



## **JOUR 503: Visual Literacy and Introduction to Documentary Storytelling**

### **1 Unit**

**Summer 2021 – Mondays – 1-3 p.m.**

**Section:** 21194R

**Location:** HYBRID - ANN 404 and ONLINE, see class schedule for details

**Instructor: Professor Daniel Birman**

**Office:** ANN 204A

**Office Hours:** Mondays 12-1 p.m. or by appointment

**Contact Info:** [birman@usc.edu](mailto:birman@usc.edu), 818.434.4300 (cell)

### **Course Description**

So. You have a camera. You have an idea for a story. And you want to use this camera to turn the idea into a longform story. These are the two important ingredients that launch a story. Now comes the real test: How on Earth do you make a documentary happen? Well, there's a third ingredient: a creative interpretation of story elements that fuel the documentary and make it work visually. How we look at the world around us and translate our vision to a story are the rudiments of documentary work.

JOUR 503 is an introductory class designed to prepare graduate students for the work behind the scenes of documentary and the documentary production sequence at Annenberg. Students begin to explore documentary as a journalistic pursuit by first tackling one of the most important aspects of what all journalists must grasp, *visual literacy*.

For this class, visual literacy, at its core, is the individual interpretation of a setting and finding ways to communicate the results. The components of visual literacy are parsed out by the observational skills of the journalist. From the journalist's observations come:

1. Defining the story
2. Determining the visual elements that are needed to tell the story
3. Observing a setting and sorting out the chaotic elements to find the story
4. Capturing the elements in an organized fashion
5. Piecing the elements together to create a fair and balanced representation of what the journalist observed.

We will discuss the responsibilities of journalists to apply the tenets of visual literacy to documentary work. Next, we will evaluate the work of others to see how these elements are used. And then, we will create an organized approach to achieve these elements for longform storytelling.

Students learn visual literacy through an organized approach to production. Visuals in documentary are sequences that, when assembled, tell their own story. But the decisions on how to interpret the extent of a visual sequence begins well before production begins. This is because our interpretation of the setting has to begin with a clear understanding of what the story is all about. Thus, it becomes the research task that drives the core values of longform documentaries.

Documentaries bring viewers into new worlds and experiences, through the in-depth presentation of journalistically-sound information about real people, places and/or events. Documentary storytelling involves a

range of creative choices about narrative structure, point of view, balance, style, and characters. Students learn the basics – what it is, how it's done, and what mistakes to look out for.

Longform storytelling demands that a story have an angle that is distinctive and interesting. A story begins with an idea, a hypothesis or a series of questions, a curiosity about the world around you. The story becomes more focused throughout the filmmaking process, until it has a compelling beginning, a revealing middle, and a satisfying end.

The industry has evolved dramatically over the years – changes in technology, platforms, the way stories are produced and consumed – changes that have created exciting times for aspiring documentary filmmakers. Students learn the elements necessary to tell strong and competitive stories, and how these are the building blocks to entering the marketplace to pitch, produce and sell ideas.

## **Student Learning Outcomes**

Students taking JOUR 503:

- Gain insight into the overall process of documentary / longform: from development to post-production
- Analyze existing work in the marketplace for a greater understanding about the craft
- Explore visual literacy

This work is the precursor to JOUR 521 and 522, the documentary production and post-production classes, and a master's thesis (or capstone) project.

## **Course Notes**

Grading is based on the instructor's assessment of the effort placed on the assignments. Most of the work in JOUR 503 centers on a student's sense of journalistic values utilized or not utilized in the visual approach to a documentary, and therefore, are often subjective in nature.

The instructor will be looking for well-reasoned statements based on a student's observations and interpretations. The instructor will also look for evidence that the student is providing feedback with journalistic values as guiding tenets to any statement.

## **Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required**

No special proficiency is required. All assignments to be written using Microsoft Word.

## **Required Readings and Supplementary Materials**

### **REFERENCES:**

Through observation (critiquing existing shows), organization, and test shooting, you'll begin to learn the secrets to longform storytelling. In addition to the semester's work, the following may give you an even greater understanding of the history behind documentary and nonfiction television and the work that goes into creating it.

