

General Info & Assignments

Fundamentals of Documentary Photography

- Term: 2025/26 Fall
- Course Location: C 120 Media Lab (Fridays 08:20 - 10:30)
- Course Instructor: Daniel Halasz (halaszd@ceu.edu, www.danielhalasz.com)

Course Description

This practice-based course introduces documentary photography to students of culture, politics, and society. Through a combination of theoretical study and hands-on practice, students will explore how photography can be used to document and analyze social, cultural, and political phenomena. The course emphasizes collaborative work, critical thinking, and the development of technical skills in photography and digital image processing.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this module, students will be able to:

- Understand the role of documentary photography in social, cultural, and political contexts.
- Apply basic camera techniques and photo editing skills to create meaningful images.
- Analyze and critique photographic works from a socio-political perspective.
- Collaborate effectively in group projects to create cohesive documentary series.
- Articulate the cultural considerations and regional differences in documentary photography.

Course Structure and Group Work

Students will be divided into groups of 3-4 at the beginning of the course. Each group will choose a broad socio-political topic (e.g., urban development, immigration, climate change) that they will explore throughout the semester.

Student-Led Reading Discussions

There are 5 highlighted readings/viewings with Connection Questions throughout the semester. The class will be divided into 5 pairs of students, with each pair being responsible for leading one 5-7 minute discussion on their assigned week. This involves providing a brief summary of the resource and posing the Connection Question to the class to start the conversation. A sign-up sheet will be provided in Week 1.

Course Requirements and Assessment

- Individual Assignments (40%): Four technical and conceptual assignments.
- Group Project Development (20%): Ongoing collaborative work and presentations.
- Final Group Project (30%): A multi-faceted documentary project on the group's theme.
- Participation and Peer Feedback (10%): Active engagement in class discussions and critiques.

Detailed Assignment Descriptions

1. Camera Basics and Composition (Individual, 10%) [Due Oct 6]
Apply the exposure triangle (ISO, aperture, shutter speed) and basic composition techniques to create a series of 5 images that document an aspect of your group's theme. Include exposure settings for each photo and a brief explanation of your compositional choices.
2. Lightroom Editing Essentials (Individual, 10%) [Due Oct 20]
Edit a provided set of RAW images using Adobe Lightroom. Demonstrate proficiency in basic adjustments (exposure, contrast, color, cropping) and local adjustments. Submit before and after versions with a brief description of your editing process.
3. Environmental Portrait (Individual, 10%) [Due Nov 3]
Create two environmental portraits related to your group's theme. Use natural light and compose the image to reveal information about the subject's identity, occupation, or relationship to the theme. Include camera settings and a short paragraph explaining your approach.
4. Visual Narrative (Individual, 10%) [Due Dec 11]
Produce a series of 5-7 images that tell a story or convey a message related to your group's theme. Focus on creating a cohesive

narrative through careful sequencing and visual consistency. Submit the series with a brief artist statement explaining your narrative approach.

5. **Final Group Project (30%)** [Due Dec 11]

Collaborate with your group to create a multi-faceted documentary project on your chosen theme. The project should include:

- A curated selection of 15-20 images that provide diverse perspectives on the theme.
- A 2-page written statement (600-700 words) explaining the group's approach, findings, and individual contributions.
- A presentation of the work to the class, including a discussion of the creative and collaborative process.

Final Project Group Roles

- The Curator/Sequencer: Leads the final selection and sequencing of images.
- The Writer/Researcher: Takes the lead on drafting the final written statement.
- The Presentation Designer: Manages the visual design of the final presentation.
- The Project Manager (for groups of 4): Coordinates group meetings and deadlines.

Feedback and Critique Methods

- Small-Group Critiques: Students will break into small groups for focused feedback.
- Silent Critique (Gallery Walk): Students will post images to a digital board and leave written comments for a reflective review.
- Structured Feedback Model: All critiques will use the "Glow" (a strength), "Question" (a query about intent), and "Grow" (a suggestion) model.

Evaluation criteria include

- relevant research on chosen topic and historic/contemporary visual references
- originality, conceptual depth, visual storytelling
- compositional skills (applying/braking rules, cropping, foreground/middle ground/background)
- technical execution (exposure, focus, white balance, lighting, equipment choice, post-processing)
- presentation quality (consistency, digital presentation, printing)

Diversity of perspectives

Course materials and examples are selected with an effort to try represent a wide range of cultural, political, and various other perspectives in art and media. The canon of art is Western-dominated, so participants are encouraged to bring examples showcasing more diverse perspectives and to discuss how different cultural contexts might influence interpretations of the works we study or create. Exercise prompts are also designed to allow you to explore themes relevant to your own identities and experiences.



