

Nancy Schiesari

Description

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Profession: Cinematographer, Director, Associate Professor at University of Texas at Austin

Nationality: United States

Schooling: BFA Central School of Art , London. MFA Royal College of Art, London

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Interviewed by David Roche & Marine Soubeille

Nancy Schiesari is a US-American director, producer and cinematographer and is currently [Professor of Film Production at the University of Texas at Austin](#). She worked as an Assistant Cinematographer and a Cinematographer in Great Britain in the 1980s before returning to the USA in the 1990s. She directed her first short, *Loaves and Fishes*, in 2000 and has produced and directed five feature-length documentaries since. She founded MOTI-Productions in 2010. Most of her films were broadcast on

PBS and can be viewed on the [production company's website](#).

David Roche is Professor of Film Studies at Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, a 2022-27 IUF Senior member and President of SERCIA. His recent publications include the monographs *Arrival* (2024) and *Meta in Film and Television Series* (2022), and the collected volumes *Edgar Poe et ses motifs à l'écran* (2023, with Vincent Souladié), *Transnationalism and Imperialism: Endurance of the Global Western Film* (2022, with Hervé Mayer) and *Women Who Kill: Gender and Sexuality in Films and Series of the Post-Feminist Era* (2020, with Cristelle Maury).

Marine Soubeille is a PhD Candidate at Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier and teaches at the Université de Lorraine. Her research focuses on the representation of Texas identity in film and series and the historiographic potential of audiovisual fictions.

David Roche: Can you give us a sense of your background, from your work in the industry to teaching at UT for instance. Your education, jobs you might have had.

Nancy Schiesari: I was born of Italian immigrant parents, who came over to the United States after World War 2 when they were in their mid-thirties. My dad had been a doctor in World War II, and when he came to the States, he had to do his exams all over again. He settled in the Deep South of all places because that's where they needed doctors. So I ended up growing up in Jackson, Mississippi, during [Jim Crow](#). I was born in 1951. The first time my parents took me to Europe I was seven years old, I think. We would go back to Italy and visit grandparents (my father was from Venice, my mother from the Florence area) on a regular basis and I really enjoyed those trips. When I was sixteen or seventeen, I took my first trip to London. I got on a bus by myself and visited the Tate Gallery because I loved painting, and I saw Degas's famous statue of the little ballerina. That's when I knew I wanted to be in that city. So after high school, instead of going to university or college, I went to the [Central School of Art in London](#) and ended up getting a BFA in studio art painting. I was painting at a time when the British scene was copying everything coming out of New York, and at that time what was in fashion were big field paintings, abstract paintings, flat paintings. [Figurative painting](#) was dead in their minds. I happened to be a figurative painter. I responded to the figure and reinterpreted the figure on a flat space, basically that was my instinct. So the professors gathered around me at my first assessment and told me figurative painting was dead: photography has taken over the figure; painting is about two dimensions and surface. It was terrible. But I did end up painting abstractly and came to appreciate the form.

I went to Italy after London and got another degree in art. While in Italy, I had a kind of epiphany. I saw a cameraman working one day, the very same day that I watched a [Ken Loach](#) movie entitled [Family Life \(1971\)](#). When I saw that film, I thought to myself, "Whatever that is, I want to be part of something like that. I want to work with people who are doing this." And then I saw this cameraman shooting and I think he even let me look through the lens. It clicked. I said to myself, "Okay, this is what I want to do. I want to be a cinematographer where I can continue to frame and light and paint, but I'll be doing it in motion with the camera, and working with a team of people who have something to say." Because painting is wonderful, and I sometimes wonder if I took the wrong path, but with a painting, you just hope it's going to end up on somebody's wall and that's about it. A film, if it can reach people, has

more impact. Also the Vietnam War was ending while I was studying in Italy, and I just felt like I had to go into a political space, as a young twenty-year-old, to try and make a difference.

After that, I went back to London and was accepted at the [Royal College of Art](#) to do an MFA in film. I had the same problem in graduate school as before: they were doing [post-structuralist cinema](#), basically the equivalent of banning figurative art and painting. You couldn't make films that had any catharsis in it. It was a very Brechtian approach to cinema; you had to introduce a conceit within the film that somehow made you conscious it was a construction. I was going into film to express emotion and politics and take sides with people. But I was going to a college where this structuralist approach was dominant; it felt like another very repressive situation.

At that point, I wanted to be a cinematographer and I was realizing that, in my own student groups, the people that were asked to shoot were the same two guys who were big guys and wore these blue jackets and did roll-ups. Somehow people just assumed they would be better cameramen. It took me a long time to get my first break in cinematography in the film industry in the UK. At that time, to work in the industry one had to belong to the ACTT ([The Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians](#)), a trade union in the United Kingdom which existed from 1933 to 1991. It operated like a guild to keep people out. So it was very hard to get in. And the way you got in was in this roundabout way where someone had to put your name on a waiting list. This was the late 1970s, so there were no cell phones or any kind of social media. All you could do was put yourself on a waiting list, and a cinematographer might come in and say, "I need a camera assistant for this shoot." They would go to their list of union first assistant camera members and they would say, "Oh, this person is available." If the cameraperson was your friend, he could call in and say, "Oh, I tried that person. They're not available. Is so-and-so on the wait list?" And they would go, "Yes, I have a Nancy Schiesari." And they'd say, "I'd like to work with her today." So only by this roundabout way could you become a part of the union. So I got my foot in the door that way and then they put you through a big rigmarole. So I went to Soho Square; it's a very fancy building with an enormous stairwell. I went all the way up and knocked on two huge mahogany doors and inside was a large table with all these top cinematographers sitting around, considering my application to join the union. And they said things like, "Oh, have you considered being an animation camera operator—a rostrum camera operator." [A rostrum camera](#) goes up and down over still things. And then another one said, "Would you be able to carry a 35mm camera rig up the mountain?" And then one sympathetic guy said, "Oh, come on, you know the grips help with that." The grips are the guys that carry the tracks and everything. Anyway, another asked, "Surely you'd rather direct. Why do you want to be a cinematographer?" I told them and left.

