



**U.S. DOCUMENTARY COMPETITION**  
- World Premiere -

# **USERS**

Directed by Natalia Almada



2021 / 81min / English / Color

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## **LOGLINE**

An epic exploration of our tech addiction and its impact on the social fabric of our planet.

Scored by the infamous Kronos Quartet, the acclaimed director of *EL GENERAL* (Best Director, Sundance) presents her latest documentary, from the Academy-award nominated producers of *Beasts of the Southern Wild & Monsters and Men*.

## **PRODUCER SYNOPSIS**

*Users* begins with a mother's question: will her children love the perfect machines in their lives more than they'll love her, their imperfect mother? From this seemingly simple prompt, acclaimed filmmaker Natalia Almada (2012 MacArthur Genius Grant Recipient, 2009 Sundance Film Festival Directing Award) spins an epic examination of the world in which we live now, one in which it is taken for granted that technological progress will always inspire social progress, and which we've come to believe our ever smarter machines will lead to the betterment of humankind. Constructed from a series of stunning, immaculately rendered images, and featuring a score performed by the Kronos Quartet, *Users* is an immersive journey into the heart of our changing relationship to the natural world.

From the largest indoor vertical farm in the world to an IVF embryo lab to an underwater fiber optic cable landing, *Users* continually unearths new vistas that offer the opportunity to view the inner workings of the invisible forces that surround us. Almada marshals all the forces cinema in a Malickian montage to reveal the invisible forces that guide our lives, and suggests the extents to which these movements may not be fully understood for years to come. Amidst a world in constant flux, life continues, children grow up in a world of technological advancements, their mother loves and worries about the best choices to be made, as *Users* blends the great questions and small moments of life into a seamless cinematic whole.

## An Interview with Director Natalia Almada

**Q: *Users* is an incredibly expansive film. Could you talk about your entry point to all of the ideas it contains?**

**A:** It was a collision of a lot of different things in my life. My first son was born in 2016 and I had just finished my narrative film *Todo los demas*—I was actually in the hospital, when that film premiered. Suddenly, the way that I had to confront questions about technology was really different. I can remember being at the park and seeing parents on their cell phones and wondering how screens were affecting people's parenting and how they might affect my own. Would I use a phone with my kid? Maybe put on a video when we're on an airplane so they don't bother anyone? These are everyday questions that aren't easy to answer...and there are so many that come with early parenting. As soon as you start to think about these seemingly simple choices, you immediately have to go deeper.

Having children felt frightening in terms of how it would affect my creative practice and career. How would I manage to make another film? I had dedicated most of my 30s to my career and giving up filmmaking didn't make sense to me because I knew I couldn't be a good parent if I didn't have my work. It is so much who I am. But I rationalized with myself - most of my creative triggers came from change. Since becoming a parent was a huge life change that would shift how I see the world it should actually be a very inspiring time in my life. I rationalized and decided that I would think of motherhood and my children as inspiration rather than a hindrance.

**Q: How do you go from this collision of life events that you're describing to starting to conceive a film that could actually be made?**

**A:** My process with all my films is very organic. Maybe sculptural is another word for it. That by no means implies that it is unintentional. I need the process to articulate the ideas. With *Users*, some early funding allowed us to do a 10-day shoot to start to figure out the scope and style of the film. When I look at the finished film now there is a part of me that is surprised by what it is, at how it all came together, and yet it still holds the essential idea of its origin. In fact I think we used footage from everything we shot on that first 10-day shoot.

**Q: Would you say, then, that, broadly, "technology" is what *Users* is about? It has so many different elements...**

**A:** Going back to the questions I was facing in my life, they were about technology, right? I was in San Francisco, new to a city which is a huge hub for technology. And as I did research and worked more on the film, it took shape. It's still hard for me to say, but I think in the end, the main question that I was trying to ask was: "How does all of *this* this so called progress, change our relationship to ourselves and to others? How does it change our way of being, who we are?" It was a much more existential question. It's not what happens to my kid if I use a cell phone, but rather, if I use a cell phone, how does that change my child's sense of self? Does my child feel secondary to that cell phone? Or, if I *do* put the TV on during a flight for my kids, are they not looking out the window? Are they not appreciating the mystery of what it means to be

up in the air? Are they not learning how to tolerate boredom and discomfort? Or talk to strangers? And what does it mean to put my kid in a smart crib that teaches them a certain kind of comfort that's reliable and technology-based versus my kind of messy, not always perfect comfort?

