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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## A Documentary Pedagogy for Freedom: Recognizing the Eyes in the Room

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We walk into our classrooms, be they virtual or face-to-face, and we see the eyes of our students with screens in front of them. Those screens may be laptops, desktops, tablets, or phones but the screens are there. On those screens our students spend an average of four hours per day, engaging moving and still images. We then ask them to read and process something that was written by someone they will never see or hear. We expect them to be fully engaged by the reading. The social justice issues they are reading about are hidden beneath text on a page. While reading is essential, it is limiting, and it especially limits the mental capacity of the students we teach today whose minds are wired to engage moving and still images via stories. Our students need to see to fully connect with that we are studying. If we are to teach to their strengths we need to show them the subject matter. The way we show them is by using documentaries as the foundation of course design. Listen to Albert Maysles as he speaks on the power of documentaries:

Documentaries put students in the midst of the social justice issues we are studying. They can see, feel, and connect, not just with the issue, but also with the real people who are affected by injustices. Nick Fraser says in his book *Say What Happened: A Story of Documentaries*, “docs have morphed into contemporary essays, becoming a form whereby we get to experience highly provisional stabs at reality, but, far more than fictions, which are usually finished and fixed in their own reality, they are also transformed by it.”<sup>[1]</sup> Documentaries are the new essay; we have access to a new type of reading made just for the generation of students we are teaching. We need to honor them by showing them and in the showing they are seeing what was, what is, and what can be.

We work in an industry that values the written and spoken word over the visual. We were taught to plan our classes starting with the reading—readings that were written years before our time mostly by dead white males. I always found these readings alien to me when I was a student, and even those I connected with were usually written by people many years my senior. There was still this disconnect because of the faded pages from which I read; I was removed from them by time and space. None of what I have said makes these works irrelevant or useless but it highlights the limitations of readings. When I think about the students I teach today who view more than they read I see that they are deep thinkers, they are intelligent, they can read and write, and they also bring a more expansive set of communicative and interpretive skills to the classroom than I did when I was a student. The question I am raising in this blog is: How do I engage what my students bring to the classroom so that I can show them what I want them to learn? Yes, *show* them. To answer my question, I am suggesting that we show our students the social justice issues we are discussing in class while showing them how movements work by engaging documentaries as the core content for our courses. I am not dismissing books and readings, but I am displacing their historical place of privilege.

Why documentaries? Documentaries speak to the head and the heart. Documentaries help students see and feel by eliciting the emotive response in the visual. More centers of the brain are activated by sound, movement, light, story, and real life characters who lived in the movement. Students see history and how they can make history. I have also found that conversation after a documentary is democratized unlike those after reading discussions. Reading discussions privilege certain types of students whereas discussion around documentaries has a way of leveling the playing field. Students feel more equipped to talk about that which they have seen, engaged, and understood. As Cathy Chattoo says in her book *Story Movements: How Documentaries Empower People and Inspire Social Change*,

*Documentary is a vital, irreplaceable part of our storytelling culture and democratic discourse. It is distinct among mediated ways we receive and interpret signals about the world and its inhabitants. We humans, despite our insistence to the contrary, make individual and collective decisions from an emotional place of the soul—where kindness and compassion and rage and anger originate—not from a rational deliberation of facts and information. By opening a portal into the depth of human experience, documentary storytelling contributes to strengthening our cultural moral compass—our normative rulebook that shapes how we regard one another in daily exchanges, and how we prioritize the policies and laws that either expand justice or dictate oppression.<sup>[2]</sup>*

Documentaries connect with us because we are wired for story and true stories told well speak truth to us and set us free to be part of the freedom movement. So if we are to start with documentaries as the foundation of our courses, and use readings to complement the documentaries, where do we start? Let me offer a few questions that might get you thinking:

1. What do I want my students to see?
2. Why is the visual experience of this course as important as the reading(s)?
3. What do I want my students to hear?

4. What do I want my students to feel?
5. Why is it important for my students to engage the sights and sounds of this experience so as to bring to life that which we are studying together?
6. What do I want my students to do about social injustice as a result of experiencing this course?
7. How can I create and curate a visual experience that is buttressed by quality readings that will make this course be more than memorable, but will make it serve as a launching pad for social justice initiatives and actions in the real world?
8. How can I make the viewing experience a communal experience and make it as unlike the isolating experience of reading as possible?
9. What documentaries are worth my students' time, in that they are well told stories, well researched, historically accurate, factual, and emotionally stimulating?

So now you might ask what could this look like? What are some documentaries one might consider? There are of course many but allow me to offer a list I have used for courses where the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s has been the foundation of the course. The list below is just one such list to get you thinking about what a curated list of documentaries would look like, and about the order which they would be engaged.

**A Civil Rights Course Lineup** (in this order):

***The Murder of Emmet Till*** (2003) 53 minutes  
Directed by Stanley Nelson

***The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords*** (1999) 86 minutes  
Directed by Stanley Nelson

***Eyes on the Prize: Season #1 - 1952 to 1965*** (1987) 42 minutes each  
Directed by Henry Hampton and others

***Mavis*** (2015) 80 minutes  
Directed by Jessica Edwards

***4 Little Girls*** (1997) 102 minutes  
Directed by Spike Lee

***Mr. Civil Rights: Thurgood Marshall & The NAACP*** (2014) 57 minutes  
Directed by Mick Cauette

***Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*** (2015) 115 minutes  
Directed by Stanley Nelson

***Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*** (2003) 90 minutes  
Directed by Nancy D. Kates and Bennet Singer

***Movin' On Up: The Music and Message of Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions*** (2008)

90 minutes

Directed by Phillip Galloway

***Freedom Riders*** (2010) 117 minutes

Directed by Stanley Nelson

***John Lewis: Good Trouble*** (2020) 96 Minutes

Directed by Dawn Porter

***King: A Filmed Record Montgomery to Memphis*** (1970) 240 minutes

Directed by Sidney Lumet

***King in the Wilderness*** (2018) 111 minutes

Directed by Peter W. Kuhardt

***The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975*** (2011) 92 minutes

Director Göran Olsson

***Wattstax*** (1973) 103 Minutes

Directed by Mel Stuart

***Chisholm '72: Unbought and Unbossed*** (2004) 66 minutes

Directed by Shola Lynch

***I Am Not Your Negro*** (2017) 93 minutes

Directed by Raoul Peck

### **Documentary Associations and Resources:**

Fireflight Media

<http://www.firelightmedia.tv>

PBS Civil Rights Documentary

<http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/explore/10-black-history-documentaries-to-watch/>

HBO Documentaries

<https://www.hbo.com/documentaries>

International Documentary Associations

<https://www.documentary.org>

Doc Society

<https://docsociety.org>

Odyssey Impact

<https://www.odyssey-impact.org>

Impact Field Guide  
<https://impactguide.org>

American Documentary  
<https://www.amdoc.org/create/filmmaker-resources/>

PBS POV  
<http://www.pbs.org/pov/>

Netflix Best Documentaries  
<https://www.netflix.com/browse/genre/6839>

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup>Nick Fraser, *Say What Happened: A Star of Documentaries* (London: Faber & Faber Press, 2019), 28.

<sup>[2]</sup>Cathy Borum Chattoo, *Story Movements: How Documentaries Empower People and Inspire Social Change*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 207.

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