

MDOCS

JOHN B. MOORE DOCUMENTARY STUDIES COLLABORATIVE

Fall 2014, 1.5



November 17, 2014
A Bi-weekly Newsletter

Documentaries Stand the Test of Time: Raoul Peck

For Raoul Peck, a Haitian-born narrative and documentary filmmaker, educator and the director of La Femis, France's world-renowned national film school, documentary differs from journalistic work. Why? As he told students and class visitors in *Workshopping Documentary* on November 6, the documentarian needs to "make sure that it will mean something in 30-40 years, compared to a journalistic report which gets old [as] fast as current events die out."

Peck's own work stands that test of time, as *Lumumba* (1992) and *Man by the Shore* (1993), narrative films engaging history, remain must-see works on Congo's independence and the devastation of the Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti. *Fatal Assistance* (2013) promises to join them.

MDOCS welcomed Peck to a day of conversation that followed a pre-screening of *Fatal Assistance*, about the mismanagement and limited impact of international aid to Haiti in the wake of a devastating 2010 earthquake. On Nov. 5, *Workshopping Documentary* students Julia Boyer '16, Nathalie Cabrera '17, Billie Kanfer '16, and Evian Li '16 introduced the work and offered context to about twenty students, faculty, and staff.

On November 6, Peck met with Skidmore community members over a Francophone lunch, in a documentary studies class and at an evening screening of *Fatal Assistance* attended by around 100 riveted people who participated in a lively hour-long conversation after the almost two-hour film.

Faculty from the French department, international students from Haiti and Rwanda, and staff members who had participated in a post-earthquake mission to Haiti joined devotees of film and documentary.

In all venues, Peck made a strong case for documentary storytelling. Answering the broad question, "how do you define documentary?" he suggested that documentaries allow the subject to speak for itself, in a story that "as a documentarian you are trying to tell ... with an artistic input. You have a story, characters and an evolution in those characters."

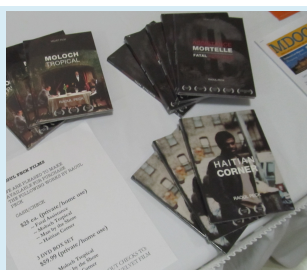
For *Fatal Assistance*, Peck revealed, getting to the characters in the story required an insider's access. He convinced Jean-Max Bellerive, the Prime Minister of Haiti (2009-2011), (whose politics he had previously criticized) and other leading Haitian political figures to participate because of shared frustration with donor countries' policies and suspicions that promised large sums but shut Haitian leaders out of both decision-making and implementation.

(continued on p. 3)

Inside This Issue:

- **Raoul Peck:** *Documentary Stands the Test of Time*
- **Attending an Audio Fest:** Ariel Plotnick ('15)
- **Director's Note**

PLUS: New Doc Date! Nov. 19 - Noah Throop ('14)





Director's Note

RAOUL PECK'S visit to campus showcased work that, as the filmmaker intended, started a conversation about a big subject: the impact of humanitarian aid on the people it is meant to help. Peck's *Fatal Assistance* case study presented the international community's response to an earthquake in Haiti. But his overarching goal was to reveal the nuances of a larger problem. Peck's dual agenda reminded students that the hallmark of enduring documentary work is its ability not just to tell a story, but to help us understand why that story matters. Peck's work on campus—in conversation, in the classroom, at the screening—made that point in spades (and French & English!), thanks to the support of the Skidmore village—Foreign Languages & Literatures, International Affairs, Latin American Studies and the Science Literacy project worked with MDOCS to pull off splendid events.

And Peck's message was well received. After all, being able to go from the particular story to the big idea and back again is an important part of liberal arts critical thinking. What Peck and other documentarians bring is not just the passion and the evidence, but the ability to tell a story in a way that keeps us mesmerized and sends us out the door asking what we can do to make a change.

On December 5, JOCELYN AREM '04, the award-winning force behind the Caffè Lena Project, will lead a conversation in advance of her spring 2015 Carr Residency. Before telling the story, we need to marshal our evidence, whether archival or interview-based, from sound, visual or textual materials. Then how does a group transform evidence to analysis to a documentary? AreM's residency will help Skidmore and Saratoga Springs community members with memory projects in the planning stage build some tools, skills (and archives). We hope to see you in December or in the spring!

J. Dym

Multimedia Storytelling

Spring Planning



Final Fall Doc Date

November 19: 3:30-5pm
What's up, Doc? Noah Throop, '14, screens *Home & Where the Food Grows*, LI 113

Stick around for pizza & a conversation!