**Q: How do you limit an investigation like this? *Users* touches on technology, but also how it intersects with climate, food scarcity, waste, memory, labor. How did you know where and when to stop?**

**A:** It's something of a gut feeling. There were definitely some big categories like the environment—global warming, labour, surveillance and AI. As well as more abstract concepts like how does it change how we remember, or our notion of what is natural? The structure of the film is like a spider web in which these various threads are woven together, glued together by the mother and her children. I knew I needed to create a progression through these various ideas and a structure that would create a whole that's bigger than its parts. So we began at the beginning - with the crib and nursing and food and water. So the film really grounds you in the most essential basic things and then moves towards the more abstract. If all our drinking water is recycled, how does that change our sense of nature? It's still water and it's good for us and thank God we have the possibility to recycle water. But this technology might fundamentally change something fundamental in our relationship to nature. *Users* isn't so much trying to tell you what that change is as much as trying to ask viewers to notice it, think about it, bring it into their consciousness as they think about buying the next cell phone or using the next app.

**Q: It's a provocative film in that regard, but not in an aggressive fashion. The editing, especially, feels as though it's gradually leading the viewer through a series of questions and ideas as opposed to just slamming things together.**

**A:** The kind of filmmaking I'm interested in is one that is provocative. I want the viewer to think, to work and to be engaged and then to also be able to bring their own narratives into the film. So how do I create enough space to trigger those questions? I wanted my children in the film to make you think about time and think about generations, but I didn't want to close the film off so that you wouldn't be able to think about your own children or your own parents or your own relationship to those things. The pacing and the edit has a lot to do with that. How do I leave something on the screen long enough so that, while you may understand immediately what it is, you then have enough time for you to insert your own narrative or to consider the less obvious meaning and reason for that image in the film.

**Q: I imagine if you're thinking about legibility, leaving space, you need to start with capturing the right kinds of images. Throughout *Users*, your images are kind of slippery—in a good way—in that they feel recognizable, but also somehow strange. Can you talk about working with your DP Bennett Cerf?**

**A:** Documentary can be a way to look at the familiar in a different way, or to take one thing and look at it from all its different angles. So there's a lot that's familiar in the film, but for me, the question was: how do we re-contextualize or frame things differently so that what you're seeing is subverted and you're forced to look at a familiar thing in a different way. There were certain

elements that were clear to me about the kind of formality I wanted for *Users* and I would say it's in my previous two films for sure. I come from a background in photography and I'm interested in what the image can do. So there's a lot of precision. We don't work loosely, we don't shoot a bunch of stuff that doesn't get used. It's a pretty rigorous process and the shoot had elements of how you shoot a fiction film. Bennett has shot fiction and documentary, and he's a very technical DP which was great for this.

I think left to my own devices, I would never move the camera, but Bennett is amazing with rigging things and using a gimbal, and sliders and drones in ways that feel, I think, different than what we're used to seeing. He has this incredible amount of control which allows him to be precise and move the camera in ways that create meaning or are poetic. It helps that we work little by little. He's seeing the footage and he's seeing the edits and we're discussing everything about it. We might notice we have a number of grand landscapes and recognize that we need to capture more intimate moments. Or realizing a sequence of images has too much stillness so finding ways to move things more.

**Q: The score is performed by the Kronos Quartet and you're mixing using Dolby's advanced Atmos technology. The film has a kind of sonic detail that you don't often hear in documentary.**

**A:** My partner Dave Cerf is the sound designer and composed the music. He and I worked closely together from the very origin of the idea of the film, through the actual shoot and the eventually editing process. In our early discussions about sound, we'd talk about how you can almost think of *Users* as a sound piece. How can sound reflect all the ideas that are in the film? This led to practical questions. When is the sound synthetic? When is it human? When is it intimate? When is it grand? Those things are at play constantly throughout the film, and the Atmos technology allows us to be even more detailed and intentional in how sound reflects the core ideas. For the score, Dave composed on the computer, but we always knew that what we wanted was to have real instruments to bring that human element to the music. We wanted that little bit of imperfection. Kronos is *pretty* perfect, but nonetheless, you can tell that there's an essential humanness, a heart and soul behind the playing. We did an early session with Kronos to build a sound palette and integrated that into how Dave continued the scoring.

