

# CTPR 531: PLANNING THE DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION

## SPRING 2023

**CLASS TIME:** Thursday 9 – 11:50am

**CLASSROOM:** SCB 101

**INSTRUCTOR:** YU GU

**Email:** [yugu@usc.edu](mailto:yugu@usc.edu)

**Cell:** 213-284-6928

**Office hours by appointment Mondays and Thursdays**

**SA:** Quinn Benson-Yates

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### RECOMMENDED TEXTS

- DIRECTING THE DOCUMENTARY by Michael Rabiger (6th Edition, Focal Press, 2015)
- CLEARANCE AND COPYRIGHT: EVERYTHING THE INDEPENDENT FILMMAKER NEEDS TO KNOW by Michael C. Donaldson (5th edition, Silman-James Press, 2023)
- DOCUMENTARY FILM: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION, by Patricia Aufderheide (Oxford Press, 2007)

### \*\*\*\*\* EXPECTATIONS \*\*\*\*\*

This is a graduate level course that requires rigor, dedication, challenging yourself and your classmates. **This class involves research, soul-searching, producing, writing, shooting, editing and pitching** — this requires time and effort. If you want a class to cruise through, this is not for you. The classroom will be a safe space for ideas, experimentation and failure, **respect is absolute**. This means if you're late or absent without notice, if you don't submit your assignments on time, if you don't give feedback, if you put minimal or no effort into your creative work — you are disrespecting your classmates, your professor and yourself (the present student and the filmmaker you aspire to be).

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

The object of this course is to research, develop and pitch a documentary production. There will also be some consideration of documentary fundraising, distribution, and career possibilities. The broader goal is to expose the student to the documentary form as a form of cinematic expression that the filmmaker can use to articulate their own personal vision. Although we will cover some technical issues, this is not a production class; the emphasis is on the larger picture, issues of story, character and structure; aesthetics and meaning and purpose; cultural context; ethics and responsibilities; what you want to express as a filmmaker and why; what you think film can and should be; all brought to bear through class discussion on the specific project you are developing.

You will also be provided with an overview of documentary business issues including fund-raising and distribution.

In recent years the documentary form has been infused with new creative and aesthetic energy. The direct cinema of the sixties and the “balanced” television documentaries of the seventies have given way to a variety of styles and approaches. In addition to discussion of class projects, we will view all or part of numerous documentaries, and consider the almost limitless range with regard to style, tone and subject matter that contemporary non-fiction filmmaking can embrace.

Each student will write a 5-10 page treatment for a 25-minute documentary video or a documentary series, produce a 5-7 minute sample videotape (the pitch tape), and present a 5-7 minute oral pitch for their project. All students will pitch their project on 547 pitch day, even those students who do not wish their projects to be considered for 547, or who are not eligible (you must be a graduate production student, have completed the 507/508 sequence, and preferably have crewed or be crewing a 546 or 547 project). It is possible to co-develop, co-pitch and co-direct a project with another eligible student. The 547 committee will select three documentary projects to be produced in the fall. In 547, the student who has developed a selected project becomes its writer/director and must find qualified and eligible crew members for the other positions on the project.

This course also takes the place of 551 as the prerequisite for a 581 thesis documentary.

## **JOURNALS**

Journals are due each 9am Wednesday by email to me. A lot of your most important learning will happen experientially outside of the classroom. I am interested in how your thinking is developing, what new ideas and observations about your project are coming up, and questions you may be asking yourself about how to proceed. I am especially concerned with how you approach the creative process, how you get to new ideas and concepts, and how you reach deeper levels of understanding of your project. Journals are also a record of your changing connection with and response to the subject matter, which can be useful in retrospect, especially at the production stage.

The journals are private, seen only by me (this restriction doesn't apply if there are any safety or legal implications). You can discuss anything. I will only respond to something in a journal if you ask for a response (e.g., “please help me with this problem”). Occasionally I may ask your permission to bring up in class, anonymously, a topic or issue of general interest mentioned in a journal entry.

