

Photography 2

Documentary



Level HE5 – 60 CATS

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Article *Canon Fodder*

Introduction

Welcome to *Photography 2: Documentary*.

In this Level 2 course you'll explore some historical and contemporary strategies in documentary photography. By strategies we mean a combination of technical, visual and conceptual ways of engaging with the world using the medium of photography. The course is underpinned by the idea of the documentary photographer as an author and documentary photography as a tool for communication. You'll be encouraged not just to observe and witness the world around you but also to comment on it, express yourself photographically, convey an opinion and ask questions of the viewer.

The strategies presented in this course guide don't form a historical chronology of documentary photography nor are they compartmentalised into self-contained and isolated units of knowledge and skills. Instead, you'll find interconnected histories of photography, ideas, techniques, concepts and critical debates, all of which will shape your own documentary photography practice.

A route map

Think of this course as a route map into a territory called documentary. As such, it shows you a path, a way for you enter that territory. It's not the only path available, but by following the photographic landmarks along this path you'll reach vantage points from which to look at the documentary territory and gain new perspectives. We hope that once you've achieved that you'll feel confident enough to venture further afield, continuing your personal exploration of documentary photography.

Looking at other photographers' work is absolutely crucial to developing a sense of what documentary is, where it comes from and where it may be heading. In this course individual images and larger bodies of work act as milestones on your path, providing you with examples of documentary photography and helping you develop your critical skills. They also act as markers for discussing specific elements of documentary work. We hope that you'll find them inspiring and that they will help you situate your own work within a wider documentary photography practice.

A reflective and reflexive approach

Within this course guide you'll find the terms 'reflective' and 'reflexive' used in a variety of contexts. These terms refer to two different but related approaches to learning and photography. Throughout the course you'll be asked to write 'reflective' comments in your learning log or blog to develop your critical and analytical skills. A reflective approach means being able to comment on social and cultural implications in documentary photography and debate relevant ethical perspectives.

"We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves."

(John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*)

By the end of this course we'll expect you to have developed a 'reflexive' practice which shows awareness of your own perception of the scenes and situations that you photograph. This is nothing to do with physically participating or intervening in the events that you capture with your camera. Rather, it's an acknowledgement that your own cultural and socio-economic background, your expectations and preconceptions about the subjects and topics that you photograph, affect the outcome of your photographic practice. In order to exhibit a reflexive photographic approach you'll have to be reflective about your own work and that of other photographers.



Before you start

Your OCA *Student Handbook* should be able to answer most questions about the basics of this course and all other OCA courses so keep this to hand.

Course aims

Photography 2: Documentary aims to support you in developing visual and conceptual strategies in documentary photography and situating your own practice within that framework. The course will help you to identify the wider social, cultural and economic implications that underpin an ethical contemporary documentary practice.

The projects, exercises and assignments in this course aim to equip you with the skills that you need to conceptualise your ideas and realise them into visual products. You'll build your critical, analytical and reflective skills so that you can develop your personal voice.

Course outcomes

On successful completion of the course you'll be able to:

- demonstrate detailed knowledge of visual and conceptual strategies in documentary photography and awareness of the contexts and frameworks in which to develop your own practice
- show awareness of wider social and cultural implications in documentary photography and be able to debate relevant ethical perspectives
- reformat and realise a range of ideas, evaluate their relevance and integrate them in the production of visual material
- manage learning resources, exhibit self-appraisal and interact effectively within a learning group
- start developing a personal voice and apply communication skills effectively and with increasing autonomy.

Even if you don't intend to submit your work for assessment, it's useful to take ownership of these outcomes to aid your learning and use them as a means of self-assessment. You can check your progress against the learning outcomes in your learning log, when you review your progress against each assignment.

Your tutor

Your tutor is your main point of contact with the OCA. Before you start work, make sure that you're clear about your tuition arrangements. The OCA system is explained in some detail in your *Student handbook*.

If you haven't already done so, please write a paragraph or two about your experience to date. Add background information about anything that you think may be relevant for your tutor to know about you (your profile) – your experience of photography so far, your reasons for starting this course and what you hope to achieve from it.