**Q: *Users* is a unique film, but I did feel echoes of other filmmakers: Harun Farocki, Godfrey Reggio, Chantal Akerman. Filmmakers working in an essayistic register. I wonder if those filmmakers (or others) connect in your mind to what you've accomplished here.**

**A:** This is always a question that comes up, but film is not usually my first reference point. Chantal Akerman is a huge inspiration and influence, I'd say more, on my previous film than this one, but I love her formality. I like the *Qatsi* films and *Baraka* and *Samsara*. All those essay films that have a kind of epic quality to them, but, for me, there's an important difference at work in *Users*. Those grand scale movies are not usually made by women, right? Men have that sense of entitlement to make art that is trying to talk grandly about the universe. So part of *Users* was figuring out how to tackle a kind of filmmaking and thinking that is very gendered but from my own perspective. In this regard to me this endeavor in and of itself was a feminist gesture.

I also wanted to make a film that refused to be caged into a genre. This film is rooted in the documentary tradition but it also has fictional elements and even SciFi elements. This in and of itself reflects back on the ideas behind the film - it asks us to question the genre in a similar way to how it asks us to question our relationship to technology. For example, it was very clear to me that I didn't want to shoot home movies of my children or even verité footage. I wanted them to be more staged and performative, perhaps more in the tradition of a photographer like Sally Mann. We use the synthetic voice both as a SciFi element that allows you to think about our present from the future and also a documentary scene about how we're able to replicate our voices. Or the film only has one interview that pops up unexpectedly.

**Q: It's so true. It feels like it's usually men who set out to write the Great American Novel.**

**A:** Yeah! And you take someone like Virginia Woolf and she finds some tiny little thing and then spins it out into a big universal idea, but she never frames it that way to begin with. I won't make a critique of those films, they're amazing films. But for me, there were a couple of things that I wanted to be different in *Users*. I wanted you to sense that everything is from the perspective of an individual and that it's a woman behind what you're seeing. I wanted to bring in the intimate, and the intimate doesn't just happen because there's a closeup. It's about making sure viewers know that it's about me as the filmmaker and them as the viewer. It's not just about a huge abstract topic. I think that might be a gendered approach, I'm not sure.

**Q: Looking over your body of work, I got the sense that there's a trajectory where the films grow more spacious, more abstract as your career advances. That tendency feels like it culminates in *Users*, but also in your previous film, the narrative feature *Todo lo demás* (2016).**

**A:** Making a fiction film made me a little bit fearless. Having to work with a crew and actors and just the scope of what doing fiction is made me just feel like, whatever I need to do, I can do it. And I think slowness requires a certain confidence. It takes confidence in the images. It's a lot easier to cut fast. That requires its own talent, but that means that each image means less and that you're not going to scrutinize every image. So when you hold it there longer, it requires a certain faith in that image. It also requires a certain confidence to trust your audience to meet you half way.

**Q: Another striking thing about your work is a balance between the large and the small. During *El Velador* (2011), there's a sequence where you move between the overall space of a grand cemetery, but also make time to hold on a hand holding a cigar or a tiny tattoo on that hand. All of those details are treated equally.**

**A:** I feel that way. It's interesting when you were talking about the progression of films, *El Velador* was made after *El General* (2009) which was made with every element possible: archival, contemporary footage, hand-held fairy tale material, 16mm formal experiments and a big score. After that, I wanted to make a film with nothing, just me and my camera in the corner of a cemetery. I didn't want music, I didn't want to complicate it.

I think these kinds of gestures and managing the relation between the big or small is one of my key tools. It's in small gestures that we understand the personal and understand humanity and can relate to it. And so it allows you to understand and feel the small, the me, in the world. Does that make sense?