## **CLASS SCHEDULE**

**Week 1 — 1/12** General orientation; initial discussion of students' ideas for projects. Class organization into groups. Screen **Fast Horse** <https://youtu.be/3gssNjmEz5M>

**Assignment 1 for wk 2 — due Weds 1/18:** Write descriptive paragraphs about three ideas for documentaries (emailed to Professor on 1/18).

**Journal:** Write a page in your journal submission for Weds 1/18 about things that are important to you. You could write about personal or political concerns, aesthetics, demons, social issues, what makes you angry, sad, or happy.

**Reading:** Rabiger, Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4.

**Films to Watch: Beginnings of the Genre in Western Film**

- Robert Flaherty “Nanook of the North” 1922 (78mins) <https://youtu.be/lkW14Lu1lBo>
  - Reading: <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/42-nanook-of-the-north>
- John Grierson “Drifters” 1929 (40mins) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqeHMh7ViLg>
  - Reading: <http://artsites.ucsc.edu/faculty/gustafson/film%20161.f08/readings/griersonprinciples.pdf>
- The Story of Film: An Odyssey - Episode 1: Birth of Cinema 1900-1920 <https://tubitv.com/series/300005711/the-story-of-film-an-odyssey> - early cinema as documentary ie. Lumière’s “Employees Leaving the Lumière Factory” 1895

**Week 2 — 1/19** Discuss “Nanook” and “Drifters”, discuss research ideas with class. Screen **New Shoes, A Brief History of John Baldessari**.

**Assignment for wk 3 — due 1/25:**

- “Get out of the car” exercise (see separate sheet)
- Do preliminary research and write a one-page description of one project (to be submitted 1/25)

**Reading:** Rabiger, Chapters 5,6, and 7.

**Films to Watch: Cinema Verite - Classic and Contemporary**

- Frederick Wiseman “High School” 1968 (1hr 14mins) <https://www.kanopy.com/en/usclib/video/2332161>
  - Reading: <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/cinema-verite-the-movement-of-truth/>
- Maysles Brothers “Grey Gardens” 1976 (1hr 35mins) <https://www.kanopy.com/en/usclib/video/113031>
- Michele Stephenson & Joe Brewster “American Promise” 2013 (2hrs 14mins) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YuZSc9x1fs>

**Week 3 — 1/26** Discuss projects; interview exercises. Screen *Huntsville Station*  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/opinion/huntsville-station-reentry-prison.html>

**Assignment for wk 4 — due 2/1:** Continue research; locate, pre-interview, and write descriptions of three potential characters for your project (**email this written portion to all of us by Weds 2/1 at 9am**).

**Reading:** Rabiger, Chapter 17, 18 & 31 (interviewing chapter).

**Films to Watch:** Activist Films & Social Justice

- Lourdes Portillo “Senorita Extraviada” 2001 (1hr 16mins) <https://www.kanopy.com/en/usclib/video/2594320>
- Garrett Bradley “Time” 2020 (1hr 21mins) [https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B08J7DDGJY/ref=atv\\_dp\\_share\\_cu\\_r](https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B08J7DDGJY/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r)
- Errol Morris “The Thin Blue Line” 1988 (1hr 41mins) [https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B001D6LJIW/ref=atv\\_dp\\_share\\_cu\\_r](https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B001D6LJIW/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r)

**Week 4 — 2/2** Discuss characters & projects. Screen *My Dead Dad’s Porno Tapes*  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/19/opinion/my-dead-dads-porno-tapes.html>  
*Echolocation, F\*cked Like a Star.*

**Assignment for wk 5 — due 2/8:** **Group A** - Conduct a video interview, select a 5 minute segment to be screened, unedited, in 2/9 class.

