

Advanced Topics class      DOC 496    FILM 490

SPRING 23 | WED 10:00 – 1:15pm | Daley 214

Instructor: Steve James

Office: CDM 452, CDM Building, 243 S. Wabash

Email: [sjames34@depaul.edu](mailto:sjames34@depaul.edu) (Emails will be answered by the next day.)

Office hours: Wednesdays 1:30 – 4:30 PM

### **Course Description and Prerequisites**

This class will use instructor Steve James' documentary career as a foundation for exploring the practice of current documentary filmmaking, including contemporary ethical and social issues, as well as changes in the industry.

### **Learning Outcomes:**

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Understand the contemporary ethical and social issues, as well as changes in the industry that have influenced and impacted the work of Steve James.
- Critically examine the process of gaining access and trust with subjects in observational documentary filmmaking and how it can affect the final film.
- Understand the differences between personal point-of-view and observational point-of-view in documentary filmmaking and apply them to contemporary works.
- Evaluate the role of film subject agency in the telling of their story, the issues of equity and ethics in documentary practice.
- Analyze the relationship between journalistic approaches to documentary filmmaking and other forms of non-fiction storytelling, and the ethical implications of accuracy and objectivity.
- Examine the rise of the docuseries format and its impact on true crime stories and longer form immersive storytelling.
- Synthesize knowledge of contemporary documentary filmmaking practices, ethical considerations, and storytelling techniques to create original documentary works.

### **Academic Calendar** <https://academics.depaul.edu/calendar/Pages/default.aspx>

(Be sure to search for correct Academic Year)

Thursday February 2, 2023	Begin Spring Quarter 2023 and Summer 2023 Registration
Saturday March 25, 2023	Begin SQ2023 Classes
Friday March 31, 2023	11:59 PM Deadline to add classes to SQ2023 schedule
Friday April 7, 2023	Good Friday - University officially closed
Saturday April 8, 2023	Easter Holiday - University officially closed
Sunday April 9, 2023	Easter Holiday - University officially closed
Monday April 10, 2023	Last day to drop SQ2023 classes with no penalty (100% refund of tuition if applicable and no grade on transcript)
Monday April 10, 2023	Last day to select pass/fail option for SQ 2023 classes
Saturday April 22, 2023	Begin SQ2023 optional mid-term exam week
Friday April 28, 2023	End SQ2023 optional mid-term exam week
Friday May 12, 2023	Last day to withdraw from SQ2023 classes
Monday May 29, 2023	Memorial Day - University officially closed
Friday June 2, 2023	End SQ2023 Day & Evening Classes
Saturday June 3, 2023	Begin SQ2023 Day & Evening Final Exams
Friday June 9, 2023	End Spring Quarter 2023

## Textbooks and printed resources

Handouts: As assigned on D2L

## Software needed to complete assignments:

Netflix for one assignment only. Instructor will provide links to all other assignments.

Word processing program

### Grading

Class Participation & In Class Activities	70%
Written Essay/Critique	30%

A = 100-93	A- = 92-90	
B+ = 89-88	B = 87-83	B- = 82-80
C+ = 79-78	C = 77-73	C- = 72-70
D+ = 69-68	D = 67-63	D- = 62-60
F = 59-0		

## Standards for Achievement:

### Grade A:

Student performs in an outstanding way. Student exhibits achievement and craftsmanship in all work. Design criteria is exceeded and student challenges him/herself in project design. Student exhibits commitment to expanding ideas, vocabulary and performance.

### Grade B:

Student performs beyond the requirement of the project. Student exhibits above average progress and craftsmanship. A design criterion is exceeded. Student exhibits above average interest in expanding idea, vocabulary, and performance.

### Grade C:

Criteria of assignment is met, and all requirements are fulfilled. Student shows average quality work and minimum time and effort on projects. Student shows moderate interest.

### Grade D:

Student performance is uneven and below average. Requirements for projects are only partially fulfilled. Minimal interest is shown and attendance, participation and involvement are inadequate.

### Grade F

Student fails to meet minimum course requirements and shows no interest. Levels of participation and craftsmanship are extremely poor. Student's attendance is inadequate.

## Requesting an incomplete grade:

An incomplete grade is a special, temporary grade that may be assigned by an instructor when unforeseeable circumstances prevent a student from completing course requirements by the end of the term and when otherwise the student had a record of satisfactory progress in the course. All incomplete requests must be approved by the instructor of the course and a CDM Associate Dean. Only exceptions cases will receive such approval.