**Q: It does. And it makes me wonder what the experience of making *Users* has done to how you see yourself in the world. Has going through this process affected how you see and relate to what's around you? Are you any more or less hopeful?**

**A:** I think what you're asking in a lot of ways is a very culturally specific question. I think this idea of hopefulness is a very American concept, but it's not how I frame things intuitively. I might answer this differently in a few months, but at least right now, my level of cynicism and hopefulness is the same today as it was when I started making *Users* and probably the same as it was 20 years ago!

I was born in Mexico and my mom's American and my father Mexican and I was raised half and half. I would say as a filmmaker, I've always positioned myself more as a Mexican filmmaker. And I think of myself as Mexican, even though I'm bi-cultural but I think that this is the first time I've talked about a new film and not had to talk about where I'm from. I've always felt like I had to make Latino films and films about Mexico. Especially as a woman and as a Mexican woman, I didn't feel like I had full freedom to tackle a larger scale of filmmaking or global topics. I don't think it's something that a lot of my fellow Latino filmmakers or women filmmakers feel, right? And we should! So, it was really important to me to keep an element of my identity visible in the film. I don't look Mexican and my kids are white boys so it was especially important to me to include us speaking in Spanish.

It's also been really important to me that this is a family production and that I'm working with my husband and my brother-in-law. It was important to me to create a work environment, that was sustainable for those with families. So many members of our team had babies during the production - two babies were born and two of my producers are pregnant. I wanted a production that would support parental leaves and be flexible to people's scheduling constraints because of family. It also kind of takes you down to the essential, not just in terms of having to be more efficient with your time, but it makes you have to focus on what really matters in the work and to let the things that maybe aren't as important go more quickly.

This all perhaps has more to do with my commitment to the industry and how I would like our industry to change. But that's been a big thing and it's a very feminist thing because in that discussion, it's usually the moms that get screwed. So it was especially important to honor and respect Josh's paternity leave and I was very touched and happy that he had the confidence to feed his newborn on a business call one day. To me that took courage on his part and is the kind of men we need to equalize the field.

**Q: This commitment realizing change in the industry probably had to have an affect the final film, no?**

**A:** I hope so. It also helped that we had a group of funders that supported the film without demanding certain concessions. We tried to make something that puts viewers in an ambiguous space where you can feel things two ways at the same time, as opposed to saying: "Don't ever use a cell phone because it's going to destroy you." It's not the most obvious route and we were incredibly well supported as we experimented.

We were very fortunate to have funders who gave us creative freedom and never asked us to change our vision - and this is a testament to the fantastic work of my producers Josh and Liz to find the right partners for this project. The aim of the film was always to be ambiguous - to hold opposing ideas in balance. Technology is a testament of our power to create, to solve and to imagine. Technology also has untended and potentially detrimental consequences when it is not carefully considered. We live in a media culture and society that is often reluctant to hold that kind of complexity, but we were not interested in telling you to never use a cell phone because it is going to destroy you. We want for you to leave the film and ask yourself how that next app or gadget you absent-mindedly purchase (or develop) might change your relationship to those you love, your sense of self or impact the environment - forever...

**Q: So many documentaries seemed obsessed with providing immediate answers, yet the questions in *Users* feel like they may take decades to unravel.**

**A:** How ridiculous is our present going to seem to someone in the future? It's so easy for us to think that where we are is the peak of technology. And to not imagine that Google maps might be totally obsolete one day. Or that we may not use cell phones. In the future, they might be like, God, they carried these ridiculous things with them all the time, right?



## **An Interview with Director of Photography Bennett Cerf**

**Q: Could you describe the kinds of equipment you used for the shoot and why you chose them?**

**A:** We shot *Users* with the Red Gemini. We had support from Simplemente in Mexico City, who offered us a number of their cameras to use for our entire shoot. This was a massive advantage for us because sometimes we needed to experiment. Some of our at-home experiments paid off. We bought a teleprompter for what we called screen portraits and would have my nephews watch certain movies that were colorful or significant to us. The teleprompter would allow us to film them looking directly into the camera while watching the films. The rig resulted from lengthy discussions about how to make a shot about our relationship to screens and computers/phones, etc., without actually seeing the device. We all experience it in our daily lives, but we don't get to peer into other people's eyes when they are caught in the trance.

