Social Documentary Photography: Pictures You Will Never Forget

The March on the Pentagon, fifty years ago: A protester faces soldiers near the Pentagon on October 21, 1967. Photo by Marc Riboud/Magnum Photos

**Title of Course:** Introduction to Social Documentary Photography: Pictures You Will Never Forget  
**Course Number:** U49 JRN 332    Spring 2018 Intersession Section 01  
**Units:** 3  
**Instructor:** Wendi Fitzgerald: wfitzger@wustl.edu; Cell: 314-302-3130

**Meeting Schedule: Week One:** Friday, January 5th: 6-8:30 p.m.  
Saturday, January 6th: 9 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sunday, January 7th: 9 a.m.-6 p.m.

**Week Two:** Friday, January 12th, 6-8:30 p.m.; Saturday, January 13th: 9 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sunday, January 14th: 9 a.m.-6 p.m.

Photography plays a critical role in educating people about the world, and increasingly we seek the visual component to comprehend world events. This introductory session will study classic and contemporary trends in social documentary photography. We will examine the social power of images, and the associated desire of photographers to initiate political and
societal change through their work. Students will become familiar with classic themes and contemporary trends. This course will explore how documentary photography is used to contextualize issues, and we will examine how the medium itself has evolved. We will study aesthetic quality, documentary integrity and current technical innovation, including the impact of cellphonography, dronography and their applications.

During the course students will learn the history, theory and principles of social documentary and social realism photography. The course places an emphasis on personal documentary projects, with the goal of practical application of theoretical knowledge. Students will gain hands-on experience by creating and contributing to a documentation project. We will identify, research, and document a chosen community issue.

Those who complete the course will be able to identify the work of significant documentarians and will have strengthened their understanding of photography as a medium for social change. Readings will be assigned as handouts or reviews of image collections and readings online or in library holdings.

This introductory course will analyze in-depth significant documentary photos, documentary styles, and the photographers who made the pictures come alive. We will look at how groups in America furthered identity politics through the crafting of imagery. We will examine the social power of images, and the associated desire of photographers to initiate political and societal change through their work. Students will become familiar with global themes and trends, both historical and contemporary. During the course students will learn the basic theory and principles of social documentary and social realism photography.

Course Schedule

Friday: January 5th: Introductions and greetings. Assignment: Identify one photo you feel has made an impact on you. Objectives and Requirements of the course. Discussion of the past of social documentary photography. Who are the masters?

Saturday: January 6th, 9-12 p.m.: Lecture: Great Social Documentary Photographers: W. Eugene Smith; Gordon Parks, Dorothea Lange. The sub-genres of social documentary photography. Lunch Break: 12-1:15:
1:30-6 p.m.: War and Conflict Photography: Gardner, Brady, Nachtwey, Capa. Possible Field Trip: Missouri History Museum: Capturing the City: Photographs from the Streets of St. Louis, 1900-1930

Sunday, January 7th- 9-12 p.m.—Classroom lecture: Gordon Parks, Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Walker Evans and the Farm Security Administration phenomena. Social Documentary Photography in its heyday of the early 20th century: Lewis Hine, Jacob Riis and the Muck Rakers. The photographers and the events of the 1930s and 1940s; William Eggleston. A look at street photography.
Lunch Break: 12-1:15 p.m.
2-4 p.m.: Guest Speaker

4-6 p.m.: The Life of William Eggleston. Street Photography. Discussion and research on St. Louis neighborhoods.

Friday, January 12th: 6-8:30 p.m.: Possible field trip; Preparations for group project. Lecture: More on influential documentary photographers. The future of Social Documentary Photography.

Saturday, January 13th: 9 a.m. - 10 a.m.: Classroom lecture and final preparations for field project. Presentations due.
10 a.m. - 6 p.m. Shoot project, edit, establish theme, refine.

Sunday, January 14th, 9 a.m.-12 p.m.: Lecture, production of photo essay; edit photos in Photoshop, create thematic layout.
12 p.m.-1:30 p.m.: Lunch

1:30-6 p.m.: Complete all presentations and assignments. Round up and final critique of group project.