David Roche: So they were all men.

Nancy Schiesari: Oh, yeah. At the time, there was only one woman, [Diane Tammes](#), in the union—only one woman in the whole of the UK who could work, because you couldn't work in the industry if you weren't a member of the union. Now it's changed, of course, like it has almost everywhere. On Hollywood features you join [IASTE](#). But I just remember thinking as I went back down those stairs, "Well, how many women do I see in London getting on the bus with their pram, with one kid in one arm and shopping in the other, plus a pram?" Just the heavy things that women have to carry up and down stairs all the time! Anyway, I got a phone call from a sympathetic guy the next day and he said, "You're in the union. You can start claiming unemployment pay if you're not working." So that was pretty nice. I didn't apply for unemployment and started getting jobs.

That's how I got my big start in cinematography. Then I got another big break. [Ken McMullen](#), an independent feature filmmaker in London, who's made a lot of films, offered me the job of shooting [Partition \(1987\)](#), which was a 35mm feature for Channel 4 about the partition of India. I don't know how and why he did it but he did. I pulled it off and it looked great; it looked really good.

From then on, my career started stepping along. But the reality is that I had one child, Felix, when I did *Partition*, from a ten-year marriage that did not work out. And then I met my second partner Paul on the set of *Partition*. He was the production designer and he was really amazing; he built this incredible set that expresses the schizophrenia of Partition, how the Indians who internalized their Englishness go along with the British; they accepted partition. *Partition* is a fabulous film, a meditation on the concept of partition more than a narrative story. Paul designed and built the set and I lit his set and I shot through the set and we had each other's backs and then we started dating after the shoot and then I got pregnant. My career was really just taking off and Paul was really supportive. He said, "Whatever you want to do. If you want to keep the baby, I'll be thrilled. If you don't, it's fine with me; I just value our relationship." I went to the Elizabeth Anderson Garrison Hospital in London, which was an all women's hospital with all women doctors at that time. That's where I shot my first documentary, *Save the EGA* (Elizabeth Garrison Hospital).

It was my first paid job where I was the cinematographer and I did these cool tracking shots through these wards of empty beds. Anyway, the hospital was saved, and here I was going to look into the possibility of an abortion. So they put me on a sonogram and I looked over at the sonogram and I saw the fetus and she had these arms and hands waving in the amniotic fluid. I didn't know it was a she, but I went, "Oh my god – an artist!" Paul was downstairs waiting. I said, "I think we should—I think I'm going to keep her. We're going to keep her." I didn't know it was a "her" yet; you know, they didn't tell you in those days.

So I had Eleanor, which meant I had a small two-year-old and a baby. I was still getting work and Paul was also getting work, but it was starting to get hard and I think I resented him going off on shoots and me taking care of the kids, and he resented not working and taking care of the kids when I had a film shoot. It was not like you could get a nanny to stay for that long; you wouldn't keep a nanny there for two weeks with your baby. I also started getting depressed—what is called postpartum depression. I think because if you have children late in life and your mid-thirties, it's really traumatic on the body and things happen; it's real hard to get back. But you know, I just kept doing what I loved doing and then I had an opportunity to come to the States.

This was in 1990. I came to the States for one semester. I was teaching in London at the time at the London College of Printing (now the London Institute of the Arts). I got this exchange with a teacher in Oakland, California, and we swapped jobs. When I was there, I started getting offers to shoot films. I shot for [Deborah Koons Garcia](#), a feature film called [Poco Loco \(1994\)](#). The kids were so happy: it was California, not gloomy London. Peter, Felix's dad, my first husband, also started teaching in Flagstaff and he wanted to stay. I ended up in getting this job in Austin and I started living with the two kids and adapting to an American life, with school and sports and everything. Every summer the children went to spend time in London with their dads and their dads came here—even both of them at the same time on one occasion. One of my friends said, "You're the only person I know who has had her two ex-husbands living at your place—welcoming them both at the same time!" But we have always stayed close and we have always been friends—there was never any animosity. I took the job at UTA because by then I was already teaching and I loved seeing students develop, but also because the security of the income was important. It was also harder to take jobs that were like, "Okay, next week we need you over here in Pakistan or something." I just couldn't do that: I couldn't leave teaching for that long; I couldn't leave my kids. So I started just gradually making my own films, which I could control, and I've been doing that ever since.

Marine Soubeille: You mentioned this meeting with the union. Was that your first instance of discrimination against women in the industry? Have you encountered other situations like it?

