

COLORADO MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

Photographing People: A Documentary Approach



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Goal The passage to a person's soul is through their eyes. Discovering the key to a person's soul, photographically, requires a desire to delve into that passage and - for a brief moment - become the subject. The photographer must possess a willingness, if not a need, to experience - in a sudden rush - the depths and the essence of the subject.

In this class you will take the skills you already possess and learn to combine them with the skills of observing, understanding and empathizing with your subject. By the end of this course you should be able to confidently photograph people in their surroundings and create photographs that tell of "who" your subject is. Don't confuse this with "what" that person "does." You will be photographing your subject "doing what they do" but you want to make photographs that speak of "who" your subject is - as a person. Anyone can take a shot of someone wearing a uniform and "say" this person's a cop. The trick is - can you learn to take a shot that says "who" that subject is as a person.

Introduction You will learn approaches to photographing people with a documentary approach. You'll be able to take these skills and apply them to many styles of people photography: from documentary, to fashion, to portraits to studio setups. The majority of class time and assignments will highlight using an unobtrusive, non-confrontational method. You should learn to create images in which your subjects are captured in a natural, candid style and in a manner in which the subject's personality and "soul" are captured.

You will be graded in this class. A final portfolio from class assignments will be due on the last day of class. Your grade will be based on your visual growth from the start to finish of this class.

Recommended References

Andrez Kertesz, *SixtyYears of Photography, 1912-1972*
Margaret Bourke-White, *Photojournalist* by Theodore M. Brown
David Hume Kennerly, *Shooter*
Time/Life Series: Documentary Photography
Photojournalism: The Professionals' Approach, Kenneth Kobre
The Photographs of Margaret Bourke-White, NY Graphic Society
Any other books with the photography of...Eugene Smith and Alfred Eisenstadt, Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Photographing People • A DOCUMENTARY APPROACH

Approaches & Terms There are (for me) four approaches to photographing people. Sometimes these approaches mix, sometimes they don't. It will be up to you to feel when it's right and when it ain't.

- **Confrontational & Non-Confrontational**
Subject's reaction and interaction with photographer.
- **Obtrusive & Un-Obtrusive**
Photographer's interference or interaction with subject.

Confrontational Examples of confrontational reactions to photographer:

- eye contact
- subject's self-posing
- interaction with photographer

(in the case of wars, celebs, etc...beating up, throwing something at photog, shooting at them, blowing them up...you get the idea.)

Non-Confrontational Non-confrontational describes the subjects lack of reaction to you as the shooter. Non-Confrontational means the subject is not looking at the camera.

- Subject appears to be completely oblivious to the presence of a photographer
(even if your presence is known, the subject is not acknowledging it).
- Subject doesn't know he/she is being photographed
(feature photos, surveillance).

Obtrusive Portraits are the best example of obtrusive photography

- You completely control the subject: what the subject wears, what the subject does
how the subject poses, where the subject poses.
- Other factors can include lighting of the subject (studio, flash)

Un-Obtrusive Unobtrusive means your subject never knows you're there...

- **Fly on the Wall approach:** Become invisible to your subject. Following your subject during the course of the subject's hobby, job, etc... Becoming the "fly on the wall" requires the most in Anticipation, Dexterity, Presetting, Timing, Patience and appreciation for Serendipity from a shooter.

(Guess what: more on this real soon!)

Unobtrusive
obtrusiveness
or is that
Obtrusive
Un-
Obtrusiveness?

Conversing with a subject and photographing them at the same time falls in the middle. It is obtrusive in that you are interacting with the subject, but it is unobtrusive in that you are not posing the subject in a direct manner; it's more like "working" your subject to arrive at an expression, body position, etc...which evokes some of that subject's personality and soul.

Remember - you're translating their personality onto the film - you have to read that person, understand who they are and know what to record on the film. If you notice they have a particular facial expression, or body expression while discussing a particular topic - work it! - keep a conversation going in that direction and it's highly likely the subject will use those expressions again - this time be ready!

You can also work a subject into position by wandering around them as you shoot. They will naturally turn to face you. In other words, if you see something in the background that works (or doesn't!), or notice the lighting might be better from a different angle, work them into position to use that discovery.