**Q: Natalia described the process of making *Users* as "sculptural" in that you'd film a little bit, then there would be some editing, then you'd decide on more things to film. Could you describe those conversations and that decision-making process?**

**A:** Natalia had a general idea of what she wanted before we started filming. She knew a few shots that she wanted right away and those became our starting point. She would have early morning epiphanies during prep or editing and we'd discuss them as we would plan each shoot. The process reminded me of how Wong Kar-wai filmed *In The Mood For Love*. He shot it incrementally while editing and writing the movie. It's a fantastic privilege to create a film in this way because the film changes its shape as you put all the ingredients together. You can't always see until you're editing, so Natalia would edit between our shoots to discover what we had captured. With each shoot and pause for editing, the strategy shifted slightly.

The difference between what we remember from the shoot versus what we see again later can be so nuanced. Little moments that may have seemed insignificant during shooting turned out to be gems later. Other travel jobs would weave between our shoots and Natalia would ask me to shoot anything that inspired me wherever I went. One night, I was driving back to LA from one of our shoots near Bakersfield, CA, and a train pulled up beside me while I was on the free-way in the middle of the night. We were in sync for nearly 15 miles. At that moment, I was struck by the image of a train cutting through the night, so I filmed it on my iPhone while I drove next to the train. Natalia liked it, so we returned and filmed it with the proper gear.

**Q: The images in *Users* have such a consistency and formal control to them. I'd love to hear about how, once you arrived at a location, you made decisions about how to create a shot.**

**A:** Often we would try to scout locations before we shot. However, that didn't usually mean that we would shoot what we planned in the scout. Instead, we would scout with intention and then gather as many tools as possible to achieve at least two technical options for each shot we had in mind. When we would show up to shoot, we would look at the scene again and think about what each shot meant when we finally could see all the detail. Our shot ideas were always in a

tug of war between shooting for context and shooting for abstraction. After shooting for about eight months, there was a realization that the images we were shooting were a little too concrete. So we considered ways to disorient the viewer more. One example occurred when Natalia wanted to capture a giant freeway interchange. Initially, we talked about shooting it from above with a drone, but because that's a relatively common image now, it wasn't going to lend itself to a long take because it's a recognizable drone or helicopter shot. Natalia likes long takes because she wants to invite the viewer to be inquisitive and to look all around the frame. If you see a shot you've seen a million times, there isn't much for you to engage with. To remedy that, we drove through the underpasses with the camera on top of a minivan. Natalia drove me as I operated and all I told her was that I was going to pan as we drove through, not quite knowing whether that would be the effect we wanted. We drove through and I picked a moment to pan slowly, and the whole shot began to unravel in front of us.

**Q: Could you talk more about balancing between the more formal register of much of the shooting and still being alive and ready for unexpected things as they were happening?**

**A:** Natalia gave me a warning up-front that she doesn't like to move the camera during shots. I think I've made a career of dynamically moving the camera, so this was a refreshing rethink of my usual approach. The idea in this film was to have formal visual rules. We would frame shots for a static shot; no panning, tilting, booming, zooming—nothing. However, there were more dynamic moments like when the camera was attached to a boat or a car. For instance, we had just finished a freeway shot and were heading to the next exit so we could pull over and I could show Natalia what we'd captured. We were coming up to the exit and I became mesmerized by some passing power lines. As I was filming them, she mentioned the cool truck behind us, so I started to tilt down to include the truck in the shot, and boom! It ended up a strangely cinematic moment. It said so many things and had this gravitas to it.