Nancy Schiesari: Yes, there was discrimination. I had another incident in London, too. It was at ITVS. (There were two broadcast networks: there was the BBC and ITVS, which was the BBC's rival and commercially dependent.) I was working as an assistant cameraperson. At that time, an A.C. was responsible for loading the magazines with film, changing lenses, shipping and making sure the stock that you're shooting came from the same batch and had the same emulsion number, the same strip number; all these things have to match, so that all the rolls of film that you get are from the same batch number because they're manufactured in big rolls almost like a hay roll that you see in the fields, and then they're sliced into strips of 16 mm films. They come in a batch from one roll, so it has to come from the same batch because, if you get two or three different batches from two different big rolls, there can be some color discrepancies, etc. I was picking up more film stock from this guy who was a manager there. I noticed he was giving me mismatches and I said, "This isn't good. I need stock with the same emulsion number." First, he complained that I didn't know what I was talking about, and so he was very dismissive. I insisted, "No, this is what we have and what we need." Then he said something about the trouble with women is they don't have a sense of humor. Or rather, he said, "That's the trouble with you Americans." I said, "Well actually, I'm American born but my parents are Italian." He retorted, "Oh, well. I'm Swiss, and you know what we think about Italians." So there was a xenophobic put-down and a dismissive remark about women having no sense of humor. I got the DP to come over and I said, "This guy has said this and this. I want to complain to the union about his comments." All of a sudden, he was going, "Oh, I'm so sorry." But that was the only time. When I started working as a director of photography, I always worked with good men; they were all men pretty much, until I got an opportunity to hire women. And the men were always good people and they were supportive and nice, but there was—yeah, there was often the feeling that, oh, you know, it was hard. It was scary if you made a mistake, and luckily I didn't, but it was really, you know, you felt the eyes were always watching you.

David Roche: That second instance, was that in the late 1970s or early 1980s?

Nancy Schiesari: That was the late 1970s.

David Roche: Since you have experiences in both Great Britain and the United States, though not at the same time, would you say that there are differences in terms of the place of women in the film and television industries in both countries or would you put those differences down to the era?

Nancy Schiesari: One reason why I decided to stay in the States was my experience working with men and women in California was very different from Great Britain. It was California; it was Berkeley; it's the West Coast! What do you expect? But the classism that existed in England was the first thing that bothered me. And there was sexism, racism on top of that, so no one of color ever was—when I was working in England at least—in key roles in a crew. There were some on *Partition* because it was being produced by Tariq Ali and the clapper loader was of Indian descent, but the focus puller was an Anglo guy. He was your classic English guy and he was rude to the Indian guy and bossed him around. I think I might have said something to him once; it was pretty awful. I never saw anything like that in the States when I got here and I loved the atmosphere of film crews here. So that was one reason I stayed here. It made a difference.

Marine Soubeille: You made a documentary about an important woman photographer, [Hansel Mieth: Vagabond Photographer \(2003\)](#). Do you have any women role models and is it important to you?

Nancy Schiesari: Well, actually, a French woman was my role model: [Babette Mangolte](#). She shot Chantal Ackerman's films. She's tough. I got my first gig as a professional A.C. on a feature film to work as Babette's focus puller with [Sally Potter](#) who did *Orlando* (1992) and all these films. Sally's first feature film with the BFI was called [The Gold Diggers \(1983\)](#), starring [Julie Christie](#). We were going to shoot this in Iceland, and it had to be an all women's crew. They looked everywhere to interview a whole bunch of people because there are so few professional women in the British film industry. I was shooting an independent fiction film about Mary Wollstonecraft in East London, set in the eighteenth century, in this beautiful Georgian house, when Babette and Sally Potter came on the set to meet me and see me work and then interview me. We stepped aside after the scenes were done and I went to this small room with them, a beautiful plush room, and we sat down and they told me about the project and said they were looking for an A.C. and would I be interested and I said, "Yeah, sure."

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Hansel Mieth: Vagabond Photographer (Nancy Schiesari, 2003) – Selections

I got the job and we went to Iceland. There I learned with the best [Babette Mangolte]. It was fascinating to work with an all-women crew in conditions that were pretty rough because it was fall and there were glaciers and it was very cold and very windy. Julie Christie was the main star and she had decided to do this film because she was also kind of pro-feminist and wanted to help women and she had loved the idea and came on board. Because the crew was comprised of women, all the women that did the gaffing and the building and stuff had to be found in these small collectives of women, CO-OPs and things. If you've ever been in a CO-OP, you know you spend maybe a fifth of the day drinking tea and talking about politics and stuff, and the rest of the time you know, you make—art or something. But it's not like a film industry set where everything runs like a car assembly. So all of a sudden these women who had a lot of agency and say in their CO-OPs were suddenly in these very specific jobs where they had to do the same thing every day and always within a hierarchical structure. One day they almost mutinied and we had a big meeting and Sally cried. Nobody knows this; I mean, I've never seen it come up in interviews. Sally Potter cried and tried to explain the process. Also, I had an experience on that set with the clapper loader. There were these big 35mm magazines that we had to carry. One day, the clapper said, with a CO-OP attitude, "I'd like to focus pull. Can we share this job?" Focus puller is a really specific job that requires experience: you get the focus wrong, you screw up the shot and you don't find out until the next day when it's been processed, and the films had to be sent to London to get processed (in those days, there weren't any decent video taps). I said, "Well, it's up to Babette. She's the DP." Babette said to her, "When you can get the clapper loader exactly right in the frame without me having to say 'Go up, go down, go left,' when you can get that right, then we'll talk. But I'm not changing the focus puller at this stage. The focus has already been set. This is a very specific intuitive job. It's already set." So I got to keep my job. But it was that kind of leftovers of the collective mindset, and I'd been in a Marxist poster collective for years so I knew.