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The Seven-Step Program To Photographing People

There are seven steps toward achieving strong photographs of people:

- 1) Previsualizing
- 2) Dexterity
- 3) Anticipation
- 4) Patience
- 5) Timing
- 6) Serendipity
- 7) Presetting

Previsualization Previsualization is the ability to “see” the final photograph in your mind’s eye. I cannot stress the importance of this ability enough. Previsualization is the key to excellent photography - no matter what form it takes. Without previsualizing, you are shooting without a game plan. Although not all the images you previsualize will come together, you will have a mental visual list in your mind’s eye while you’re shooting.

- Previsualize before you even start shooting:

Have a mental set of some of the pictures you wish to make with your subject or that you anticipate as being possible (because of who the subject is, where they are, what they do, what you know about them, know facial expressions, etc...). Some or none of these pictures will be possible, but by having them in your head, you will be more likely to recognize the situation, background, expression and body language when they synchronize.

- Previsualize as you’re shooting:

Learn how to “see” the final product in “real time.” This is an obscure concept, but very real. Practice this concept by carrying the capture of an expression one step further: picture the final slide or print in your head - how the subject will look, the expression, the lighting, the cropping, the angle - everything there is to the final image.

Once you’ve practiced this, try doing it before you’ve captured the shot; this becomes the fine tuning of Anticipation.

By having a mental “proof” to work from, your photography will reach a new plateau. This “previsualization” is the difference between merely catching a good shot and creating a powerful image. Previsualizing will make you think about your photography. Previsualizing will give you control over what kind of pictures you leave a shoot with.

For each of the remaining steps to happen, previsualization will make all the difference in the world. It takes practice but should be in your mind for every shot you take.

Dexterity Dexterity is the ability to place yourself in the right place at the right time without becoming obtrusive.

Be aware of your surroundings:

- Which backgrounds might be good, clean, or possess storytelling elements
- AND EQUALLY which might be distracting

-
- where does the lighting strike the subject and how does it fall on them
 - AGAIN were will the lighting be crappy or non flattering

Be VERY aware of your surroundings:

You need to know your elements for other reasons. I don't want people backing over cliffs or getting run over by trains, cars, tourists, tourists driving or horse carriages!

AND REMEMBER: Without being OBTRUSIVE!

Anticipation

Anticipation is the ability to see and react to the possibilities of what could occur in the viewfinder and prepare accordingly.

- Making lens selections based on these possibilities

You must know and be able to previsualize what kind of effect each lens will create - practice with your lenses, play, experiment with your vision!

- Being in the right place at the right time:

This requires a real sixth sense for what is about to happen. However, by watching your subjects - the way they move, where they move when they do, and things like: do they repeat these motions, expressions, etc. many of the possibilities can be anticipated. Again - it's that previsualization.

Patience

You must be able to relax in the viewfinder and wait for the key, storytelling, personality exposing moment. Overreacting, hurrying to click the shutter, randomly clicking the shutter and impatience will make you miss the moment.

Keep your eye in the viewfinder and your mind on the subject. Murphy dictates that if you leave the viewfinder, the moment you've been waiting for will slip past you.

Timing

If you see it happening in the viewfinder - Guess What? - You just missed the shot! Patience yes - but don't miss the moment entirely. You've got to anticipate the expressions; see them coming before they are at their peak; recognize the moment coming on and practice the timing to know when to shoot.

Serendipity

Webster's defines this as: the faculty of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for. Call it dumb luck, shots happen, being in the right place at the right time...whatever. Learn to know when it's surrounding you and act accordingly by putting all of the above into action.

Presetting

All the Previsualizing, Anticipation, Dexterity, Timing, Patience and Serendipity in the world won't do you any good unless you're ready for action!

