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Chesapeake Project Course Revision

I regularly teach ENGL 245, Film Form and Culture, a course that introduces students to fundamentals of film analysis. The course includes a unit on documentary, where a key question is how to distinguish documentary from the narrative fiction film. The film I most frequently have used for this part of the course is *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988), which usefully thematizes issues of documentary's relationship to the truth, fiction-film conventions, and the criminal justice system.

With the insights gained from as a Chesapeake fellow, I have integrated a different film into this part of the course. *Blue Vinyl* (Helfand/Gold, 2002) is a documentary that investigates the environmental impact of polyvinyl chloride (PVC). The film engendered controversy as representatives of the plastics industry pushed back on some of its claims. Integrating these controversies will allow me both to convey content on bioaccumulation of toxins as well as to address issues surrounding the question: How do documentaries (try to) tell the truth?

One of the most prominent insights I gained from the seminar is how fundamental the scalability of sustainability issues is. In other words, sustainability is a web of issues, a complex tangle of both local and global matters. An extension of this idea is that sustainability issues work better when woven into a number of assignments/topics. So immediately following the week on documentary, I will turn to a week on American Independent Cinema. This topic is another example of alternatives to classical Hollywood style, which is the overarching issue of this part of the course. But in the context of sustainability, the film that I have chosen, *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 2004), also relates closely to *Blue Vinyl* because it revolves around the issue of environmental toxins. I will ask the students to write a comparative paper comparing the virtues and limitations of each film's engagement with the issue of sustainability. Which was more effective? What kinds of stylistic choices did the films exhibit? How did that affect the message?

I am looking forward to trying out a number of other combinations for this section of the course and building up even longer threads within the course—about food, for instance, or on the topic of global climate change, where the pairing of *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The Day after Tomorrow* comes easily to mind. The Seminar has also encouraged me to reflect on how prominent the issues of sustainability is within the film history, and a medium-term goal that I have is to create a course on the topic of environmental cinema.