Email your profile to your tutor as soon as possible. This will help them to understand how best to support you during the course. Arrange with your tutor how you'll deal with any queries that arise between assignments. This will usually be by email or phone.

Getting feedback

At the end of each part of the course you'll need to submit your work so that your tutor can give you some feedback on your progress. This submission should be a cross-section of the work you've done, including:

- your assignment work, including finished pieces, preliminary work and your reflections
- a selection of work and reflections on your exercises
- progress on your critical review
- any other backup work.

Show this work to your tutor by gathering it together and either posting or emailing it (you can use a free file-sharing service if there's a lot of material) or you can add it to your blog as you work through each part of the course. For this Level 2 course, you may submit prints, digital images or a combination of the two, unless you're specifically directed otherwise.

Make sure that you label any work that you send to your tutor with your name, student number and the assignment number. Remember to email your tutor to tell them when you're ready to submit so that they know to look at your blog or expect a parcel. Your tutor will get back to you as soon as possible after receiving your assignment but this may take a little time. Continue with the course while you're waiting.

It will be helpful for your tutor to see the work that you produce in between assignments. You may agree, for instance, that you'll send your tutor samples of your work or make your work available on your blog, if you need your tutor to comment on something in particular or if you have a problem that you need help with.

Your learning log

Your learning log is an integral part of this and every other OCA course. If you're new to OCA courses, read the *Keeping sketchbooks* and *Introducing learning logs* study guides for further information. You'll find this on the OCA student website.

Use your learning log to record your progress through the course. Your learning log should contain:

- your thoughts on the work you produce for each exercise
- your ideas and observations as you work through the course
- your reflections on the reading you do and any research you carry out
- your tutor's reports on assignments and your reactions to these.

You're strongly recommended to set up your learning log as an online blog. This blog could document your work for the exercises and assignments and provide links to research material. Setting up a blog is free and can be done through websites such as Blogger, Tumblr or Wordpress.

Planning ahead

This Level 2 course represents 600 hours of learning time. The course should take about a year and a half to complete if you spend around 8 hours each week on it.

As with all OCA courses, these course materials are intended to be used flexibly but keep your tutor fully informed about your progress. You'll need to allow extra time if you decide to have your work formally assessed.

Photography 2: Documentary is divided into six parts, corresponding to the course assignments. For Assignment Six you'll prepare your work for assessment, if that's what you choose to do. Parts One to Five each address a different issue or topic and are separated into projects designed to tackle the topic in bite-sized chunks. As well as information and advice, each project offers exercises that slowly build up and feed into the assignments that you'll send to your tutor.

The first assignment has a diagnostic element and is designed to give your tutor a feel for your work at an early stage in the course.

Managing your time

The time you spend on each part of the course will depend on how quickly you work, the time available to you, how easy or hard you find each exercise, and how quickly you want to complete the course. Don't worry if you take more or less time than suggested provided that you're not getting too bogged down in a particular part of the course and that your tutor is happy with the work you're producing. If it helps, draft a rough study plan and revisit this at the end of each part. The course structure is intended to be flexible, but it's always useful to bear deadlines in mind.

Critical, reflective and practical work

The exercises in each part of the course are designed to broaden your perspectives on documentary by directing you to specific learning resources and then asking you to carry out precise tasks. There is additional supporting information that relates to the exercises on the OCA student website and in the essential and recommended bibliography. This critical and reflective study leads to a practical photographic assignment. This assignment will give you a chance to develop your practical skills and also demonstrate how your practice has been informed by the reading and research you've carried out.

Before you start work on each part of the course, go to the end and read the assignment brief. You're strongly recommended to adopt a 'work in progress' approach to each assignment by thinking about it as you progress through the coursework. Develop your practical work for each assignment as you work through the projects and exercises. This will provide you with a more rewarding and productive learning experience.