You hear that it's important to have people of color and women; it's important to have all these minorities integrated in an industry of any kind. It's totally true. Because if I hadn't worked under Babette and seen how she lit film, how she used beautiful three-quarter light from behind . . . We did all the screen tests together, and I learned so much from her and, more important, she was a woman doing this job and I had only worked for men before. So because I had that experience, I felt like, "Well, she can do it; I can do it." And I had never thought that before; I never had the courage. So when Ken McMillan came along with *Partition*, I said, "Let me. I can shoot your film." Because originally he had asked me if I wanted to be the A.C. on it. I said, "Why don't you let me shoot it and light it?" And he was crazy enough to say yes. Babette was a real force in the sense her example gave me that confidence.

Marine Soubeille: That's awesome. This is a specific question regarding [Citizens at Last \(2021\)](#) . Was it your intention not to depict Minnie Fisher Cunningham as a heroine and to depict the fight for women's suffrage in Texas as a collective effort waged on several fronts, by African American and Mexican-American women and Tejanas as well?

Nancy Schiesari: The film is really a mixture of everything, maybe a little bit too much of a hybrid. I didn't want to focus just on Minnie Fisher Cunningham, even though it really was her story because she powered it through and she was so amazing. But it was also a collective effort and I thought it was really important to show the connections—people don't realize that, for an amendment to pass, you

need three-quarters of all the states to vote on an amendment that's going to change the constitution. To make that majority, a number of those states had to come from the deep south, i.e., the former Confederate states. They had already defeated the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave black men the right to vote, by creating Jim Crow laws, lynching and all these things to intimidate black voters, and the last thing they wanted was another amendment that gave all women the right to vote. So it was very hard to get the vote here in Texas. Minnie Fisher Cunningham was a brilliant strategist; she never stopped and she made these coalitions work and she got behind the scenes and she found the weakness. Texas politicians put out the myth that in other countries women had been given the vote because of their service to helping men in World War One. In this case, it was just that she outsmarted these politicians. So that was really interesting. To make a really good film, you really have to narrow it down and I kind of did the opposite: I wanted to include as much as possible of names and people so that someone might go, "Oh, I've never heard of her. I'm going to look her up." The film's probably loaded with too much information, but it was kind of a conscious choice to do that and sacrifice making a really good film.

Marine Soubeille: Why is it the film doesn't mention "Ma" Ferguson, the first woman governor of Texas?

Nancy Schiesari: She was later; she was much later.

Marine Soubeille: The film does touch on those years a little bit at the end.

Nancy Schiesari: True. "Ma" Ferguson was interesting and funky and crazy. And she wasn't a puppet either; she wasn't her husband's puppet. She made a lot of her own decisions, but to be able to end it—to say, "We think women got the vote in 1921 but not all women got the vote and it took until the sixties for the Civil Rights Act." That's why the film ends with Lulu B. White's story, and the really great part is that I've been able to make five short films about these women that we only mention in the film a little bit. We've got a new film on Lulu B. White and Jovita Idar, a Mexican-American who was from Laredo; we just made a six-minute film about her that will work inside of teachers' lesson plans in Texas.

David Roche: I have a very general question you already touched upon several times, so feel free to answer however you like. What does feminism mean to you? And what's your relationship to feminism and as a person and artist? Would you say it has evolved over the years and how so?

Nancy Schiesari: It really has evolved. I can say when I started teaching at UTA thirty years ago, a narrative production class would have almost twenty students: seventeen or eighteen were young men, three women. The class yesterday where they pitched their five-minute-script ideas, it's about 50/50. The women scripts are really good; they're trying to say something. They move to cinema not just as a professional career, but because of their political and feminist views. Their films are not all necessarily feminist, but they have a kind of humanity in them that I think is a kind of sensibility that has come from being other or being marginalized. The male students' films are really clever and funny. So it's going to be a great mix of films that are smart and funny, and the female films are . . . deeper, I guess. But that I've lived to see such a change is good. As for what feminism means to me. . . Well, my generation thought you could do it all, and I'm not sure about that anymore. It's hard to have a career and be a mom. And it's very hard to give up being a mom if, you know, you want a family, and I see so many women, graduate students having to make that choice. It's just unfair that women still have the burden

of making it all work if they want to have a life of the mind and a child. They're smart; they want to create; they're creative; they love making things.

One of my student's scripts is about a choreographer and she's working with her dancers and then she goes to get a coffee and all of the sudden, you know, she's reaching for her order and a guy reaches for the same order, and then they look and they kind of connect, and then these scenes are played out on the stage also. And then she has to make a choice to leave him to go back to her work because her work starts to fall apart as she gives more and more of her time to the relationship, but she makes the choice to do her work. I thought, "Wow. This is, this is a terrible thing, a terrible choice. I mean, why should you have to choose, you know? Why can't this society be such that children are more integrated into workspaces and you can bring your kids to work and there's a nursery for them? You can visit them at lunch or play with them or whatever." So I think feminism is still important; the big issues are still based around class and who can afford childcare or time off to be with your child. But men have changed so much, too. The younger generation of men are amazing—they get it. They often come from mothers who are not like our mothers—my mother—who gave up and were stay home moms more. My male students' mothers weren't, so their sons are very used to that.

Marine Soubeille: How do you go about funding your films? Are there people you turn to specifically?