Requirements for Credit:

Come to class on time. Class participation is critical due to the theme of a group photo project. The syllabus is subject to change and flexibility is a key factor. As always, we are here to help; if you have any special considerations please let the instructor know as soon as possible.

There are three assignments due. One is called “Deconstruction: The Story Behind The Photo”. The second is “Compare and Contrast: An Analysis of Two Photographers and Their Careers”. And the third involves group
participation in identifying a neighborhood in St. Louis, conducting research of the neighborhood, and producing one photo to an overall group project. This will involve class time and a field trip to the neighborhood chosen for documentation.

1) Deconstruction: The Story Behind the Photo

This session, we will study historical images that have become iconic in nature. We all might be familiar with Dorothea Lange’s photo in 1936 titled “Migrant Mother,” a compelling single image of a woman and her children that summarized the desperation of the Great Depression. We all seem to know the Afghan Girl photo by Steve McCurry, the young refugee with the green haunting eyes. Like the lines etched on the face of the Migrant Mother (Florence Thompson), some images become etched in our collective consciousness. They become powerful documents made by photographers witnessing life unfolding. They become part of our history. We will also examined other images with great stories behind them, like Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Bob Jackson, who photographed the unforgettable image of Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald, the day after Oswald assassinated President John Kennedy in 1963.

Irony lies in the fact that the amount of time it takes to make a photograph can be just a sliver of a second and then a photo becomes timeless. Many great photos that we recall in our minds have a great story behind them. We access total recall in our brains to these freeze-frame images, and we assign emotional significance to them.

When we look at these iconic photographs, we can realize they have the impact to persuade, evoke strong emotions, and indeed some photos have even changed the world. For example, two photos that helped shape general opinion of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam: The girl running down the street naked after being burned by napalm, photo taken by Nick Ut in 1972; and Eddie Adams’ 1968 photograph of a General executing a Viet Cong prisoner on the streets of Saigon. The photo, which garnered a Pulitzer Prize for Adams, caused such a furor that it would later prompt Adams to lament: “The general killed the Viet Cong. I killed the general with my camera.”

The assignment is to choose a photo that you find visually compelling. Find a photo that speaks to you. Analyze the photo: What makes it compelling to you, to others? What does this photo bring to you? What gives the photo “legs”?
After establishing the photo of your choice, connect with the history of the photo. Who, what, where, when and why? Put the photo in social, political and historical context. What does history reflect, or what does the photographer reveal about making of the photo?

Any and all photos are acceptable and you can choose contemporary or historic photos. One to three pages in length will be enough. This assignment will be due by Sunday, January 14th. Be prepared also to share your choice with the rest of the class.

2) Compare and Contrast: Analysis of Two Photographers and Their Careers

During the session, we'll study many photographers and look at their work and their lives. We'll discuss their impact and their influence on us, on society, and on each other artistically.

Identify and research two photographers/artists whose work interests you. Find a link between the two. Explore their work and their lives, keeping in context and consideration of the technology used, the political and economic climate, design and style, social and cultural impact. Identify the links and correlations between the two. What is the influential connection? Photographers believe in serendipity (fortunate happenstance). Find two that maybe had a serendipitous connection.

There are many possible pairings. Perhaps the subjects you choose are not two photographers, but two striving souls who influenced each other. (Alfred Stieglitz, the photographer, and Georgia O’Keefe, his wife the painter, for example). There is no vacuum in the realm of creativity. There are many photographers who were influenced by other photographers, painters, sculptures, and other artists.

Show examples of the photographers’ work and tell us how they influenced or inspired each other. Talk about the medium they used and the technology they employed. What format camera was used? What type of print or finished product was rendered? You can talk about how the photographers you choose have fared in real time and in historical context. Your example is of your choosing. It can be two who lived in the same time period, or two who never met. Place them in virtual history. Highlight where ideologies or ideas merged, or where technologies converged.
This can be power point, and will be shared with the class. Ten to fifteen minutes minimum, you can go as long as you like. Written material will be accepted. This is due no later than 15 January 2017.

3) Document a St. Louis Neighborhood: As a group, we will research the plethora of St. Louis neighborhoods, choose one and spend an afternoon photographically documenting the neighborhood. We will then spend class time editing the photos to create a photo essay. Cell phone images, Instagram, etc. are all acceptable.