**Q: You've worked a bit in both narrative and documentary and I wonder how those two modes inform each other when you're working?**

**A:** I think I approach narrative and documentary the same way. The root is always in my personal connection to the story. *Users* is a question we're posing about the future we leave behind for the next generation. This movie is pretty much about my nephews! I have huge stakes in asking what kind of a life they will live when they grow up. Will they understand themselves better if AI knows them better than they do? That personal connection to the subject matter always gets my juices flowing. My parents are hard of hearing, which has heightened my sense of what it means to communicate. When I was asked to shoot a horror project this last summer called *Kinderfanger* for Crypt TV, which featured a hard of hearing actress, I knew right away how to film her character sympathetically.

I started working in narrative before I was shooting documentaries and it took me some time to realize that had I done the reverse, I would have understood that they aren't ultimately different at their core. When you strip away the scripted scenes and the constructed backdrops, you're just trying to capture human emotion. I think that I'm looking for the same thing in both. The uncanny valley of narrative is that nearly all the rules of physics apply, but it's in a context that

didn't just happen on its own. I think that what's so beautiful about both, are the moments where you can't tell the construction from reality. Hopefully that leaves room for the subject in front of the camera to be all we care about. What's been so beautiful about working on this film, is that we have the strong intention of the shot to describe what we're trying to say and the reality of what happens in the shot to help you forget that there are frame lines.

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**

**NATALIA ALMADA** (Director) is the recipient of the 2012 MacArthur “Genius” Award, whose work combines artistic expression with social inquiry to make films that are both personal reflections and critical social commentaries. Directing credits include *Al Otro Lado* (2005 Tribeca Film Festival), *El General* (2009 Sundance Film Festival Directing Award), *El Velador* (2011 Cannes Film Festival), and her narrative feature *Todo lo demás* (2016 New York Film Festival). She lives in Mexico City and San Francisco.

**JOSH PENN** (Producer) is a producer with the Department of Motion Pictures. He produced *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, which won the Sundance Grand Jury Prize, the Cannes Caméra d'Or, and was nominated for four Academy Awards (including Best Picture). In addition, Josh was nominated for Outstanding Producer at the 2013 Producer's Guild Awards. He has also held producing roles on *Monsters and Men* (Sundance Special Jury Prize), *Patti Cake\$*, *Western* (Sundance Special Jury Prize), *The Great Invisible* (SXSW Grand Jury Prize), and the live documentary *A Thousand Thoughts* among other films. Josh premiered three films at Sundance 2020: *Wendy*, *Farewell Amor* and *Bloody Nose Empty Pockets* and will premiere three more at Sundance 2021: *Philly D.A.*, *Users* and *7 Sounds*. In 2018, Josh was accepted as a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences.

Outside of his work in film, Josh was previously the Michigan New Media Director for President Obama's 2008 campaign and a Senior Digital Program Manager for the 2012 re-election campaign.

**ELIZABETH LODGE STEPP** (Producer) is an Austin, TX based producer. Elizabeth is a 2019 Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program Grantee with her latest film *Users*, which is premiering at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival. She is also a Sundance Feature Film Creative Producing Fellow with *Monsters and Men*, which premiered in Sundance's 2018 Dramatic Competition line-up, and won the festival's Special Jury Award for Outstanding First Feature. She has produced numerous films, including documentaries *Brimstone and Glory*, which was named 2017 Top 5 Documentaries by the National Board of Review, and *Kerri Walsh Jennings: Gold Within* which premiered on NBC in 2016, and co-produced *Knight of Cups* (2015) and *Song to Song* (SXSW 2017), both directed by Terrence Malick.

**DANIELA ALATORRE** (Co-Producer) is a Mexican producer and filmmaker. She holds an MFA in documentary film from the School of Visual Arts in NY. She has been part of the Sundance Editing, Music and Creative Producing Labs, and a Flaherty Film Seminar fellow and continuous participant. Alatorre was the head of the Documentary Programming Committee for the Morelia International Film Festival for 7 years, which she also produced for ten.