Nancy Schiesari: Yeah, it's a nightmare for independent filmmakers because they have to get grants. And these grants take time to write, although sometimes when writing the grants you clarify your ideas, so your treatments get better and better and you're clear about what you're trying to do. It has some benefit. For *Hansel*, I got an ITVS grant. For [Tattooed under Fire \(2008\)](#), I got a grant from ITVS for \$100,000, which was really nice. But all the other films were \$5,000 here, \$10,000 or \$20,000 there. I got a \$10,000 grant from Austin Film Society for [Canine Soldiers \(2016\)](#). For *Citizens at Last*, I was lucky to work with a benefactor, with Ellen Temple who was the executive producer; these films were based on the books she published in the 1980s. It's amazing. These were women and academics working on women's history and Texas women's history, which was not very popular anywhere in the United States, not even in Texas. History departments were run by men—white men—and they were doing World War II or the "big" subjects of history. Napoleon. Writing your PhD on Minnie Fisher Cunningham or any of these women, you might get hired in small colleges somewhere out in the sticks in Texas. And those women scholars, Ellen supported them, some with grants, others by publishing their books. This was in the 1980s. I met up with her five years ago over coffee. I looked her up and saw her books and I said, "Why don't you make a documentary? Why don't you make a film about this?" And she replied, "Would you like to?" So we went ahead and did it.

David Roche: Is diversity important for you when composing a film crew?

Nancy Schiesari: I'm surrounded by students who are much smarter than me, more talented than me and in certain areas: sound design, sound editing, things like that. So I always had the intention of offering real jobs to students, and that's how I use the grant money because I have a salary as a teacher and don't necessarily need the money to pay myself; I used the money to pay these positions. I am really pleased, for instance, with the editor on *Tattooed Under Fire*, [Christina Kim](#); she was an undergrad and I gave her the job of editing and she did a great job, and ended up getting into MFA program at both UCLA and USC. Now she's an editor in LA.

And then Vik [Vikrant Muthusamy], who did beautiful music on *Canine Soldiers*. I don't know if you noticed the music; it was just incredible. Vik's a tall, South Asian student and at the time he was a double major in film and music. He came to see me during office hours and said, "Can I come to your class and ask your students if they need to work with a composer?" I said, "Sure, yeah, we're actually meeting today." So he came down and stood in front of the class and introduced himself and played some of his pieces. I said, "Well, I need a composer for this documentary. It's a paid job. You think you'd like to do it?" He accepted. His dream was to write a score like *Braveheart* [Mel Gibson, 1995], his favorite film; he wanted to do big Hollywood scores. I gave him the rough cut of *Canine Soldiers* and he went away and came back with this big score. I said, "It's a documentary."

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Canine Soldiers (Nancy Schiesari, 2016)

You know, the human voice in a documentary is an instrument. You have to give it space and time and work with that. That's your main sound." He went away for two days and came back with a new score and it was perfect; he got it just like that, he understood immediately, dialed it all back and came up with these beautiful, sad moments.

That film was rescued. My original idea for the film was to follow three soldiers with three dogs. They get married with the dogs (they use the word "married") at the beginning based on their autobiography of what the handler's personality is like, so the military matches them with the dog like *match.com*. Then they start training together and bond together, and once they're bonded they deploy. I wanted three different characters: a woman, a Mexican American, an African American. Two or three dog handlers signed on and I started working with them and then they deployed and their orders changed. Things happen in the military; obviously, the military does not care about me and my film! So they make these changes and then I find out and I was going down this path and now I'm going to go another. So the only character that survived with a beginning, middle and end was Radwan, who was Polish, with his dog Dex. We don't realize that many people who join the military during those wars were doing it as a pathway to obtain American citizenship. He was great.

Danielle, I met later; she'd already deployed. She did all her story-telling in the past tense; everything was based on what had already happened. What was so great about Danielle is that I was reading a lot of academic writings on post-humanism (my sister's written a lot about it; she's a post-humanist and has two books about animals in the Renaissance) and these writers (Donna Haraway but also Derrida) inspired me. What I love about documentary is it's real people who are doing the thing and they get it. They might not be academics or intellectuals, but they understand it. So I had a posthumanist discussion with Danielle and told her about the pyramid in Western culture with white males at the top, and then lesser males, and then women, and then animals, and that's the way we've been seeing the world since the Ancient Greeks. And yet, we've realized that animals are super smart in these different things that humans can't do. So it levels the playing field and stops the "humans are the topdog" idea and puts a co-species evolution and dependency and all kinds of things on the table; it makes us less special than we think we are. I was sharing these ideas with Danielle and then she summed it up when she says, "We don't know what animals are really capable of." That dog—he or she just saved your life and everybody behind you, and thanks to him or her, you're still here. So in the film, we then cut to Radwan at home. He was able to join his daughter and his own species thanks to another species. Because of that female or male dog, you're here today. That's the posthumanist argument—that we are here thanks to all our co-interdependent species, especially dogs. Temple Grandin believes Neanderthals didn't survive because they didn't have dogs. Dogs have been with us for ages, in both our everyday lives and dream lives. The first dated burial site has a dog lying next to a young girl.

As a film, *Canine Soldiers* was rescued by the emotion. The intended original structure fell apart—the three people, the interesting character development, what happens with them with their dogs, and then what happens when they come back. You stick with these three characters you get to know them—the classic character-motivated documentary that Americans love; I could never do that well. But what kind of kept the thread was just the emotional thing that was starting to build up towards the end. And it was also Vik's music. When the black soldier says, "You know, I worked with this dog and he was getting

there, but they had to put him down,” and the music just goes silent; it’s the music and the emotion in his voice. So documentary is all about voice and working with that.

David Roche: I love *Canine Soldiers*. I could talk about that movie for hours. It really works. I think it’s very structured, maybe not in the way you had planned it initially, but it’s very much structured by the emotions. There is a trajectory and it’s really interesting that the white soldier is actually, like you said, an immigrant. It decenters the whole thing; he’s white, but he’s also other. And I also find it interesting because, for me, *Canine Soldiers* is maybe more ethical than political.

