholarly relationship to the subject, but the goal is to use the past in a personal and emotional interpretive process. Whereas historians offer interpretation, detailed criticism, and analysis, historical storytellers search out the emotional content of history that scholars avoid. Producer Ken Burns (*Civil War*; *Baseball*; *Jazz*) refers to himself as an “emotional archeologist.”

As narrative documentary historians, we must liberate the documentary from the scourge of being portentous, pretentious, or didactic. Students learn to be more attached to the subject than an historian. The definition of documentary that I present to the class is the “creative interpretation of reality,” creative because filmmakers bring an artistic sensibility to the story and interpretive because a well-researched point of view is acceptable and permitted.

Some academics take exception to this approach, suggesting that it is not really history. However Mark Phillips, of the Department of History at Carleton, argues that history is a “family of genres” – that memoirs, fiction, and film all relate and interact with academic or “high” history.

Indeed Shelby Foote, an American historian and major contributor to the widely successful *Civil War* series, believes that at times narrative history is the kind that can come closest to telling the truth. “You can never get to the truth,” he concedes, “but that's your goal.”

Over 26 weeks, my students learn that the importance of being respectful of research and historical accuracy is just as important as the need to learn to select and shape unwieldy masses of historical data into a manageable length, with a coherent visual and dramatic shape. The students learn the effectiveness of the eight elements of our craft – four visual (live cinematography, interviews, and archival film and photographs) and four aural (third-person narration, first-person narrators, music, and sound effects.)

We succeed when our documentary makes the past come alive for a moment, when these efforts stimulate enough interest among the viewers that people seek out and read the relevant history of the period.

Michael Ostroff is an Ottawa-based director/producer of narrative historical documentary films examining Canada's cultural history. His first film was *Two Nations*, a student film about Louis Riel (1971); his most recent production is the feature-length documentary, *Winds of Heaven Carr, Carvers and the Spirits of the Forest* (2010), which will be broadcast on TV Ontario, Thursday, April 26, 9.00 pm.