In 2017 she founded No Ficción, an independent media company based in Mexico City along with Elena Fortes and Cinépolis. Daniela is the producer of the short films *A Three Minute Hug* (2018, directed by Everardo González), *A Tale of Two Kitchens* (2019, directed by Trisha

Ziff), *Birders* (2019, directed by Otilia Portillo), *Lorena*, *Light Footed Woman* (2019, directed by Juan Carlos Rulfo) and *After the Raid* (2019, directed by Rodrigo Reyes), the New York Times op-docs *Unsilenced* (2016, directed by Betzabé García) and *Ruptured City*, (2018, directed by Diego Rabasa and Santiago Arau), and the feature documentaries *El General* (2009, directed by Natalia Almada), *iDe Panzazo!* (2012, directed by Juan Carlos Rulfo and Carlos Loret de Mola), *El Ingeniero* (2012, directed by Alejandro Lubezki), *Midnight Family* (2019, directed by Luke Lorentzen), *Vivos* (as associate producer, 2019, directed by Ai Weiwei) and *Users* (as co-producer, 2021, directed by Natalia Almada). *Retreat* which received a special mention from the jury and the Ambulante Film Festival prize at the XVII Morelia International Film Festival is her first feature documentary as a director. She is also the co-director of *Fragments*, a short film about and done during the pandemic that had its premiere at the Morelia Film Festival in 2020.

**ELIVIA SHAW** (Co-Producer) is a filmmaker and producer originally from Washington, DC. She holds an MFA in Documentary Film from Stanford University where she also taught undergraduate filmmaking courses. Her short films have been featured on the Atlantic and PBS and screened at festivals including AFI Docs and DOCNYC. Her short film, *The Clinic*, won the Grand Jury Prize at AFI Fest and was shortlisted for the Student BAFTA awards. Elivia previously worked on Emmy and Academy Award winning television series and documentaries for Al Jazeera, HBO and PBS including Al Jazeera's *Empire*, *Sky & Ground* and the 2013 Sundance Film Festival Selection, *Life According to Sam*.

**BENNETT CERF** (Director of Photography) is an acclaimed director of photography, who has strengthened many narrative and documentary projects. Most recently, he shot director Natalia Almada's *Users*, a 2021 Sundance selection. For the project he took a smaller-is-better approach, relying on basically 3 lenses for the entire film and a sometimes no crew.\* Bennett is also known for his work on Facebook Watch horror series *Kinderfanger*, starring Angel Theory, as well as Kevin McTurk's festival favorite *The Haunted Swordsman*, a puppet horror film starring Jason Scott Lee, James Hong and Christopher Lloyd.

Over two decades of on-set experience and shooting has made Bennett an in-demand storyteller, trusted by many directors and producers to elevate their personal stories. He has shot over 20 documentaries, often bringing a narrative-focused aesthetic to his productions. Highlights include Emily Cassie's *A Girl Named C* about a girl who decided to shine a light on her sexual assault at age 11, David Neptune's *Words Can't Go There* about a Bamboo flute player willing to risk everything to become a master of the craft, and Kathleen Man Gyllenhaal's *In Utero*, about the indelible psychological imprint left on us in the womb.

In the commercial world, Bennett has shot projects for Reebok, Intel and DJI. Films he has shot have garnered multiple awards including Emmys, a DGA student award, Best Short at the Austin Film Festival and recognition as Vimeo Staff Picks. Bennett also graduated from AFI with a Mas-

ters in cinematography and received a Bachelor's from the College of Santa Fe. He currently resides in Los Angeles.

**DAVE CERF** (Sound Designer/Composer) works at the intersection of film editing, sound design, music, live performance, and software design. Over the last two decades, Dave has collaborated on a tour of abandoned drive-in movie screenings, a live documentary (Utopia in Four Movements with Sam Green), dance performances (Alone Together with choreographer Catherine Galasso), Internet radio streaming (with sound artist Fausto Cáceres), and Pop-Up Magazine, a "live magazine" presented on stage. Dave and members of his chamber ensemble Threnody Ensemble composed music for Sam Green's *The Weather Underground* and the experimental films of Pat O'Neill and Jennifer Reeves. He composed the sound and music for *Todo lo demás* and *Users*—the most recent films by Mexican filmmaker Natalia Almada—working with Marc Ribot, Claire Chase, and Kronos Quartet.