Nancy Schiesari: Oh, it’s so good to hear. Thanks. It was also shot in 3D, did you know that? It was shot in 3D because I was inspired by Wim Wenders’s film about Pina Bausch in 3D (2011) and Herzog did the caves of Lascaux in 3D (2010) and I thought to myself, “if there’s a film that’s going to represent a dog’s point of view, it’s not going to be a human perspective, and we’ll have to do it in 3D.” We’d been seeing these images on television every night from Iraq and they’re always flat, khaki and sand-colored. I thought we could get the kind of visceral experience of being there in 3D. So we shot in 3D because these Panasonic cameras had come out and they were more or less the same size as regular cameras, but they had two lenses and they shot high-resolution 3D. It was shown only once at the Austin Film Festival at the Alamo Drafthouse when it premiered in 3D, and it was so great! It was like a performance piece because everybody had their glasses on and the soldiers were there, the handlers . . . It was awesome to see it on a big screen in 3D, but it never survived in that form.

Marine Soubeille: From *Tattooed under Fire* to *Citizens at Last*, you made very different kinds of documentaries on various topics. How do you prepare for documentaries depending on their type? Do you have a specific audience in mind when you prepare those films?

Nancy Schiesari: I think it has always been intended for an American audience and usually through PBS, because that’s where they’re shown. There is a thread running through them. A lot of the films are about unknown people who have been hidden from history, like Hansel Mieth. She was an unknown photographer when I met her. She’d been hidden from history because of the McCarthy years. And the one about John Nance Garner [*Cactus Jack: Lone Star on Capitol Hill*, 2016], that’s a film about Texas. He’s somebody who was written off by a number of northern East Coast intellectuals who all adored F.D.R., but F.D.R. couldn’t have done what he did without Garner. Politics is often about compromise and wheeling and dealing, so Garner was an unknown player. His intentions might have been a little shady: he ran against F.D.R. the third time and he was probably part of some kind of southern, conspiracy to oust F.D.R. but as the vice president he made the New Deal possible. He was a Democrat all the way through.

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Cactus Jack: Lone Star on Capitol Hill (Nancy Schiesari, 2016)

The women from the history of Texas [in *Citizens at Last*] were also unknown, as were the OSS, the Italian Americans who volunteered in the military to go on these very dangerous missions [in *OSS in Italy*]. and were dropped behind enemy lines in Italy to work with the resistance and the partisans, to help the Allies advance in Europe. I sought them out all over the East Coast, these working-class guys who had done these very brave things and never had their story told.

So it's about underrepresented people and then it's about form; I try to incorporate different forms. For *Tattooed under Fire*, I felt it needed to be *verité* with the guys, just hanging out with them. But these history films; they're about dead people. And because they were hidden from history, there's little archive film, there are very few photographs. So you have to build the film; you have to build the energy and the "chi" from the narrator's voice [Franchelle Steward Dorn]. So she's really important and so is the writing. Then we have the archive film and get Simon [Quiroz], who teaches special effects at U.C. San Deigo, to make all the photographs move. I'm always looking for ways to articulate content in different ways, to keep the energy flowing..

Marine Soubeille: You had a bit more archival footage for *Cactus Jack*, right?

Nancy Schiesari: Yes, I love archive, and I also love Hansel's work for that. When you researched archive film—before digitization you'd go to NARA, the National Archives in Washington, D.C.—they brought you archive on carts (in those days it was on U-matic tape) and then they hand it to you, and you look at it, and then they roll the thing back to the morgue. They bring these ghosts from history in black and white, that some guy on the corner of some snowy street in Manhattan was filming. We don't have his name, so these cameramen are hidden; they're gone. But with a photographer, even a mediocre photographer, there will be a signature on the back. You'll know where they came from. But all the film archives . . . it was a thrill to find this archive and to be able to say "That's a good shot. That guy had a great eye," and we can use those shots to build a sequence. Hansel did that with the way she shot stills—she wasn't a Cartier-Bresson—but she would go and work a scene like a documentary cinematographer goes into a space, figures out the geography, thinking: "I'll do a wide shot here. I'm going to move in now and cover these people talking. I'm going to shoot somebody looking across the room so I can cut to someone listening." That's how she built it. It was perfect for *Lifemagazines* because it was a layout; you had all these different shots like a movie scene. She was really good at doing coverage, and as a cinematographer of documentary, I got it right away. That's why I loved her work, and she was a hero to me for that, too.

Marine Soubeille: You told us a little bit about what connects your different films together, the idea that their subjects were forgotten people, people history forgot. But your work is also Texas-centered. Is that a deliberate choice or is it just chance?

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Cactus Jack: Lone Star on Capitol Hill (Nancy Schiesari, 2016)

Nancy Schiesari: That's a good question. I did an interview with all the historians [in *Citizens at Last*] because they too have been hidden from history as women historians who chose these subjects, so I made sure we did a short bio piece about the historians who contributed to go on the website Citizensatlastfilm.com, since we had a crew and everything—and, Merline Pitre, the black historian who wrote a book about Lulu B. White, this very important Civil Rights activist in Texas, said she went to university as the daughter of sharecroppers in Louisiana. Her first PhD was in French and then she decided to do another PhD in History. Since she was teaching at a college in Texas, she said to herself, "Why, I might as well research what's here." So that's the same reason I focused on Texas stories. For *Tattooed Under Fire*, I was friends with the owner of the tattoo parlor, which is forty minutes north of Austin. She told me about these soldiers who were coming in her shop to get tattooed and she couldn't believe their stories, and I said, "Well, someone should just be documenting that." She answered: "Come up any time."