- Book: Bernard, Sheila Curran, *Documentary Storytelling: Making Stronger More Dramatic Nonfiction Films*.
- Prior work by students: *Impact*, USC Annenberg's award-winning student-produced newsmagazine series. <http://www.uscannenbergmedia.com/category/watch/impact>

## Description and Assessment of Assignments

- CJR ARTICLE ANALYSIS:** Students will read and critically evaluate the current state of documentary and the industry. The output will be a Word document that reflects deep thinking about the role of the journalist in documentary filmmaking and the maintenance of moral and ethical boundaries in an environment that values entertainment.
- DOCUMENTARY ANALYSES:** Understanding the elements that go into making a documentary is the first step toward practicing the craft. The assignments all center on this work. Students will identify various aspects of documentaries and analyze them based on the specific visual literacy lecture. What is engaging? What are the visual and narrative interpretations? What works and what does not work, and why? What elements were employed for the storytelling? Also analyze the technical aspects: camera work, editing, use of natural sound, graphics, music. What is the filmmaker’s point of view and style, and what storytelling decisions did he or she make?

## Grading Breakdown of Grade

Grading on the documentary analysis assignments will be based, entirely, on the student’s well-reasoned statements. The analyses are not expected to meet the instructor’s point-of-view, but rather, should reflect the student’s assessment of the criteria centering on journalistic needs and methods used to achieve visual literacy.

***It is expected that students will attend all sessions on time. Attendance is considered professional behavior and will be judged as such. The instructor may, at his discretion, lower a grade by 15% due to lack of professional attendance.***

Assignment	% of Grade
Analysis of CJR article	10%
Analysis of a documentary: observation	15%
Analysis of a documentary: interpretation	15%
Analysis of a documentary: narrative structure	15%
Analysis of a documentary: visual structure	15%
Full analysis of a documentary	30%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Grading Scale

The following is the grade scale that I use to assign letter grades. **It is up to you to keep track of your grades and to make an appointment with me to discuss any concerns you might have.**

95% to 100%: A	80% to 83%: B-	67% to 69%: D+
90% to 94%: A-	77% to 79%: C+	64% to 66%: D
87% to 89%: B+	74% to 76%: C	60% to 63%: D-
84% to 86%: B	70% to 73%: C-	0% to 59%: F

## Grading Standards

### *Journalism*

All assignments will be edited on a professional basis and you will be judged first on the accuracy, fairness and objectivity of your stories. You will then be evaluated for broadcast style, editing, production value, originality and the ability to meet deadlines.

**“A” stories** are accurate, clear, comprehensive stories that are well written and require only minor copyediting (i.e., they would be aired or published). Video work must also be shot and edited creatively, be well paced and include good sound bites and natural sound that add flavor, color or emotion to the story.

**“B” stories** require more than minor editing and have a few style or spelling errors or one significant error of omission. For video, there may be minor flaws in the composition of some shots or in the editing. Good use of available sound bites is required.

**“C” stories** need considerable editing or rewriting and/or have many spelling, style or omission errors. Camera work and editing techniques in video stories are mediocre or unimaginative, but passable. Sound bites add little or no color - only information that could be better told in the reporter’s narration.

**“D” stories** require excessive rewriting, have numerous errors and should not have been submitted. Camera work is unsatisfactory or fails to show important elements.

**“F” stories** have failed to meet the major criteria of the assignment, are late, have numerous errors or both. Your copy should not contain any errors in spelling, style, grammar and facts. Any misspelled or mispronounced proper noun will result in an automatic “F” on that assignment. Any factual error will also result in an automatic “F” on the assignment. Accuracy is the first law of journalism. The following are some other circumstances that would warrant a grade of “F” and potential USC/Annenberg disciplinary action:

- Fabricating a story or making up quotes or information.
- Plagiarizing a script/article, part of a script/article or information from any source.
- Staging video or telling interview subjects what to say.
- Using video shot by someone else and presenting it as original work.
- Shooting video in one location and presenting it as another location.
- Using the camcorder to intentionally intimidate, provoke or incite a person or a group of people to elicit more “dramatic” video.
- Promising, paying or giving someone something in exchange for doing an interview either on or off camera.
- Missing a deadline.

## Grading Timeline

Students are to turn assignments in prior to the class meeting they are due. The instructor will provide written feedback prior to the following class meeting.