Deeply dissatisfied with available tools of the trade, Dave worked for eight years at Apple as an interface designer for Final Cut Pro X and wrote several editions of the 2400-page user manual. Still deeply dissatisfied with the available tools, he began investigating alternative sound and video representations with Robert M. Ochshorn at Alan Kay's Xerox PARC reboot CDG (now DynamicLand), helmed by Bret Victor. At the same time, he assisted sound and picture editor Walter Murch on two feature films: *Hemingway* and *Gellhorn* (HBO) and Brad Bird's *Tomorrowland* (Disney). There was also a 6-month detour to volunteer at the Dalai Lama's video archive in Dharamsala, India as well as a performance about his personal history told via the rise and fall of public pay phones.

**KRONOS QUARTET** (Music Performed By) has been active for over 45 years. Based in San Francisco, the Kronos Quartet – David Harrington (violin), John Sherba (violin), Hank Dutt (viola), and Sunny Yang (cello) – has combined a spirit of fearless exploration with a commitment to continually reimagine the string quartet experience. In the process, Kronos has become one of the world's most celebrated and influential ensembles, performing thousands of concerts, releasing more than 60 recordings, collaborating with many of the world's most accomplished composers and performers, and commissioning over 1,000 works and arrangements for string quartet. Kronos has received over 40 awards, including the prestigious Polar Music Prize, Avery Fisher Prize, and Edison Klassiek Oeuvreprijs for career achievement.

Integral to Kronos' work is a series of long-running collaborations with many of the world's foremost composers, including Franghiz Ali-Zadeh, Philip Glass, Nicole Lizée, Vladimir Martynov, Steve Reich, Aleksandra Vrebalov. Additional collaborators have included Sam Amidon, Asha Bhosle, Noam Chomsky, Rhiannon Giddens, Sam Green, Zakir Hussain, múm, Trevor Paglen, Van Dyke Parks, San Francisco Girls Chorus, Tanya Tagaq, Trio Da Kali, Mahsa Vahdat, Tom Waits, Wu Man, Howard Zinn.

On tour for five months per year, Kronos appears in the world's most prestigious concert halls, clubs, and festivals. Kronos is equally prolific and wide-ranging on recordings, including three

Grammy-winning albums – *Sun Rings* (2019), composed by Terry Riley for string quartet, chorus and pre-recorded spacescapes, *Landfall* with Laurie Anderson (2018), and Alban Berg’s *Lyric Suite* featuring Dawn Upshaw (2003) – all released by longtime label Nonesuch Records. Among Kronos’ recent releases are *Ladilikan* (World Circuit Records) with Trio Da Kali, an ensemble of Malian griot musicians assembled by Aga Khan Music Initiative; *Michael Gordon: Clouded Yellow* (Cantaloupe), *Placeless* (Kirkelig Kulturverksted) with Iranian vocalists Mahsa and Marjan Vahdat, and *Long Time Passing: Kronos & Friends Celebrate Pete Seeger* (Smithsonian Folkways) with Sam Amidon, Maria Arnal, Brian Carpenter, Lee Knight, Meklit, and Aoife O’Donovan.

The nonprofit Kronos Performing Arts Association manages all aspects of Kronos’ work, including the commissioning of new works, concert tours and home season performances, education programs, and the annual Kronos Festival. In 2015, Kronos launched *50 for the Future: The Kronos Learning Repertoire*, an education and legacy project that is commissioning—and distributing online for free—50 new works for string quartet composed by 25 women and 25 men.

## **CREDITS**

### **Director**

Natalia Almada

### **Producers**

Josh Penn

Elizabeth Lodge Stepp

Natalia Almada

### **Executive Producers**

Sean O'Grady

Bill Stertz

Charlotte Cook

Tony Hsieh

Roberto Grande

Mimi Pham

Kathryn Everett

Bryn Mooser

Noah Kadner

Rune Hansen

Mónica Reina

### **Co-Producers**

Daniela Alatorre

Elivia Shaw

### **Director of Photography**

Bennett Cerf

### **Sound Designer**

Dave Cerf

### **Editor**

Natalia Almada

### **Sound Mixers**

Lora Hirschberg



Alejandro de Icaza

**Composer**

Dave Cerf

**Music Performed By**

Kronos Quartet