**Reading:** Rabiger, Chapters 19, 20, 21, 22 & chapter 31 pg. 449 — 471

**Films to Watch:** Experimental/ Personal

- Chris Marker “Sans Soleil” 1983 (3hr 28mins) <https://www.kanopy.com/en/usclib/video/218577>
- Rea Tajiri “History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige” 1991 (32mins) <https://www.kanopy.com/en/usclib/video/218577>
- Kirsten Johnson “Cameraperson” 2016 (1hr 42mins) [https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B01MT48I8A/ref=atv\\_dp\\_share\\_cu\\_r](https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B01MT48I8A/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r)
- Yance Ford “Strong Island” 2017 (1hr 47mins) Netflix

**Week 5 — 2/9** **Group A** - Screen and discuss uncut 5-minutes of video interview. Discussion of treatments and pitch decks.

**Assignment for wk 6 — due 2/15:**

**Group B** - Conduct a video interview, select a 5 minute segment to be screened, unedited, in 2/16 class.

**Group A** - Write first draft of treatment (1-3 pages), and research report (1 page), including a bibliography of films, books, articles and resource persons you have consulted or intend to consult;

\*\*\* Group A email copies to all of us by 2/15

Reading for discussion on treatments and pitches:

<https://www.documentary.org/core-application>

<https://www.documentary.org/funding/documentary-core-application-project/faq>

**Week 6 — 2/16 Group B** - Screen and discuss uncut 5-minutes of video interview. Screen previous **547 Pitch Tapes**.

Assignment for wk 7 — due 2/22: **Entire class** — read Group A draft treatments and write feedback to colleagues by 2/22.

**Group B** - Write first draft of treatment (1-3 pages), and research report (1 page), including a bibliography of films, books, articles and resource persons you have consulted or intend to consult;

\*\*\* Group B email copies to all of us by 2/22

**Week 7 — 2/23** Screen previous **547 Pitch Tapes**. Discussion of Rights, Clearances, & Permissions. Discuss first draft of **Group A treatments** and research reports.

Assignment for wk 8 — due 3/1:

**Entire class** — **Scene #1**: plan and shoot enough footage for a **scene** involving one or more potential characters, and cut the scene together (it should be no longer than 3 minutes).

**Week 8 — 3/2** Discuss first draft of **Group B treatments** and research reports; Screen **Scene #1**, groups A and B.

Assignment for wk 9 — due 3/8: **Entire class** — Groups A & B — Write second draft of treatment (3-5 pages), including bio.

\*\*\*\*email to all of us, latest 3/8.

Shoot/edit a **Scene #2** of pitch tape to screen on 3/9.

**Week 9 — 3/9** Groups A and B screen **Scene #2**. Discuss second draft treatments. Components of an oral pitch.

Assignment for wk 10 — due 3/22: Both groups — Complete **Rough Cut of Pitch Tape** and prepare to screen in class on 3/23 along with rough oral pitch.

**SPRING BREAK 3/12-3/19**

**Week 10 — 3/23** Screen **Rough Pitch Tapes** and practice **Rough Pitch**.

Assignment for wk 10 — due 3/29: Complete final written treatments; **submit to instructor (digitally) 547 documentary selection committee (digital or hard copies, TBA) and to SA.**

Prepare for Dress Rehearsal on 3/30 of final pitch tapes and oral presentations.

**Week 11 — 3/30** **DRESS REHEARSAL OF PITCHES: Pitch tape & oral pitch.**

**\*\*\* FRIDAY, 4/7 — PITCH DAY \*\*\***

**Week 12 — 4/13** Pitch Recap. Budgeting overview with sample budgets.

**Week 13 — 4/20** Fundraising, distribution, documentary industry landscape. Instructor/class evaluations.

**Week 14 — 4/27** Speaker TBD ie. doc series showrunner, editor, composer.

**Week 15 — 5/4** Individual conferences by request.

**GRADING CRITERIA**

Class contribution	15%
Final written treatment	20%
Final video pitch tape	20%
Final oral pitch	20%
Journal, other assignments	15%
Attendance, deadlines	10%

Class contribution includes reading and viewing (in advance at times; see the schedule above) the assignments of the other students, and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

Class attendance includes being on time to class (otherwise, the students who present their material first are short-changed). It is also considered inexcusable in professional film production, and you should develop the discipline in film school of always being on time. Anyone not in class at 9:00 or at the end of the break is considered late. Two times being late equals one unexcused absence. Written medical explanations are required for excused absences, in advance (by email) except in case of emergency. Two unexcused absences result in a lowered grade; four absences are grounds for failing the class. If you are late for any reason, you will be considered absent. Assignments will be evaluated both on the quality of the work and the ability to meet deadlines.