Information about the Incomplete Grades policy can be found at

<http://www.cdm.depaul.edu/Current%20Students/Pages/Grading-Policies.aspx>

**Trigger and Content Warnings:** This class will examine issues of social justice and media representation and so some of our course discussions and media examples will deal with the legacy of sexism, racism, classism, and forms of physical and social violence. Content warnings for particularly difficult videos will be marked, and I will do my best to foster a classroom in which we can relate courageously, compassionately, and contemplatively with difficult and important content when needed.

## Respect for Diversity and Inclusion at DePaul University as aligned with our Vincentian Values

At DePaul, our mission calls us to explore “what must be done” in order to respect the inherent dignity and identity of each human person. We value diversity because it is part of our history, our traditions and our future. We see diversity as an asset and a strength that adds to the richness of classroom learning. In my course, I strive to include diverse authors, perspectives and teaching pedagogies. I also encourage open dialogue and spaces for students to express their unique identities and perspectives. I am open to having difficult conversations and I will strive to create an inclusive classroom that values all perspectives. If at any time, the classroom experience does not live up to this expectation, please feel free to contact me via email or during office hours.

## **COVID-19 Health and Safety Precautions**

The health and safety of everyone at DePaul depend on the cooperation of all who come to campus. By taking care of yourself, you protect the entire community. DePaul's COVID-19 response plans are based on the latest guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Chicago Department of Public Health and the university's medical advisor from AMITA Health.

Mandatory protocols must be followed by DePaul students, faculty and staff at all times on both campuses <https://resources.depaul.edu/coronavirus/guidance/health-safety-practices/Pages/default.aspx>.

**Attendance** – Classes will consist of lecture, screenings, discussion, creative exercises, and a written essay/critique. Homework will consist of screening films and select readings. Since we do most of the work in class, attendance is extremely important to get the full value of the class. An absence is defined as not showing up for class, or arriving more than 15 minutes late, or missing any 15-minute period during class time. There is sign in sheet for attendance every class. If you arrive less than 15 minutes late, and do not sign in make sure you let me know you are present so I do not mark you absent. Any absences will result in a reduction of the attendance/participation grade. However, if you are sick, please stay home.

**Class Participation**— Along with showing up, you are expected to join in general class discussions, and small group discussions and activities. You'll notice that a portion of your grade are the "in class" activities. If you miss the class, you get a 0.

**Digital Assignments:** All assignments handed in digitally must have a visual "slate" with your name and title of assignment, and the file name should contain your name.

**Examinations** – Students who do not take exams during the regularly scheduled time will receive a failing grade for the exam unless they have contacted the instructor in advance to arrange for a make-up exam. Make-up exams will be administered by the College according to its make-up exam schedule.

## **Changes to Syllabus**

This syllabus is subject to change as necessary during the quarter. If a change occurs, it will be thoroughly addressed during class, posted under Announcements in D2L, and sent via email.

## **Online Course Evaluations**

Evaluations are a way for students to provide valuable feedback regarding their instructor and the course. Detailed feedback will enable the instructor to continuously tailor teaching methods and course content to meet the learning goals of the course and the academic needs of the students. They are a requirement of the course and are key to continue to provide you with the highest quality of teaching. The evaluations are anonymous; the instructor and administration do not track who entered what responses. A program is used to check if the student completed the evaluations, but the evaluation is completely separate from the student's identity. Since 100% participation is our goal, students are sent periodic reminders over three weeks. Students do not receive reminders once they complete the evaluation. Please see <https://resources.depaul.edu/teaching-commons/teaching/Pages/online-teaching-evaluations.aspx> for additional information.

## **Academic Integrity and Plagiarism**

This course will be subject to the university's academic integrity policy. More information can be found at <http://academicintegrity.depaul.edu/>. If you have any questions be sure to consult with your professor.

## **Academic Policies**

All students are required to manage their class schedules each term in accordance with the deadlines for enrolling and withdrawing as indicated in the [University Academic Calendar](#). Information on enrollment, withdrawal, grading and incompletes can be found at:

<http://www.cdm.depaul.edu/Current%20Students/Pages/PoliciesandProcedures.aspx>

## **Students with Disabilities**

Students seeking disability-related accommodations are required to register with DePaul's Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) enabling them to access accommodations and support services to assist with their success. There are two office locations:

- Loop Campus – Lewis Center #1420 – (312) 362-8002
- Lincoln Park Campus – Student Center #370 – (773) 325-1677

Students who register with the Center for Students with Disabilities are also invited to contact Dr. Gergory Moorhead, Director of the Center, privately to discuss how he may assist in facilitating the accommodations to be used in a course. This is best done early in the term. The conversation will remain confidential to the extent possible.