The critical review

You'll be asked to start writing a 2,000-word essay or critical review on a topic of your choice as part of Assignment Four. You'll submit your final draft at the end of the course. This may be the first time that you've had to produce a substantial piece of academic writing so start thinking about it as you work through the course. Ideally, you should aim to submit an outline proposal for your critical review with Assignment Three. Your tutor can then start to give you guidance on how to proceed further. You'll find more information about the critical review at the end of Part Four of this course guide.

Reading

Many of the exercises in this course will ask you to read specific articles, book chapters and essays that you can find in key texts. You'll find a list of these essential texts as well as a recommended further reading list at the end of this course guide. There is also a regularly

updated version of the reading list on the OCA website.

Referencing your reading

Whenever you read something that you might want to refer to in your projects and assignments, get into the habit of taking down the full reference to the book, article or website straight away. You must fully reference any other work that you draw on if you plan to go for formal assessment. To do this you should use the Harvard referencing system. You'll find a guide to this on the OCA student website. Getting down the full reference at the time will save you the frustration of having to hunt for the details of a half-remembered reference long after the event – and ensure that you don't inadvertently plagiarise someone else's work.

Online learning materials and student-led research

This course guide will point you to specific learning materials that you need to refer to for particular exercises. Some of these learning materials can be sourced from the reading list while others are publicly available online. Some resources have been specifically prepared for this course – for example, **Core resources: pluk_JeffWall.pdf**. You'll find these on the OCA student website <http://oca-student.com>. The course also refers to materials listed in the essential and recommended bibliography. Your learning log should contain evidence of your having accessed and looked into all the online research materials mentioned in the exercises.

As you work through this course guide, you'll come across some research points which will direct you to do your own online research and find out more about particular photographers and their work as well as other topics relevant to documentary photography. However, now that you're working at Level 2, you also need to direct your own research. Wherever you see a name or a piece of work that's new to you, take responsibility for finding out more about it, immediately or later when you have time. Provide evidence of your research in your learning log. Don't think of this research as a chore. Building a bank of learning and research materials for future use will ultimately benefit your future practice. Taking responsibility for researching beyond what is in the course itself is essential at this level, not optional.

Thinking about assessment

Once you've completed and submitted your first assignment, you'll need to decide whether you want to go for formal accreditation at the end of the course, i.e. assessment. Your tutor is there to help you decide. The *Assessment and how to get qualified* study guide, available on the OCA student website, gives more detailed information about assessment and accreditation. For assessment you'll need to submit a cross-section of the work you've done on the course:

- all six assignments plus any amendments made in response to tutor comments
- your tutor reports
- your learning log or blog url.

Only work done during the course should be submitted to your tutor or for formal assessment.

Assessment criteria

These are central to the assessment process for this course, so if you're going to have your work assessed to gain formal credits, please make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence of each criterion. On completion of each assignment, and before you send your assignment to your tutor, test yourself against the criteria – in other words, do a self-assessment and see how you think you would do. Write down your findings for each assignment you've completed in your learning log, noting all your perceived strengths and weaknesses, taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will be helpful for your tutor to see, as well as helping you prepare for assessment.

The assessment criteria for this course are as follows:

- **Demonstration of technical and visual skills** – materials, techniques, observational skills, visual awareness, design and compositional skills.
- **Quality of outcome** – content, application of knowledge, presentation of work in a coherent manner, discernment, conceptualisation of thoughts, communication of ideas.
- **Demonstration of creativity** – imagination, experimentation, invention, development of a personal voice.
- **Context** – reflection, research, critical thinking (learning logs, critical reviews and essays).

Pre-assessment review

If you decide to have your work formally assessed, you'll need to spend some time at the end of the course preparing your finished work for submission. How you present your work to the assessors is of critical importance and can make the difference between an average mark and an excellent mark. Because of this your tutor is available to guide you on presenting your work.

Preparation for professional practice is a key element of this course so treat the task of putting together your assessment portfolio as an extra assignment with your tutor as 'client'. This will help you develop your skills in preparing your work for presentation to clients, exhibiting bodies, etc. There's more on preparing your work for assessment in Part Six.