ALL STUDENTS ARE EXPECTED TO UNDERSTAND AND ABIDE BY THE USC SCHOOL OF CINEMA-TELEVISION SAFETY GUIDELINES. VIOLATIONS OF ANY OF THE SAFETY GUIDELINES MAY RESULT IN DISCIPLINARY ACTION RANGING FROM CONFISCATION OF FOOTAGE TO EXPULSION FROM THE UNIVERSITY.

## REFERENCE WEBSITES

[www.documentaryproducersalliance.org](http://www.documentaryproducersalliance.org)

[www.documentary.org](http://www.documentary.org) (doc resources)

[www.mediarights.org](http://www.mediarights.org)

[www.kqed.org](http://www.kqed.org) (on-line California based short films)

[www.withoutabox.com](http://www.withoutabox.com) (film festivals)

[www.doculink.org](http://www.doculink.org) (doc filmmakers list-serve and website)

[www.studentfilmmakers.com](http://www.studentfilmmakers.com)

[www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov) (for the PBS series Point of View)

[www.pbs.org/independentlens](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens)

[www.indiewire.com](http://www.indiewire.com) (online film journal)

[www.namac.org](http://www.namac.org) (National alliance for Media Arts and Culture)

[www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org) (Independent Television Service)

[www.ifp.org](http://www.ifp.org) (Independent Feature Project)

[www.d-word.com](http://www.d-word.com) (doc filmmakers resource)

[www.medialawyer.com](http://www.medialawyer.com) (international entertainment, multimedia, intellectual property law and business network)

[www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) (movie data base)

[www.media-alliance.org](http://www.media-alliance.org) (activist media)

[www.fullframefest.org](http://www.fullframefest.org) (doc film fest)

[www.truefalse.org](http://www.truefalse.org) (doc film fest)

[www.blackstarfest.org](http://www.blackstarfest.org) (BIPOC film fest)

[www.creativecommons.org](http://www.creativecommons.org) (media sharing, license free music, etc.)

[www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org) (archive footage, free to use)

## DIGITAL POLICY

No digital devices (smartphones, tablets, laptops) may be used in class, other than note-taking by the filmmaker whose work is being discussed, or by explicit permission from the instructor. Make notes to yourself handwritten in a paper notebook.

## ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS PITCHING TO DIRECT 547 DOCS

In addition to the pre-reqs for interested candidates – grads 508 & 531; undergrads 450, 310 & 431 – students must disclose any reasons preventing their projects from adhering to the customary sat/sun shooting times at the time they make the decision to pitch. They are encouraged to gather a crew interested in their project prior to pitch day even though it is understood that crew commitments can still stay open until the Wednesday following Friday pitch day. This deadline importantly must be met in order for the project to be ‘green lit.’

## STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC CONDUCT AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

### STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one’s own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another’s work as one’s own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. SCampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the University Student Conduct Code (see University Governance, Section 11.00), while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A

### Academic Conduct:

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, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

### Support Systems:

*Student Counseling Services (SCS)* – (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. [engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling)

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline* – 1 (800) 273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP)* – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call  
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. [engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp)

*Sexual Assault Resource Center*

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: [sarc.usc.edu](http://sarc.usc.edu)

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance* – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. [equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu)

*Bias Assessment Response and Support*

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support)

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs*

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. [dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu)

*USC Support and Advocacy (USCSA)* – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa)

*Diversity at USC*

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. [diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)

*USC Emergency Information*

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible. [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)

*USC Department of Public Safety – UPC: (213) 740-4321 – HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24-hour emergency or to report a crime.*

Provides overall safety to USC community. [dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu)

<p><b>PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</b></p>
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