Please see <https://offices.depaul.edu/student-affairs/about/departments/Pages/csd.aspx> for Services and Contact Information

### **Preferred Name & Gender Pronouns**

Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, culture, religion, politics, sexual orientation, gender, gender variance, and nationalities. I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the quarter so that I may make appropriate changes to my records. Please also note that students may choose to identify within the University community with a preferred first name that differs from their legal name and may also update their gender. The preferred first name will appear in University related systems and documents except where the use of the legal name is necessitated or required by University business or legal need. For more information and instructions on how to do so, please see the Student Preferred Name and Gender Policy at <http://policies.depaul.edu/policy/policy.aspx?pid=332>

### **SCA Production Office:**

The Production office, located in LL Daley Building and at [production@cdm.depaul.edu](mailto:production@cdm.depaul.edu) is an invaluable resource to all DePaul student filmmakers. The office can answer general questions about navigating filming inside or outside of DePaul, SCA facilities and equipment, and provide resources for casting, insurance, crew calls, etc. Office hours are listed on the CDM Production Resources page [here](#).

### **SCA Central:**

Run by The Production Office, SCA Central is our online information hub, filled with resources including the SCA Production Handbook, pre-production templates, waivers/contracts, job listings, SCA events, local production community news & events, internship opportunities, etc. Find it on D2L and make it your home page.

### **SCA Production Handbook:**

Required reading for all SCA Students prior to equipment/stage/studio reservations, The SCA Production Handbook is an invaluable resource to all DePaul student filmmakers. Guidelines, policies, and procedures for filming at DePaul; using SCA facilities and equipment; and answers to questions regarding SCA resources and building contacts, are found inside. The handbook is updated regularly on [SCA Central](#) and also linked to the CDM Production Resources page [here](#).

## **WEEK by WEEK PLAN**

**\* Read Handouts as assigned. Watch videos as assigned. Check D2L for handouts and video links**

### **WEEK 1 – March 29**

#### **Finding documentary – career beginnings**

James presents his own professional story from first falling in love with film, to becoming a documentary filmmaker while navigating working in Chicago's commercial industry while making his first film, *Hoop Dreams*.

#### **In class:**

Watch brief excerpts from James' student films, *28 Up* (Michael Apted, 1985), *Harlan County U.S.A.* (Barbara Kopple 1976) and *Hoop Dreams* (1994)

#### **Discussion topics:**

Balancing making a living with pursuing your own work.

Longitudinal filmmaking vs traditional documentary film approaches.

Following the story where it leads.

### **WEEK 2 – April 5**

#### **The Coin of the Realm**

Gaining access and earning trust are essential to successful observational documentary filmmaking.

#### **Assignment:**

**Watch:** *The Interrupters* (James, 2011)

<http://vimeo.com/26741394>

Password: KTQ2012TI

#### **In class:**

Watch excerpts from *At the Death House Door* (James & Peter Gilbert, 2008) Discuss the process of gaining access and trust on this film and *The Interrupters*.

### **WEEK 3 – April 12**

#### **Point-of-view in documentary filmmaking**

Examining the differences between personal point-of-view in documentary vs point-of-view in observational and more traditional documentary filmmaking.

#### **Assignment:**

**Watch:** *Stevie* (James, 2002)

[https://www.dropbox.com/s/4xd7wcftg3j62oc/Stevie\\_h264.mp4?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/4xd7wcftg3j62oc/Stevie_h264.mp4?dl=0)

#### **In class:**

Discuss the personal storytelling approach of *Stevie*. Watch and discuss excerpts from *Minding the Gap* (Bing Liu, 2020).

### **WEEK 4 – April 19**

#### **Who's story is it to tell? – part 1**

To what degree do the subjects in films have agency in the telling of their story? And who has “the right” to tell their story?