[Main Course Forum](#)



[Class Drive for all course submissions](#)



[Attendance Checklist](#)

Week 1

Week 1: Introduction and Group Formation

- Course overview and expectations
- Introduction to documentary photography in social and political contexts
- Group formation and theme selection
- Introduction to Media Lab facilities

Viewing material:

History of Photography Overview (2020), abridged video based on the 12-part series *Photographic Processes* by the George Eastman Museum, Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8y0WpmwaM8>

How was it made? The Daguerreotype | V&A
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAPgdo5H7ZY>

How was it made? Calotypes | V&A
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jCWQTNWgyM>

How was it made? Wet Collodion | V&A
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNyQ0nfMsxo>

Kodak in the Congo: The Untold Story of Alice Seeley Harris,
Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rstFCn3r1BE>

Reading material:

Brabant, M. (2016) *A brief timeline of the history of photography*. Available at
<https://www.dickermanprints.com/a-brief-timeline-of-the-history-of-photography/>

Rosenblum, N., Gernsheim, H. E. R., Grundberg, A. and Newhall, B., (2019) *History of Photography*. Encyclopedia Britannica, Available at
<https://www.britannica.com/technology/photography> (chapters 1-3, until 1840s)

Further resources:

Benjamin, W. (1935) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Illuminations, edited by Arendt, H., translated by Zohn, H. Available at
<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>

Week 2

Week 2: Camera Basics Workshop

- Hands-on workshop: lenses, ISO, aperture, shutter speed, basic composition techniques
- Student-Led Discussion 1: History of Photography Overview (2020), George Eastman Museum
- Connection Question: As you learn the technical "how" of photography, consider the "why." How did the early technical limitations of photography shape what it could and could not document?
- Assignment 1 introduced: Camera Basics and Composition [Due Oct 6]

Viewing material:

Camera Basics – Aperture

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YojL7UQTVhc>

Camera Basics – Shutter Speed

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7R9ZTxoTOSk>

Camera Basics – ISO

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8cj9Lj9w-g>

Camera Basics – Focal Length

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CoEsqePADw>

Further resources:

Photography Mapped

<http://photography-mapped.com/interact.html>

DoF Simulator

<https://dofsimulator.net/en/>

Photographers:

Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii, August Sander

Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans

Leni Riefenstahl

Robert Capa – Gerda Taro, Robert Doisneau

Gordon Parks, Robert Frank, W. Eugene Smith

Magnum Photos, Henri Cartier-Bresson

Seydu Keïta, Malick Sidibé

Links:

August Sander - What This Photo Doesn't Show

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AVNhTi9pzM>

Dorothea Lange

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=dorothea+lange&co=f&st=g>

W. Eugene Smith

<https://time.com/26789/w-eugene-smith-life-magazine-1951-photo-essay-nurse-midwife/feed/>

Magnum Photos – The changing of a myth

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOHmvL5KeXw>

Robert Frank – The Americans

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAwxKjipHoE>

Week 3

Week 3: Visual Storytelling

- Lecture: Visual storytelling techniques
- Group work: Developing project proposals and assigning roles
- Student-Led Discussion 2: John Szarkowski, MoMA exhibition wall text for Diane Arbus (1972)
- Connection Question: Szarkowski writes that Arbus photographed "the considerable mystery of the everyday." How can you apply this idea to your own group's theme?

Reading & viewing:

John Szarkowski, Director, Department of Photography, MoMA exhibition wall text for Diane Arbus (1972)

<https://americansuburbx.com/2012/08/diane-arbus-diane-arbus-moma-exhibition-wall-label-1972.html>

Imagine - The colorful Mr Eggleston (2009)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jZ_HkaTXh8

Rambling through Eggleston's Democratic Forest (Alec Soth, 2021)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kj6efh1mSH4>

Documentary - Documents of Contemporary Art (2013), MIT Press / Whitechapel Gallery

<https://cloudflare-ipfs.com/ipfs/bafykbzacebs542dukn2dzsx7bmmui37jxyhnxz7xooiefokptnltrjkcy6i?filename=Julian%20Stallabross%20%28ed.%29%20-%20Documentary-MIT%20Press%20%282013%29.pdf>

Photographers:

Diane Arbus, William Eggleston

Week 4

Week 4: Lightroom Classic Basics

- Assignment 1 Due
- Review of Assignment 1 (Small-Group Critiques)
- Introduction to Lightroom Classic: importing, organizing, and basic editing
- Group project proposal presentations
- Assignment 2 Introduced: Lightroom Editing Essentials [Due Oct 20]

Group Project Proposal Worksheet

Work with your new partner/group to answer the following questions. Your team will give a short **3-minute / 3-slide pitch** based on these answers at the beginning of our next class.