Marine Soubeille: So that's how you choose your topics?

Nancy Schiesari: Yes, one leads to another, or in this case, I'm having coffee with someone and they go: "Oh, would you like to do that?" and I go: "Yeah, okay."

David Roche: We were wondering how your work as a cinematographer might have informed your documentary filmmaking.

Nancy Schiesari: Well, I like working with cinematographers. I know what to ask from them. Some stuff I shoot myself, like the opening of *Canine Soldiers*. I heard about a dog funeral, a military burial for a dog. I said, "Well, that's got to be in the film." So I went up there by myself, stayed with a friend in Detroit, and filmed the ceremony where the soldier is crying and holding the flag. I moved around—I think like an editor when I'm shooting and make sure there's an establishing shot again, like Hansel was doing—and I ran alongside filming the soldier carrying her dog's ashes. I didn't care that people were staring at me because once you have a camera next to your face you feel almost invisible. So I let her come into the frame and then I let her pass, and I ran ahead and showed that she was holding a burial box and then I let her walk out of frame; then I ran really fast in front of her in time to get her salute! So it's about thinking in terms of a sequence all the time. I love to dance. I mean, I love to rock and roll dance and, when I dance, I kind of mirror my partner who is dancing; I pick up on whatever he or she is doing, and I like to dance with them. That's why I'm a good cinematographer. I love the Marx Brothers film [*Duck Soup*, 1933] where there's a mirror and he anticipates [the other's movements]. It's like there's a magnet between me and the person I'm following and I kind of anticipate their movement. Like when you're dancing.

David Roche: Is this something that you learned with time? Do you think that you already thought like an editor when you were shooting in the 1980s?

Nancy Schiesari: Good question. No, I didn't do that. You learn in editing that this isn't useful to have a bunch of single shots. In a documentary, you need to think like a narrative filmmaker and you need to

think in terms of a sequence or a scene. So when you're in a real location, you're not just going to shoot one or two shots; you try and build things—you never know how B-roll is going to be used. In *Tattooed under Fire*—I hope you've seen it because I think it's a really strong film—when James comes back (he's the guitar player) and he's giving his last interview, he's talking about how he was in a Humvee and it blew up, and the flames were everywhere . . . When we were driving down to Austin, I just started filming him and it was raining, you know, there was rain pouring down the windshield, and you could hear the rain, and he was looking outside the window, so I filmed him and the cars going past. That sequence is the B roll I ended up putting under his voice-over talking about the burning flames: he's in the car, and you see him in the passenger seat and the rain is on the windshield. That's the B-roll and it works great there. I didn't know how that B-roll was going to be used. So you shoot whatever feels evocative to you at the time. You never know with documentary.

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Tattooed under Fire (Nancy Schiesari, 2008) Behind The Scenes

Marine Soubeille: It worked great.

Nancy Schiesari: Yes, and the sound was so uncanny.

Marine Soubeille: You've played with sound a lot in that documentary, with the sound of the needle that kept going.

Nancy Schiesari: Well, that was unfortunate; you can't get away from it . . . But even that had an effect: it was like digging up their unconscious feelings.

Marine Soubeille: They sound like machine guns.

Nancy Schiesari: Yes, and apparently it hurts, so it makes them want to talk when they're getting tattooed.

Marine Soubeille: One guy says it's like acupuncture.

Nancy Schiesari: Yes, and another one says it's inflicting pain but it's my pain. She says my mother had cancer and I was always looking after her, but this is my pain!

Marine Soubeille: We noticed that there were a lot of emotion and ethical questions in your documentaries. Notably in the *Hansel Mieth* documentary, *Canine Soldiers* and *Tattooed Under Fire*. How does that inform your practice? Do you try to connect with the people that you're going to interview before shooting? Do you spend a lot of time with them?

Nancy Schiesari: Not too often. You don't have an opportunity to spend a lot of time with people. For *Tattooed*, I met them in the tattoo parlor. I realized I was gravitating towards sensitive types because there were guys in there that scared me. I didn't go and ask them; I ended up gravitating towards people that looked like my students or my children. There are so many creative people in the military who don't have the opportunity to go to college, but then you find that they are incredible musicians. Consuela, the very young El Salvadorian who came to the US as an undocumented migrant, and after serving in the military got her citizenship, a free ride to college and graduated with a degree in architecture. So she achieved the American Dream and got her mother out of working in a slaughterhouse factory in Greeley Colorado; she bought her a house. So yes, I found empathetic subjects, but I was careful who I chose to talk to.

Marine Soubeille: So you don't have a lot of time to spend with them before you shoot.

Nancy Schiesari: I don't have a lot of time, no. I tend to start by chatting a little bit, asking "What's this and that?", and then I start asking deeper questions. In *Tattooed under Fire*, I was afraid I hadn't gone far enough. It was when the three soldiers come back and they are sitting on the couch and the African-American soldier, who is very nervous, started saying: "They talk about collateral damage—you can't talk about killing children, but they're gonna grow up and just be just like their parents." And I knew that he'd done something like that, right? And I had the opportunity to say, "Hey, do you want to talk about this tomorrow? I'll come back", and he probably would have said "Yes," but I didn't want to go there; I couldn't, I just didn't want to. But that wasn't the part that really disturbed me. There was a man and his

son. The son, who was about 17 or 18, was about to deploy; his father had already deployed and said that he had no problem killing a pregnant woman and child over there because he said, “By the time the child grows up, which will be no time, that child will end up killing, shooting him, my son. So I have no problem.” I didn’t have my camera. I was just outside chatting to him. I don’t know if he would have said that on camera, but I was horrified. Also, I think I wanted to make an anti-war film that showed compassion for these working-class kids who were going to war. If I had shown US soldiers as evil, racist-type people, which they might sometimes be—I mean the philosophy that gets bred into them, where they see the enemy as evil and their cultures are inferior to theirs, then it’s easy to hurt and kill them—but I didn’t want to go for that kind of emotion.