OCA website and forums

There are lots of other OCA students currently studying photography. Use the OCA website forums as a place to meet them, share experiences and learn from one another. The forums are a great place to ask questions of other students, perhaps from those who have already done the course. A number of exercises suggest you access the forums to share some of your research and to join in with the debates that are taking place. The OCA student website also contains resource material and links to online archives you may need to use. You may want to start by logging on to the forums and introducing yourself. Find out who else is on the course and say hello.

Photography two

Part one

Introducing documentary



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This first part of the course introduces you to some of the key debates around the documentary photograph and the practice of documentary photography. You'll find that these debates are recurrent issues in documentary and that they'll return, in varying degrees of complexity, in later parts of the course. The aim of this first part is to challenge your preconceptions of documentary and provide you with some fertile ground that will help you develop your knowledge, understanding and skills.

In a way, documentary photography is a victim of its own legacy, its own history. The gritty B&W documents of suffering and otherness – documents that have become both part of world history and the history of photography itself – characterise the documentary image for many people. However, this is only one of many possible documentary photography strategies. Part One will give you a flavour of the visual possibilities of documentary, prepare you for the following sections and stimulate you to start looking into contemporary documentary practice.

This section will help you develop the open-mindedness that is required in order to learn about documentary photography and become a practitioner with your own personal voice. That personal voice can't be attained in a vacuum. It's crucial to read about and look at other artists' work and reflect on key debates implicit in their practice. Many of the readings in this first part of the course are classic writings on documentary photography that stand the test of time; they are as insightful now as when they were written. The opinions expressed by the authors are exactly that: the author's own opinions. The exercises in Part One, and throughout the course, invite you to read critically and engage with – or even challenge – the authors' opinions.

Working towards your assignment

Read the brief for Assignment One and create a dedicated page on your learning log or blog. Make a few preliminary planning notes and keep adding thoughts, ideas and resources to it as you work through the projects in Part One.

This page should also contain your work in progress for this assignment. See the section entitled 'Critical, reflective and practical work' in the Introduction to this course guide.

Project Defining documentary

"There is nothing more earth-shattering than already envisioning, from the place we are about to leave, the place we will be reaching that evening, or the following day, without anything in-between."

(Théodore Monod, *Méharées*)

Quoting a famous French ethnographer, explorer and naturalist passionate about the Sahara may seem an unorthodox way to begin a course on documentary photography. However, Monod's comment alludes to the limitations you set if you create preconceptions at the beginning of any journey. Strictly defining a photographic practice that is continually evolving is tantamount to limiting your potential to expand the scope of the genre. This project invites you to start thinking about what documentary may be for you, so that you can make your own personal contribution to the genre.



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Merging genres, merging media

Reportage, photojournalism, visual ethnography, street photography, travel photography. These are labels that inevitably crop up when we talk about documentary. Contemporary documentary practice makes use of strategies borrowed from a variety of photographic genres whose boundaries are no longer impermeable – if they ever were. From Robert Howlett's 1857 photograph of Isambard Kingdom Brunel posing confidently in front of a heap of iron chains – a document that symbolises Victorian self-confidence – to Robert Frank's sharp social commentary in *The Americans*, to Richard Billingham's garish depictions of his dysfunctional parents, to the vacant portraits of computer game users taken by Robbie Cooper, documentary has developed and matured in the century and a half since its inception and is now a boundless genre, continually in flux, whose possibilities are far from exhausted. You'll be looking at the work of some of the photographers mentioned here later in the course but you may want to do some online research now to get an immediate sense of the variety of work within documentary practice.



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The development of documentary has been multi-dimensional. Traditional platforms and technology for documentary have changed even since the turn of the twenty-first century. The web, the iPad, self-publishing and the now well-established presence of documentary in the art gallery are integral elements in documentary practice.

Exercise

Listen to Miranda Gavin talking about documentary photography at <http://oca-student.com/node/100125>

In your learning log, write a 200-word reflective commentary setting out your reactions to Gavin's viewpoint.

