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)*
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

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**Multimedia Storytelling**

**Spring Planning**

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**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!*

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**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!*

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**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)*
(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)
WHAT'S UP, DOC?

Co-Sponsored by Media & Film Studies

join us for a screening of

HOME
and
WHERE THE FOOD GROWS

NOAH THROOP
PRODUCTION & PROGRAMMING INTERM
AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY | POV

November 18th, 3:30 PM, LI 113
PIZZA AND DISCUSSION TO FOLLOW AT 5PM

MDOCS

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Documentary & Visual Literacy Lab:
Scribner Library 113

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