David Roche: It would have been hard to get over that kind of statement indeed.

Nancy Schiesari: Yeah. But it would have been truthful.

David Roche: We’ve got two more questions, and they’re both kind of general. First, the question we’re asking everyone: What is your view on the current state of the industry, and evolution, if there is any, for women screenwriters, producers and directors? To what extent do you feel that #MeToo may have impacted the industry?

Nancy Schiesari: I’m just thrilled to see Netflix series where every time I watch the credits I see women directors and women screenwriters over and over and over, and that was never ever the case fifteen-twenty years ago. I know that in Hollywood it’s probably not perfect. We just got through #MeToo, so that was a huge breakthrough, sending Harvey Weinstein to prison; that makes it much harder for that to happen. I’m really amazed at the number of women in the industry and also at what television has done; the industry has opened up because of Netflix and all these streaming platforms. It’s given writers this incredible opportunity to create these characters and nuanced situations, so I think television has become a way that people connect with humanity again and find out about how other people live. Of course, it’s sad, too, because we’re not getting that from each other anymore, or socializing; we’re getting our emotional life experiences from these really great writers on streaming series, from these actors who are doing *Peaky Blinders* [BBC, 2013-2022] kind of acting—I always said that Cillian Murphy is the next Marlon Brando and now he’s like really big. So I think films and streaming play this role now of being like therapy for people; they’ve become our meta-lives. For our parents, films didn’t play that role; they went to the movies occasionally, and remembered great movies like great books but now it’s part of our daily emotional life. It’s good, I guess, because most of us live in nuclear families or nuclear couple situations and don’t live in collectives anymore. But when we talk about film, it’s a way of exchanging; it’s about emotions; we talk about why we like something or why we like that actor, or character. That’s true; it’s really powerful what’s going on. I feel optimistic.

Marine Soubeille: Our last question is about your teaching. You’ve been teaching for a while. Can you tell us how your experience as a cinematographer, director and artist may have influenced your practice? Do you use material that you shot in your classes? Do you articulate the teaching and filmmaking or is it just completely disconnected?

Nancy Schiesari: I find that in narrative work, I draw on my experience as a painter, and I feel like I’ve opened their eyes to the different traditions from Western painting with Da Vinci and the window of the world, the infinity lines of infinity, the *Citizen Kane* world, to Asian culture which has given us Wong Kar-wai and the flat space that comes out of their paintings. If you look at all the scroll paintings, your eyes don’t go here, they go across. Sony, Panasonic, Canon have given these kids DSLR cameras, with

sensors that give you shallow depth of field for \$2,000 or \$3,000. In my time, to get a Kurosawa kind of shot, you had to hire a 500-millimetre lens that cost about \$500 a day to rent. I love to show my students paintings from our different traditions and lighting, from Vermeer and Caravaggio, and I also like to show them the tradition of fresco painting and how we've been obsessed with frames since cave times. Now we have all these different frames that go down to smartphone-size. But if you look at the Sistine Chapel—and how storytelling was made there: one scene next to another scene next to another scene, then you see the big Blockbuster film of God giving Adam life. These frescoes were the blockbuster paintings of their time. Then I cut to a Vermeer of a woman sleeping. I say, "Look, this is only a hundred years later, or eighty years later, and you're getting paintings like films made about domestic life and these little moments of time. These are like little Dogma95 films and no longer big blockbusters." Then I show them Asian films like *Raise the Red Lantern* [Zhang Yimou, 1991] and show them that space is completely flat, just like the paintings, and how that's articulated across the screen. I try and get them to become aware of the frame, the painting, the flat surface and how in painting it was the same dilemma. Do you go into representation of depth or do you stay on the surface? Do you do Cézanne, which is like a reference to depth, but staying on the surface, or do you do something that's about depth and story and narrative?

So those are my favorite things to teach. I also have very good coverage exercises. I give them an exercise where they have to shoot an action that has a beginning, middle, and end. Like a bicycle theft scene or a pickpocket scene or stealing someone's animal. I ask them to do that in coverage, blocking it in ten shots or less, where they have to stage it, and then I ask them to do the exact overall action with one long mise-en-scene take. Then I get them to play them side by side. After that, they do a third version where they combine the best of both so that when they're directing they'll understand: "This is not a good time to cut. It's much better to stay in real time with the characters in the frame instead of shot-reverse-shot." I'm proud of my exercises because I don't like standing in front of the classroom teaching, but I do feel like the things I ask them to do get them there, through practice. I also come up with an exercise where they have to write an inanimate object or an animal voiceover from its point of view. Herzog did that for somebody [in *Plastic Bag*, 2009]. There was a plastic paper bag and this young woman gets it at the grocery store and she puts her stuff in it, and then suddenly it starts to speak and it becomes attached to her and is taken to her kitchen and it describes her and stuff, and, of course, once she's finished, she throws the bag away and it continues, you know, it's life! That's how I like to teach. Mostly it is through exercises and practice. But I don't much enjoy standing in front of the classroom. I prefer to lecture from the back, behind a symbolic camera looking at the screen—behind the camera

David Roche and Marine Soubeille: Thank you so much for your time.

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