These new platforms are pushing the boundaries of documentary and challenging stagnant and outdated conceptions of the genre. Take, for example, the long-held notion that documentary is necessarily the result of a recording process and not a product of the imagination, as Jean-François Chévrier argued in *Documentary Now!* (2005, p.47). If this were true then Mohamed Bourouissa, a French Algerian photographer based in Paris, would not be, strictly speaking, a documentary photographer.

The paradox of documentary

In an article published in Eight magazine in 2004 (V3N1), Witold Krassowski argued that a photograph, including the documentary photograph, is not an efficient method to document a process: it cannot explain, analyse or make a prognosis. So why is it that photography has always been such a powerful and effective tool for documenting events? Despite its limitations, according to Krassowski, there is an action that the photograph "can perform brilliantly: it can influence human emotions".



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Paradoxically, a medium which by the very nature of its process of creation – an instantaneous distillation of life – lacks the complexities and richness of life itself, still has the potential to elicit in the viewer an emotional rethinking of the reality shown in the photograph. And it does so despite the fact that, essentially, the documentary photograph is mute. It doesn't tell anything; rather, it shows something. But it shows it in a way that offers the viewer the possibility of connecting with it and starting to ascribe meaning to the photograph.

"A documentary [photograph, film] takes an audience to an existing or past reality and is so compelling that they can empathise with mind, emotion and imagination. In that sense documentary is an ambitious creative and critical enterprise."

(de Jong, Knudsen & Rothwell, 2011, p.23)

Project What makes a document?

Director, producer and writer John Grierson (1898–1972) was the first to use the term 'documentary' within the visual media. In a 1926 article, Grierson argued that Robert Flaherty's film *Moana* had 'documentary value'. Flaherty had built a reputation as a film maker with his 1921 silent film *Nanook of the North*.

Flaherty's detailed record of events – or documentation – in *Nanook of the North* continued a tradition of visual ethnography established by the Torres Strait Expedition of 1898 whose director, W H R Rivers, used photography as an academically rigorous recording tool.

Photography rapidly became accepted as an authoritative document of events. In 1851, just over a decade after photography was invented, the Mission Héliographique started a photographic survey of the cultural, historical and architectural patrimony of France. 1855 saw Roger Fenton photographing the battlefields of the Crimean War. In 1860 Felice Beato brought back to Europe the drama of the Opium Wars. In the 1870s Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson contributed to a visual taxonomy of the American West in the US Geological Surveys. The USGS expeditions recorded landscape and geological evidence of a wilderness ready for development, completely ignoring the fact that that 'wilderness' was already occupied by indigenous peoples. In 1909 Albert Khan set out to record the peoples of the world, ending up with a unique collection of 72,000 autochromes.

Research point

Now that you're working at Level 2, it's up to you to direct your own research, using the information in this course guide as a starting point. Start by researching some or all of the historical developments in documentary photography outlined above. Record your findings in your learning log or blog.

Realism

From its inception, the documentary impulse, “promoted a systematic recording of visual reality for the purpose of providing information and encouraging understanding of the world” (Rogers, 1994). Photography was considered to be a fragment of reality whose meaning was intrinsically transparent and unequivocal. This is what came to be known as the *realist* paradigm.

“Nowhere was the implicit confidence in the objective truth of the camera’s vision more clearly demonstrated than in the French government’s official sponsorship of various photographic missions... photography itself was the technical analogue to the absolute belief in the legitimacy of appearances, a belief whose philosophical expression was, of course, positivism and whose artistic expression was realism and naturalism.”

(Solomon-Codeau, 1994, p.155)

Exercise

Read the first three sections (pp.1-8) of the essay ‘Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism’ by Kendall L Walton.

Core resources: [Walton_TransparentPictures.pdf](#)

Write a 200-word reflective commentary in your learning log outlining your views about Walton’s idea of photographic transparency.

Time and context

Almost all photographs spanning the turn of the 20th century could now be regarded as 'documents', i.e. as documentary photographs. This inevitably raises the question, what makes a documentary photograph?

Arguably, all photographs are a kind of document (Wells, 2004, p.9). To be precise, all photographs, eventually, *become* a document. Time has the ability to confer on photographs the character of documents. Time is what spans between two moments in history, and it is precisely a history that is at the core of the existential essence of photography (Tagg, 1998).