## Assignment Submission Policy

- A. All assignments are due on the dates specified. Lacking prior discussion and agreement with the instructor, late assignments will automatically be given a grade of F.
- B. Written assignments must be submitted via e-mail to the instructor per guidelines outlined in class.

- C. The students must use a file naming protocol for the Word document: Jour 503 Assignment Student Name and Date Example: Jour 503 A1 Dan Birman 6-4-2021

## Laptop Policy

All undergraduate and graduate Annenberg majors and minors are required to have a PC or Apple laptop that can be used in Annenberg classes. Please refer to the [Annenberg Digital Lounge](#) for more information. To connect to USC's Secure Wireless network, please visit USC's [Information Technology Services](#) website.

## Add/Drop Dates for Session 773 (7 weeks: 6/28/2021 – 8/15/2021)

- **Wednesday, July 7:** Last day to register and add classes for Session 773.
- **Wednesday, July 7:** Last day to drop a class without a mark of "W" and receive a refund for Session 773.
- **Monday, July 19:** Last day to withdraw without a mark of "W" on the transcript or change pass/no pass to letter grade.
- **Thursday, August 5:** Last day to drop a class with a mark of "W" for Session 773.

## Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

**Important note to students:** Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change based on the progress of the class, news events, and/or guest speaker availability. **Since this class is only seven weeks, it is expected that students will be on time and attend all sessions. I will not tolerate attending to email and social media addiction during class.**

Week	
1	
06.28.2021 (in-person instruction)	<p><b>INTRODUCTIONS</b></p> <p><b>Lecture: Documentary and Nonfiction Television as a Journalistic Pursuit</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Introduction to documentary as a journalistic form</li> <li>▪ An overview of the different realms of nonfiction television</li> <li>▪ Ethics, integrity and respect as pillars for your role as a journalist</li> <li>▪ Exploring passion and creativity behind the craft</li> <li>▪ Maintaining objectivity while having a point of view</li> <li>▪ The blurring lines of journalism and entertainment</li> </ul> <p><b>Assignments:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Read the Columbia Journalism Review article: "<u>Television is making more documentaries than ever – but skipping the journalism</u>"</b> by Danny Funt. (Oct. 2020)</li> <li>- <b>Write a one-page analysis</b> on the CJR article, including thoughts about the current state of the documentary industry, the competing interests between entertainment and journalism, and what the role of the journalist documentarian should be. <b>Turn in as a Word document, e-mailed to instructor.</b></li> </ul>
2	
07.05.2021	<b>** HOLIDAY (OBSERVED): FOURTH OF JULY</b>

**Week**

**3**  
07.12.2021

**\*\* DUE: One-page analysis on documentary and journalism. (Word document e-mailed to instructor before class.)**

**Lecture: The Tenets of Visual Literacy: Observation**

- Defining visual literacy: *what is it?*
- Being an active observer in the world, being curious
- Understanding our own biases and how they affect our observations
- Finding depth: conducting your own analysis and not just accepting things at face-value
- The power of imagery in conveying thoughts and ideas

**Assignments:**

- View a documentary of your choice and write a one-page analysis on the producer's observations. What was the producer **observing**? How did those observations manifest in this particular story? What creative devices were employed in telling this story? And in turn, what did **you** observe? Be prepared to talk about this in class. **Turn in as a Word document, e-mailed to instructor.**

**4**  
07.19.2021

**\*\* DUE: One-page analysis on observations in documentary. (Word document e-mailed to instructor before class.)**

**Lecture: The Tenets of Visual Literacy: Interpretation and Analysis**

- A critical deconstruction of observations into identifiable dimensions: people, locations, actualities, sounds
- The macro and micro perspectives
- Establishing a purpose and point of view: Identifying the story before deciding on which elements to seek
- Visual sequences and the stories they tell in imagery
- The spine sequence and sub-sequences in establishing a complete narrative structure
- How we engage with and interpret the media that we see

**Assignment:**

- View a documentary of your choice and write a one-page analysis on the filmmaker's **interpretation**. What was the filmmaker trying to convey? Whose point of view was the film from and how did the supporting characters contribute? Be prepared to talk about this in class. **Turn in as a Word document, e-mailed to instructor.**