Student-Led



Workshop

December 7: 4-6pm
Eli Ruben - *Max Size: 8*

- **Intro to Final Cut Pro**
- Support the Saratoga County Animal Shelter.
- **Eat Pizza!**

Email li113@skid to sign up!

Jocelyn AreM '04

Carr Residency
**The Multimedia
Community
Story Project**

Come hear the plans & brainstorm with your community partner

Dec. 5, 8:30-10am, TLC 202

Breakfast will be served!

(Pls. RSVP by Dec. 1)

Raoul Peck

(ctd.) Peck also encouraged flexibility, discussing how his film's characters emerged over two years of filming—a long commitment, he pointed out—as he and his filming teams fanned out to follow diplomats and politicians into conference rooms, international aid workers into offices or on site, and Haitian engineers and ministry officials and teachers at work in the street clearing rubble and rebuilding homes. In an indictment of the disconnect between humanitarian aid goals and impacts, the film depicted humanitarian aid as a particular kind of foreign invasion. This argument resonated with students and faculty engaged in science literacy discussion of alien invasions at all scales, and the international affairs and government students who encouraged Peck to continue the dialogue after the screening.

A trained industrial engineer and son of an agronomist who worked in development in Africa, Peck made a strong case for working with and not for those suffering disaster. In class, he drove home the importance of telling stories that matter to the artist, developing and using expertise, and working past the moment you think you're too tired to continue and opportunities emerge. His advice to budding documentarians was straightforward: "be truthful, don't let anything stop you - you will make mistakes but go to the end of whatever you're trying. Don't talk, try." Breaking rules, he suggested, was the only way to find "singularity". We expect Peck's lesson to be taken to heart as MDOCS develops over the next few years and our first students tackle and learn from their documentary projects. (B. Kanfer & J. Dym)

Documentarians on Campus:



On November 7-9, **Ariel Plotnick**, '15, President of WSPN, attended *Third Coast*, "the hub for all the best audio documentaries in the world." Interview, Jennifer Hoffer, '16

Can you summarize your experience at Third Coast?

It's an organization that listens to and collects a ton of audio documentaries and makes them visible to the public... basically the hub for all the best audio documentaries in the world... [I was] basically being at the epicenter of everything happening in radio and podcasting and audio documentary.

What kind of stories did you hear?

One woman did an abstract piece about heartbreak. It was very poetic. Usually audio documentary is narrative... there was no narrator, so it was just people talking about love... it sounds... cliché, but it was really beautiful!

What was it like to be a college student there?

There were no other college students – there were 540 people there ... and I'm pretty sure I was the youngest... independent producer there. It was really empowering, I felt.

How was it that you ended up attending this conference?

I have known about this conference for four years... and once I became the president of WSPN, I felt like I had more credibility to attend. I met with Jordana [Dym] at the beginning of the year... and she offered to help me get grant money and I applied for Student Opportunity Fund support. Part of the deal is that I'll do a presentation about the conference for the MDOCS board.

What kind of storytelling do you prefer?

The thing I aspire to make... is long form feature narrative journalism ...like *This American Life*, where it's a little more emotional and a little more human... you're interviewing someone about a crazy story, and it's crazy because it's interesting and the themes of the story are universal.

What is it that draws you to audio documentary over other forms?

... I'm drawn to audio is because it's really, really intimate. When you're listening to something... in your car or your room and there is a moment of suspended reality and it feels like they're talking to just you, but they're actually talking to thousands of people. When you go to the movies, you're in a crowd ... but with radio it's not an obvious communal experience. I think that intimacy is really beautiful and allows the imagination to kick in. If you're listening to something and don't have visuals, the storyteller has to be really skilled at how to tell the story: 'How do I tell the story? How do I make it vivid and engaging without having visual components?'

WHAT'S UP, DOC?

Co-Sponsored by Media & Film Studies



NOAH
THROOP

PRODUCTION & PROGRAMMING INTERN
AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY | POV

join us for a screening of

HOME *and* WHERE THE FOOD GROWS

November 18th, 3:30 PM, LI 113

PIZZA AND DISCUSSION TO FOLLOW AT 5PM

MDOCS

John B. Moore Documentary Studies Collaborative
Phone: 518-580-5271

Email: mdocs@skidmore.edu
Website: <http://www.skidmore.edu/mdocs>

Documentary & Visual Literacy Lab:
Scribner Library 113

SKIDMORE
C O L L E G E