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What history though? Perhaps we should talk instead about 'histories' – the chronology of events surrounding the photograph, its producer and its audience. The history of that which was photographed. The personal histories of the photographer, the viewer and the wider historical circumstances they are immersed in. The history of the distribution and publication of the photograph. All these histories make up what we call *contexts*.

Exercise

Read the post 'What Makes a Document?' on WeAreOCA, including all the replies to it, and write your own comment both on the blog page and in your own blog. Make sure that you visit all the links on the blog post.

www.weareoca.com/photography/what-makes-a-document/

Make sure your reply is personal and authoritative. Express your opinion on the topic of the blog and substantiate your comments with solid arguments, ideally referring to other contributions to the blog.

Discontinuities

The context within which a photograph is produced, distributed and consumed determines the information that it conveys. This is particularly true of documentary photographs. Earlier it was argued that the documentary photograph is essentially mute and lacks the ability to explain or, to an extent, provide certainty about that which was photographed. A documentary photograph, like any other photograph, cannot convey the experience of the event depicted. John Berger called this *discontinuity* and argued that discontinuity makes the photograph inherently ambiguous.

"All photographs are ambiguous. All photographs have been taken out of a continuity. If the event is a public event, this continuity is history; if it is personal, the continuity, which has been broken, is a life story. Even a pure landscape breaks a continuity: that of the light and the weather. Discontinuity always produces ambiguity."

(Berger & Mohr, 1995, p.91)

This discontinuity makes itself apparent in the contexts of distribution and consumption of the documentary photograph. It is then that photographs tend to be used with words in an attempt to fill in the gaps of lived experience left by the broken continuity. Once photographs are used with words, "they produce together an effect of certainty, even dogmatic assertion" (Berger & Mohr, 1995, p.91).

Exercise

Make a selection of up to five photographs from your personal or family collection. They can be as recent or as old as you wish. The only requirement is that they depict events that are relevant to you on a personal level and couldn't belong to anyone else (i.e. no photographs of the Eiffel Tower).

Using OCA forums such as OCA/student and OCA Flickr group, ask the learning communities to provide short captions or explanations for your photographs.

Summarise your findings and make them public in the same forums that you used for your research. Make sure that you also add this to your learning log.

Project A postmodern documentary

A number of visual arts movements have influenced and shaped photographic practice over its relatively short history. One of these is postmodernism. A brief summary of some of the key markers of postmodernism immediately demonstrates its relevance to documentary photography:

- an emphasis on impressions and subjectivity in writing and the visual arts
- a blurring of distinctions between genres
- a tendency towards self-consciousness
- a rejection of elaborate formal aesthetic theories in favour of spontaneity and discovery in creation.

('Postmodernism', Mary Klages, 2003, [Core resources: MaryKlages](#))



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Postmodernism provided a new framework for thinking about a recurrent issue in documentary photography: photographic truth and objectivity.

Exercise

Read the article 'In, Around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)' by Martha Rosler in Bolton, R. (ed.) (1992) *The Contest of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (p.303). Make notes in your learning log or blog.

The myth of objectivity

The indexical property of the photography, that is, the ability of the photograph to reproduce exactly what was in front of the camera at the time of taking the photograph, lies at the core of the myth of objectivity. Documentary, as a photographic practice, hasn't escaped the implications of this myth.

The following quote from André Bazin exemplifies a historical belief in the objective authority of the photographic image:

"For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man...in spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually, re-presented.. "

(André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' in *What is Cinema?* 1945, p.7)

Bazin wrote this in 1945 at the zenith of a period widely known as 'the golden age of documentary'. During this time Bill Brandt produced *The English at Home* and Edward Steichen curated the exhibition *The Family of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Bazin's belief in the objective, evidential nature of photography echoed the view of many influential documentary practitioners of the time.

It is now widely recognised that taking a photograph is a process of selection and rejection, a process influenced by the photographer's own cultural upbringing, socio-economic context and intentions.