1. Team Theme: What is the broad theme your team is exploring?
2. Core Question: What is the central question your project is trying to answer?
3. Individual Projects: What is the specific, individual story each member will pursue under this theme?
4. Access Plan: Where will you go and who will you talk to for these stories?
5. Team Roles: How will you handle the roles? (For pairs: decide who will be "Lead Writer" and "Lead Curator." For the trio: divide the Writer, Curator, and Designer roles).
6. Our Unique Angle: How will your team's perspective be unique? Define your specific angle by considering your Focus (person, place, process?), Scale (macro vs. micro?), and Aesthetic (the mood of your photos?).

[Lightroom Classic // Importing, cataloging, editing & exporting images // 17 minute tutorial by Daniel Halasz](#)

Further videos:

[Everything you need to get started with Lightroom Classic](#)

[How to organize in Lightroom Classic](#)

[Export settings in LrC](#)

[2hr Lightroom Classic Tutorial](#)

[Other long LrC tutorial](#)

Week 5

Week 5: Environmental Portraiture

This session features a micro-workshop on environmental portraiture, including a brief lecture, an in-class practice session, and an immediate informal review.

- Student-Led Discussion 3: The work of Dorothea Lange and Gordon Parks.
- Connection Question: In an environmental portrait, the setting is as important as the subject. How does the environment in Lange's or Parks' portraits add layers of meaning to the person being photographed?
- Assignment 3 Introduced: Environmental Portrait [Due Nov 3]

Some inspiration: Christoper Anderson (Marion), Richard Billingham (Ray's a laugh), Larry Sultan (Pictures from home), Viviane Sassen (Flamboya), Erwin Olaf (Hope), Cindy Sherman (Untitled Film Stills), Vasantha Yoganathan (Amma), Peter Puklus (One and a half meter), Taryn Simon (The Innocents), Deana Lawson (Nation)

Further inspiration:

still-life paintings (eg. Things - A History of Still Life @ Louvre)

Laura Letinsky (to say it isn't so), Peter Puklus (Handbook to the Stars),

Sam Taylor-Wood (Still Life), Taryn Simon (Paperwork and the Will of Capital),

Thomas Demand, Stephen Shore (Uncommon Places),

Alec Soth (Last Days of W, Dogs Days Bogotá), Gregory Halpern (ZZYZX),

Thomas Albdorf, Maisie Cousins, Csilla Klenyanszki

Thomas Ruff (Interiors)

Week 6

Week 6: Advanced Composition and Visual Design

- Assignment 2 Due
- Review of Assignment 2 (in pairs)
- Micro-workshop: Advanced composition techniques and visual design principles

Photographers:

Bernd & Hilla Becher, Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld

Week 7

Week 7: Advanced Lightroom Techniques

- Advanced Lightroom workshop: color grading, local adjustments, presets
- Student-Led Discussion 4: The work of William Eggleston
- Connection Question: Eggleston's work legitimized color in art photography. How does color (or its lack) influence the "truthfulness" or emotional impact of a documentary image?

Week 8

Week 8: Narrative and Sequencing in Photography

- Assignment 3 Due
- Review of Assignment 3 (Silent Critique / Gallery Walk)
- Micro-workshop: Creating effective visual narratives and photo sequencing
- Assignment 4 Introduced: Visual Narrative [Due Dec 11]

Photographers:

Hiroshi Sugimoto, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, Nan Goldin

Week 9

Week 9: Alternative Presentation Formats

- Discussion: Books, exhibitions, and online platforms
- Group presentations on project progress (5 minutes per group)
- Student-Led Discussion 5: Contemporary platforms like Secondary Archive and New East Archive
- Connection Question: How do online platforms change the way documentary stories are told and who gets to see them? What format is most appropriate for your group's project?

Week 10

Week 10: Individual and Group Consultations

- One-on-one meetings to discuss individual contributions
- Group meetings to refine final projects with instructor feedback

Links:

<https://secondaryarchive.org/>,
<https://martinkollar.com/>,
<https://pecsiosztondij.capacenter.hu/>,
<https://blokmagazine.com/fotoblok/>,
<https://award.sittcomm.sk/>,
<https://www.new-east-archive.org/photography>

Week 11

Week 11: Final Project Development

- Peer review sessions for final project drafts
- Dedicated in-class work time for groups to finalize their presentations, written statements, and image sequences with instructor support

Week 12

Week 12: Final Presentations and Reflection

- Final Group Project Presentations & Group Critique