**Watch:** *Hoop Dreams* (James, 1994) (Excerpts to be assigned)

[https://player.vimeo.com/external/353598461.hd.mp4?s=1667b3ffac25ed5d6f42e1f679d9f3f787ee81d&profile\\_id=175](https://player.vimeo.com/external/353598461.hd.mp4?s=1667b3ffac25ed5d6f42e1f679d9f3f787ee81d&profile_id=175)

#### **Assignment:**

Read: “Dreams of Conquest: bell hooks on *Hoop Dreams*”

<https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/dreams-conquest-bell-hooks-hoop-dreams>

Read: “Hoop Dreams: Serious Game” by John Edgar Wideman

<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/366-hoop-dreams-serious-game>

Read: “Reality Check” by Reeves Wiedeman

<https://www.vulture.com/article/tv-documentaries-ethical-standards.html>

Read: Op-Ed by Camilla Hall

<https://www.vulture.com/article/tv-documentaries-ethical-standards.html>

**In class:**

Discuss *Hoop Dreams*, reading assignments, and watch and discuss excerpts from *Subject* (Camilla Hall & Jennifer Tiexiera, 2022)

**Guest:** Jennifer Tiexiera

**WEEK 5 – April 26**

**Who’s story is it to tell? – part 2**

Further Examination of the role of “insider” vs “outsider” storytelling, and issues of equity that has become a central issue in documentary practice in recent years.

**Assignment:**

Watch: *No Crossover: The Trial of Allen Iverson* (James, 2009)

<https://vimeo.com/384888168>

Password: theanswer

Read: “A Reckoning” by Sonya Childress

<https://medium.com/@sonya.childress/a-reckoning-526bb97ca60b>

Read: “The Documentary Future: A Call for Accountability” by Sonya Childress

<https://medium.com/@sonya.childress/the-documentary-future-a-call-for-accountability-79e7c1315912>

**In class:**

Watch and discuss excerpts from *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* (RaMell Ross, 2018) as well as discuss *No Crossover: The Trial of Allen Iverson*.

**WEEK 6 – May 3**

**Documentary journalism vs non-fiction storytelling**

Looking at more journalistic approaches to documentary storytelling and discussing the ethical issues of accuracy and objectivity.

**Assignment:**

Watch: *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail* (James, 2016)

[SCREENER LINK](#)

Password: SungFamily16

Read: “On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth” by Werner Herzog

<https://www.bu.edu/arion/files/2010/03/Herzog.pdf>

Read: “In Defense of Documentaries as Journalism” by June Cross

[https://www.cjr.org/first\\_person/documentary-film-journalism.php](https://www.cjr.org/first_person/documentary-film-journalism.php)

**In class:**

Discuss *Abacus*, and watch and discuss excerpts from *Collective* (Alexander Nanau, 2020) and *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (Alex Gibney, 2005)

**Guest:** Alex Gibney

**WEEK 7 – May 10**

**The rise of the docuseries: Part 1 – true crime stories**

The docuseries became a commercially successful form due largely to the rise of true crime stories.

**Assignment:**

Watch: *The Staircase* (Jean-Xavier de Lestrade, 2004) (several episodes, TBD)

Read: "The Bloody Bubble" by Justin Sayles

<https://www.theringer.com/tv/2021/7/9/22567381/true-crime-documentaries-boom-bubble-netflix-hbo>

**In Class:**

Watch excerpts from *The Jinx* (Andrew Jarecki), and *OJ: Made in America* (Ezra Edelman)

**WEEK 8 – May 17****The rise of the docuseries: Part 2 – Longer form storytelling**

The popularity of the docuseries format has also allowed filmmakers to expand the possibilities of long form immersive storytelling.

**Assignment:**

Watch: *City So Real* (S. James, 2020) Select episodes

<https://vimeopro.com/kartemquin/city-so-real-screeners>

password: CSRNatGeo

**In class:**

Watch excerpts from *America to Me* (James, Kevin Shaw, Bing Liu, Rebecca Parrish, 2018)

**WEEK 9 – May 24****Documentary editing practices and approaches**

Detailing Steve James and collaborators approach to post production editing and storytelling.

**Assignment:**

Watch *The War Tapes* (2004, James was producer and editor)

**In class:**

Watch excerpts from *America to Me* (2018), *City So Real* (2020), and *The Luckiest Guy in the World* (S. James, 2023)

**WEEK 10 – May 31****Are we still in a documentary "Golden Age?"**

Has the forces of commercialism and streaming compromised or expanded the quality and integrity of documentary filmmaking?

**Assignment:**

Films TBD

Read: "Reality Check" by Reeves Wiedeman

<https://www.vulture.com/article/tv-documentaries-ethical-standards.html>

**In class:**

Watch and discuss excerpts from a range of current documentaries. TBD