



**Documentary Filmmaking:
A Filmmaker's Approach to Crafting Stories from Real Life
Spring 2024
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Session Dates: February 27th, March 12, March 19, April 2, April 9, April 16
Each session will meet from 2:30-4 p.m.

Overview:

Great documentaries are political, emotional, visceral, funny, heartbreaking, energizing. They make us care about things we might not have known we would care about: a summer camp for disabled kids in the 1970s, an elderly sushi chef in Japan, the New York City Welfare office, a chimp raised as a human.

How did these filmmakers take stories that meant something to them and turn them into stories that would mean something to us? How can we begin to approach subjects we care about and turn them into compelling docs?

Documentaries are also about seeing the world — or an event, or a given political or social issue — through a particular framework, and persuading an audience that that's the right framework to use. In that sense, documentaries can be just like the other analytical vehicles — academic papers, op-ed pieces, journalistic exposés, etc. — to help people see the world in a new light.

No two documentaries are the same, which is one of the thrilling and terrifying things about making them — you never know how to make the film you are about to make, until you solve it. However, we can learn the tools of story and the basic film languages at our disposal to make our films possible.

This study group will take a filmmaker's approach to look at how we craft stories from real life. We will explore a wide range of documentaries — past and present — to try to understand what makes them work and why. We will examine vérité filmmaking, interviewing, directing the camera, creating narrative through-lines, imposing a structure on non-narrative material, and the ethics of documentary. We will address these questions with a practical hands-on approach, in a collaborative, constructive conversation. In our six 90-minute sessions, there will be active in-class work, but minimal work outside of class. At the end of the program each student will pitch and workshop a documentary they hope to make.

Day one - Documentary Story

In our first session we will discuss the basic elements of narrative structure and how we apply those elements to non-fiction material.

We will start to examine how different docs are able to turn an issue into a story - how they turn real life into compelling and contained narratives that are emotional and gripping, and importantly, how these stories are told visually. To get in the practice of visual storytelling, we will prepare for each student to go out and find a story happening in the world and capture it using only 12 still photographs.

Day two - Photo Assignments

We will look at each student's photo-assignment and ask ourselves what story is being told, what images best convey the story the filmmaker is trying to tell. We will look at how, in a few still images, without manipulating the action, students are able to establish a beginning, middle, and end of a story, how they are able to establish characters and their needs and obstacles. This is foundation of visual storytelling.

Day three - Cinema Verité

Action reveals character is the underlying secret power of verité filmmaking.

We will explore examples of cinema verité in documentaries and try to understand this technique's powerful effect on viewers, and how we might achieve this as filmmakers.

We will look at examples from Frederick Wiseman, Barbara Koppel, Zachary Heinzerling, and several others.

Day four - Interview Films

How do we make an interview feel dynamic, vibrant, and alive? How do we make the audience feel that something is at stake in front of the camera?

We will look at how different directors approach this challenge - Martin Scorsese, Erroll Morris, Sarah Polly, Ava Duvernay, and others. We will discuss how we can make our interviews cinematic and thrilling - what questions we ask, how we phrase our questions, how we listen actively in order to achieve the effects we want. We will prepare for our next class of in-class interviewing.

Day five - Interviewing

In this class we will practice interviewing each other. We will try to learn from being on either side of an interview what might be possible in this dynamic - how we can pull the greatest possible interview out of our subjects to achieve the strongest possible story.

Day six - Pitching

Each student will pitch a doc they want to make. Why does this story matter? How will they grab our hearts and minds to make us understand why it matters? What film languages will they use to dramatize the questions they are seeking answers to in their films? We will pull from everything we've learned and workshop each other's ideas to best prepare everyone to make the film they want to make.

About the Instructor

Lizzie Gottlieb directs film and theater in New York. Lizzie's most recent film, *Turn Every Page - The Adventures of Robert Caro and Robert Gottlieb*, was released last year by Sony Pictures Classics and played in theaters across the country. The film won several festival awards, was named one of the Five Best Documentaries of the Year by the National Board of Review, and was a New York Times Critic's Pick.

Lizzie's first film, *Today's Man*, is about her brother who is on the Autism Spectrum. It aired on PBS (Independent Lens). Her film *Romeo Romeo*, about a young lesbian couple on a quest to have a baby, was also on PBS (America Reframed), and won the NLGJA award for Excellence in Documentary.

She founded and ran an Off-Broadway theater company dedicated to producing new plays at accessible prices. With that company, Pure Orange Productions, she produced and directed plays including Keith Bunin's *The Principality of Sorrows* with Robert Sean Leonard, David Lansbury, and Joanna Going; *Marking* by Patrick Breen, starring Peter Dinklage, Amy Ryan, Aidina Porter, and Maria Tucci. Other productions included Jonathan Marc Sherman's *Evolution* with Josh Hamilton and Peter Dinklage, Noel Coward's *Private Lives* with Sara Ramirez, and *Fifth Planet* by David Auburn with Christina Kirk and Michael Ian Black. Gottlieb directed plays for Naked Angels, New York Stage and Film, malaparte, and Julliard.

Lizzie teaches Documentary Directing at the New York Film Academy. She is currently working on a film about Vietnam deserters.