"If we accept the fundamental premise that information is the outcome of a culturally determined relationship, then we can no longer ascribe an intrinsic or universal meaning to the photographic image."

(Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', 1997, p.454)

Exercise

Write a 250-word reflective commentary on the above quotes by André Bazin and Allan Sekula. Briefly compare their respective positions and record your own view on the issue of photographic objectivity. Full texts available from OCA/student [Core resources: Bazin_ontologyphoto.pdf](#) and [Core resources: Sekula_PhotoMeaning.pdf](#)

A decisive moment?

The expression 'the decisive moment' has become part of the language of documentary photography. It was coined by Magnum co-founder and photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. The expression alludes to the seemingly natural chaos that characterises the visual world in front of us. This natural chaos, according to Cartier-Bresson, is only interrupted by fleeting moments of order in which visual elements arrange themselves in unexpected ways. Each and every one of these ephemeral arrangements constitutes a 'decisive moment'. If the photographer is quick and observant enough to photograph it, he or she can capture a 'special' moment when order rises above chaos.



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This is a plausible theory whose logic seems indisputable. Or is it?

The concept of the decisive moment is underpinned by the assumption that the visual order occasionally emerging from the chaos is an intrinsic property of the scene that is photographed. In other words, that it exists regardless of the observer. However, it could be argued that the 'decisive moment' exists *because* of the observer: it is the observer, in the act of observing and analysing the scene, who deems it 'decisive'.

To some extent, there's no such thing as a decisive moment. Rather, there's a continuum of decisive moments corresponding to a multitude of observers, of documentary photographers. The observer, as a sentient being, confers on a moment in time the quality of a 'decisive moment'. Different observers – or documentary photographers – will produce different decisive moments.

Exercise

Read Simon Bainbridge's article on the 2011 Hereford Photography Festival. **Core resources:** [Hereford_Bainbridge.pdf](#)

Select one of the bodies of work in the article and write a 200-word reflective commentary in your learning log.

Next, listen to Jon Levy, founder of Foto8, talking about documentary in the art gallery at <http://oca-student.com/node/100127>

Note down your reactions to Levy's comments in your learning log.

Assignment one

Local communities

In preparation...

Read the section entitled 'The Photographic Brief' in Short, M. (2011) *Creative photography: context and narrative*. Lausanne: AVA Publishing, pp.20-26.

The brief

Produce a small photo essay of 10 images that demonstrates your engagement with the lives, experiences and histories of your local community and its people.

You'll need to decide on a single theme, topic or activity to focus on. Discuss your ideas with your tutor before committing to it.

Do this assignment with only one camera and one lens. If you only have zoom lenses then decide on one particular focal length and don't move the zoom from that position – you can tape the zoom barrel to avoid moving it.

Provide a short commentary (200 words) explaining your ethos and rationale along with your images.

Delivery

For this assignment you'll need to submit 10 unmounted quality prints. The size should be 8x10 or A4. Liaise with your tutor regarding the technical aspects of printing your photographs.

Aims

This introductory assignment aims to act as a stepping stone between Level 1 and Level 2. The emphasis is on engaging with the world with your camera.

You're encouraged to be a participant-observer in the situations and activities that you photograph. By limiting your field of action to your immediate surroundings, you'll develop the ability to find the extraordinary in the ordinary – the things that may go unnoticed when you're familiar with a place. This assignment will develop your observational skills and prepare you for more involved projects towards the second half of the course.

Reflection

Before you send this assignment to your tutor, take a look at the assessment criteria for this course; these will be used to mark your work if you get your work formally assessed. The assessment criteria are listed in the Introduction to this course.

Review how you think you've done against the criteria and make notes in your learning log. Send these reflections to your tutor, along with your work, your supporting studies and your learning log (or link to your blog).

Make sure that each file or print has your name, student number and assignment number on it. Scan or photograph any supporting work and/or the relevant pages of your learning log. These can be summarised as a pdf document, uploaded to your blog or organised and submitted by post. Make sure that all supporting work has your name, student number and assignment number on it.

Your tutor may take a while to get back to you, so carry on with the course while you're waiting.