**5**  
07.26.2021  
**(in-person instruction)**

**\*\* DUE: One-page analysis on interpretation in documentary. (Word document e-mailed to instructor before class.)**

**IN-PERSON / Lecture: The Narrative Structure**

- The beginning / prologue: the critical first few moments to hook a viewer in
- The middle: methods for unpacking the story in an effective and meaningful way
- The end: creating a lasting impact
- Parallel story construction: how visual sequences support the narrative
- The roles of the characters we include and how they develop and expand our narrative

**Assignment:**

- View a documentary of your choice and write a one-page analysis on the film's **narrative structure**. Identify what worked or didn't in the narrative structure, and how the established tone contributed to the viewing experience. What creative methods were

<b>Week</b>	
	employed, if any? Be prepared to talk about this in class. <b>Turn in as a Word document, e-mailed to instructor.</b>
<b>6</b> 08.02.2021	<p><b>** DUE: One-page analysis on narrative structure in documentary. (Word document e-mailed to instructor before class.)</b></p> <p><b>Lecture: The Visual Sequence</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Identifying the topic and character style of a documentary, the tone</li> <li>▪ Capturing a variety of shots: establishing, wide, medium, close-ups, cutaways, reactions</li> <li>▪ How seemingly disparate pieces get edited together to tell stories</li> <li>▪ Evoking emotion or feeling in the viewer</li> <li>▪ How sub-sequences fit into a spine sequence to build a full narrative</li> </ul> <p><b>Assignment:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- View a documentary of your choice and write a one-page analysis on the film's <b>visual structure</b>. Identify and describe the nature of the prologue, the number of characters in the story, the number of visual sequences created to make the story, the spine sequence and how many times it appears throughout, and describe the nature of the ending. Comment on cinematic style, editing, etc. <b>Turn in as a Word document, e-mailed to instructor.</b></li> </ul>
<b>7</b> 08.09.2021 <b>(in-person instruction)</b>	<p><b>** DUE: One-page analysis on visual structure in documentary. (Word document e-mailed to instructor before class.)</b></p> <p><b>IN-PERSON / Lecture: The Tenets of Visual Literacy: In Practice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How to apply the tenets of visual literacy to any story we tell</li> <li>▪ How the choices you make will influence the viewers' perceptions</li> <li>▪ The ethics behind the choices we make</li> <li>▪ Constructing meaning from images we capture</li> <li>▪ Maintaining journalistic integrity throughout the story gathering process</li> </ul> <p><b>Assignment:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Re-watch a documentary from earlier in the term and write a 1-2 page re-analysis based on all of the various aspects we covered in the course. How have your observations or interpretations changed? Do you have a different or greater understanding of the filmmaker's intent? Identify the visual sequences, the tone, the style, and narrative structure techniques employed in the film? Frame your analysis through the lens of a journalist documentarian. <b>Turn in as a Word document, e-mailed to instructor.</b></li> </ul>

## Policies and Procedures

### Additional Policies

#### Attendance

Class attendance is *mandatory*. Students are advised to attend the first class meetings of their journalism classes or the instructors may drop them. The School of Journalism adheres to the university policy, which states “an instructor may replace any student who without prior consent does not attend... the first class session of the semester for once-a-week classes. It is then the student’s responsibility to withdraw officially from the course through the Registration Department.”

#### Communication

The instructor expects that graduate students are working professionals and encourages open communication. Students should feel free to contact the instructor by telephone or email. From time-to-time the instructor may decide to send emails to the entire class. It is expected that these emails will be read by the students and will contact the instructor if there are any questions.

#### Internships

The value of professional internships as part of the overall educational experience of our students has long been recognized by the School of Journalism. Accordingly, while internships are not required for successful completion of this course, any student enrolled in this course that undertakes and completes an approved, non-paid internship during this semester shall earn academic extra credit herein of an amount equal to 1 percent of the total available semester points for this course. To receive instructor approval, a student must request an internship letter from the Annenberg Career Development Office and bring it to the instructor to sign by the end of the third week of classes. The student must submit the signed letter to the media organization, along with the evaluation form provided by the Career Development Office. The form should be filled out by the intern supervisor and returned to the instructor at the end of the semester. No credit will be given if an evaluation form is not turned into the instructor by the last day of class. Note: The internship must be unpaid and can only be applied to one journalism or public relations class.

### Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

#### a. Academic Conduct

##### *Plagiarism*

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](http://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

##### *USC School of Journalism Policy on Academic Integrity*

The following is the USC Annenberg School of Journalism’s policy on academic integrity and repeated in the syllabus for every course in the school:

“Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found plagiarizing, fabricating, cheating on examinations, and/or purchasing papers or other assignments faces sanctions ranging from an ‘F’ on the assignment to dismissal from the School of Journalism. All academic integrity violations will be reported to the office of Student Judicial Affairs & Community Standards (SJACS), as per university policy, as well as journalism school administrators.”



In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself, and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course or Learning Lab, without approval of the instructor.

## **b. Support Systems**

*Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call*

[studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling)

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call*

[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press “0” after hours – 24/7 on call*

[studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault)

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)- (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298*

[equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://titleix.usc.edu)

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following *protected characteristics*: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures.

*Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298*

[usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care\\_report](http://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report)

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity | Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776*

[dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu)

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

*USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 821-4710*

[campussupport.usc.edu](http://campussupport.usc.edu)

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

*Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101*

[diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost’s Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

[dps.usc.edu](https://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](https://emergency.usc.edu)

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call

[dps.usc.edu](https://dps.usc.edu)

Non-emergency assistance or information.

*Annenberg Student Success Fund*

<https://annenbergsuccessfund.usc.edu/current-students/resources/additional-funding-resources>

The Annenberg Student Success Fund is a donor-funded financial aid account available to USC Annenberg undergraduate and graduate students for non-tuition expenses related to extra- and co-curricular programs and opportunities.

## About Your Instructor

**Daniel H. Birman** is an award-winning documentary producer and Professor of Professional Practice at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. He is executive producer for *Impact*, the school's student-produced documentary series currently featured on Spectrum News 1, L.A.'s first 24-hour news channel.

Birman recently completed a feature documentary for Netflix, *Murder to Mercy: The Cyntoia Brown Story*. This critically-acclaimed documentary explored juvenile justice issues centering on the case of Cyntoia Brown, a story that he spent 15 years producing. He also recently completed a documentary for CuriosityStream, *St. Patrick's Greatest Gift*, based on the *New York Times* Bestsellers book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, by Thomas Cahill.

Birman also produced *The Earliest Americans* for CuriosityStream, about new and controversial scientific evidence that suggests that humans crossed into North America earlier than previously theorized. *The Hunt for Dark Matter* was about the groundbreaking technology used to find evidence of dark matter in the universe, and *Conscious Capitalism* was about a new business model that is more environmentally friendly and puts priority on its workers. Prior, he produced a web series called *Sentencing Children*, in a joint journalistic collaboration between Independent Lens and *The Tennessean* about the fight to change juvenile sentencing laws in Tennessee.

Dan Birman spent six years producing and directing the world-acclaimed documentary *Me Facing Life: Cyntoia's Story*, which aired on PBS | Independent Lens. This story follows a 16-year-old girl who is received a life sentence for murder in Tennessee, and the deep social issues that contributed to her fate. The documentary was selected by ITVS for its Community Cinema program, where it was screened in 98 cities around the country. The story went viral in 2017, bringing greater attention to the need to change sentencing laws in Tennessee and across America.

Other notable projects: *Perfecting Flight: Bob Hoover*, narrated by Harrison Ford, was about legendary test pilot. *The Big Bang Machine*, a special for PBS | NOVA, about the greatest scientific discovery of modern times, the Higgs boson. *Chasing Speed* (for Velocity) was about motorcycle racer Leslie Porterfield, who beat the world record as fastest woman on a motorcycle at the Bonneville Salt Flats. *Brace for Impact* was an exclusive about Capt. Chesley B. Sullenberger III's successful emergency landing of US Airways Flight 1549 on the Hudson River. This was for TLC and Discovery Channel, narrated by Harrison Ford. *Death of the Universe* for Nat Geo's Naked Science series, explores new theories about how the universe will end. *Europa: Mystery of the Ice Moon*, for Science Channel, explores the possibility life on a moon of Jupiter. *Medical Maverick*, a limited series for Discovery Health, looks at the work of a world-class trauma surgeon. And *Alternatives: Uncovered*, a series for Discovery Health.

Birman serves on the Board of Governors for the Television Academy representing the documentary peer group. He has been instrumental in building one of the largest peer groups in the Academy and helped re-define its awards structure for the Primetime Emmys.