The following should be ready:

- First and foremost: Know your equipment. You won't have time to be messing with f-stops, shutter speeds, and which way the lens turns to take it

off. You have got to know your stuff intimately - so that you can put your fingers to the right place for the right control without having to take your eye from the viewfinder. You should learn to change f-stops, shutter speeds, change lenses and film without looking at the camera. **PRACTICE!**

- Be able to call off e-stops, shutter speeds and quickly figure exposure equivalents.
- Take that lens cap off! I like to keep them in the bag - if I need them - but I don't like them on the lens - it's only going to be in the way! If you're worried about scratching the lens - put a skylight filter on. You should be using one - they become a one-time insurance premium for that \$1,000 lens.
- Be using the right lens at the right time. "Gosh - if only I'd a had a 24 on instead of that 105." Zoom lenses are great for this - but you've got to get good with a zoom - remember that's one more control you have to learn to use effectively.
- And finally: Is there film in the camera?! Don't laugh, it's happened to me and it's happened to the best of them! **OOOPS!** If you forgot to put film in the camera - there ain't nuthin' you can do about it now! We all have a few latent images encrusted on our pressure plates. Check the film often to make sure it's running okay. If you've got a film rewind crank - use it to check pressure - this indicates that there's film in the camera.

Angles and lenses and changing your view

Don't get into the "Tourist Mode" when shooting flicks; stand, point, click, move on with never a thought of what you're seeing in the viewfinder, what your subject is - or is not doing.

Instead, move around. Change your angle, change your vision, change your lens. Shoot from different distances with different lenses. Think about movies you've seen - there's "establishing" or "long" shots, "medium" shots and "close-up" or "detail" shots. These give the viewer an opportunity to see the whole picture - so to speak.

ESTABLISHING - With the "establishing" shot you show the environment of your subject and of your subject within his or her environment.

MEDIUM - With the "medium" shot you show more detail of your subject with the environment, facial expressions, body language, how they move in the environment.

CLOSE UP - With the "close up" shot you show details of your subject. This could be the hands of a woodsmith or boxer, the face of a very old person, the tattoos of a tattoo artist. This helps to support the rest of your images and complete the package.

Spend time exploring each of these ideas when you're shooting. Changing your angle, your distance, your lens, and exploring variations within these will open up your vision and help you see things you hadn't thought you would see. Work from a distance and shoot some wide-angle shots, then maybe put on a long lens and shoot some medium shots of your subject. The longer lens from a distance will isolate them from the background. Same goes for getting close.

Shoot up close but with a wide angle lens. This will highlight your subject, but at the same time show a good deal of their environment.

Most importantly - don't scrimp on the film! Although "the moment" will only occupy one frame of film, sometimes it takes a whole heap of frames to capture "the moment" adequately.

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ASSIGNMENT 1 The Familiar Face

Photograph a friend, relative, significant other...

They can be doing anything...carrying on a conversation with you, working in the garden, doing dishes, doing their job, whatever...

This will give you a chance to start shooting with someone you're comfortable with, someone who is comfortable with you, someone whose facial expressions are familiar to you, someone whose body language is familiar to you.

Strive to capture these familiar expressions and reactions.

I just want to see what natural skills you possess for shooting people.

ASSIGNMENT 2 The Familiar Face Revisited

Shoot this same person again - this time using the skills you've (hopefully) learned in class. Bring back the following images:

- Obtrusive
- Unobtrusive
- Confrontational
- Nonconfrontational

ASSIGNMENT 3 The Event

Pick an event. This can be a sports event, a yard sale, a fair - just make it something with lot's of people, lot's of activity. I want you to attend the event and photograph the people at the event versus the event itself. You should strive for images which illustrate the spirit of the event and the spirit of the people at the event. Don't rush in and start shooting...rather, take some time and look for interesting, expressive people who would serve the purpose of illustrating the concept of spirit. Stick with a particular person for a while...don't just snap a photo and move on to the next person...

ASSIGNMENT 4 Looking at yourself

Create a self portrait of your self. This can be set up with a tripod or shot in a mirror. Be alone when you shoot this image. All I ask is that before you shoot - think about what you want to say about your "self" - what you want to visually convey.

FINAL PROJECT The Documentary

Choose a person to document. They should have an interesting hobby, or job or story to tell... I want you to spend time with this person (i.e. more than 10 minutes and three frames of film!). Regardless of what they are doing, I want you to illustrate WHO the person is - NOT just WHAT the person DOES. In other words, by photographing the person doing what they do we'll be able to get a clear vision of WHO the person is, through their expressions, body language, hands, etc...