

## **COMM 499: Special Topic - Visual Communication and Social Change**

Spring 2008

USC Annenberg School for Communication

School of Communication

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### **Course Description**

The goals for this course are for participants to develop a theoretical and practical understanding of the history and current practices of visual communication, principally through photography, video and film. There will be an exhaustive review of the historical practices of using photography to impact on significant social issues. We will examine the work of turn-of-the-century documentary photographers Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine to the film work of Sol Worth with the Navajo's. It is interesting to note that both photography and sociology share the approximate same birth date.

Current practices of photographers and the use of pictures from a variety of approaches will be explored including war photography and socially concerned documentary photography. Particular emphasis will be placed on examining the historic Farm Securities Administration (FSA) project during the Great Depression, and the early 1900's work of Lewis Hine wherein he documented child labor practices of which his images were instrumental in changing child labor laws in the United States. Hine's photographs and photographs such as war photographs like Nick Ut's iconic photograph of the napalmed girl in Vietnam have been instrumental in impacting on both the public's awareness but also toward energizing significant social action. Use of still photographs and film from Ken Burns recent World War II as they apply to storytelling and the documentary genre.

In the last few decades photographs and video have been integrated in an array of inter disciplinary fields of study including sociology, anthropology, education, public health and medicine and of course art. We will examine the uses, impact and audience reaction from not only the above mentioned applications of photography but also the use of images in advertising and in research methods along with ethical and legal considerations. Visual communication now stands next to the written word. In the revolutionary digital age, there are literally billions of images produced annually around the world with not only sophisticated professional cameras but also instant production and transmission with cell phones. With this comes new and pressing implications for the moral and ethical, as well as the legal and professional, dimensions of image-producing practices (Image Ethics in the Digital Age; Gross, Katz and Ruby 2003).

The challenge of all documentary photography in the twentieth century,

articulated first by Susan Sontag in On Photography(1977) is how to overcome our habituation to shocking images, how to make us feel the burden of our own responsibility. We will examine how photographers have responded to socio-cultural conditions such as poverty, hunger, AIDS, homelessness, the environment, conflict, etc. There will also be a component exploring the current burgeoning field of participatory photography (pluralist) wherein community members(principally affected by poverty, disease and other social distress, use photography to impact the public and impact on policy decisions affecting their lives. Students will also be expected to explore the internet for the practices discussed in class in addition to assigned readings.

### **Integrated Documentary Project (Mid Term Paper and Final)**

Each student will plan, develop, and execute a mini visual documentary project with a minimum of fifteen photographs from a film or digital camera accompanied by text that will detail the project from its inception to its conclusion and that will be presented at the end of the course as a final project. Each student will also write a one–page proposal for their planned documentary project and submit by the third week of classes. This project is an integration of all of the elements of the class—from visiting the World Press photo exhibition at USC to the reading assignments and class discussion.

There will be a vast array of documentary projects explored to clarify the limitless subject matter for the documentary approach. The mission and scope of the individual documentary projects will be an integral part of the overall learning experience offered in this class and exhaustive discussions regarding each student's project proposal and implementation will be a focus of the course even though the general topic should something about your life. During class discussions each student's project ideas will be critiqued in groups. The execution of the individual documentary project will illustrate both the knowledge acquired from class assignments to the final product, both in written and visual form and will be partially completed as part of the **mid term paper** (five pages, five photos) requirement and completed by the **final** presentation (fifteen pages, fifteen photos) . Each student will be responsible for production of the pictures and photos may be as small as 4X6 or 5X7 in size and presented in a form all students can view.

### **Required Texts and Additional Reading**

The course reading requirements will be a combination of assigned text material and article handouts (most accessible on the internet). Some additional reading requirements may be assigned throughout the course.

Required texts:

Coles, Robert. Doing Documentary Work. Oxford UP, 1997 can be ordered from Amazon

Gross, Katz and Ruby (2003) Image Ethics in the Digital Age, (University of Minnesota Press) can be purchased at USC bookstore

Sontag, Susan, (1973) On Photography(Pan Books Limited) can be ordered from Amazon

**Guest speakers to be announced. Class may meet off campus no more than twice and only if logistics work for the entire class.**

### **Week 1**

Introductions

Review syllabus

Visit World Press Photo exhibit on USC campus

Discuss class assignments and reading assignments

### **Week 2**

View documentary film To Render a Life

Class discussion about film and Coles reading assignment

Roland Bleiker and Amy Kay, Representing HIV/AIDS in Africa: Pluralist Photography and Local Empowerment, *International Studies Quarterly* (227) 51 pp. 69-163 (will be handed out)

Coles, Robert. Doing Documentary Work. Oxford UP, 1997. Introduction and Part One

### **Week 3**

Coles, Robert. Doing Documentary Work. Oxford UP, 1997. Part Two

Becker, H.S., Photography and Sociology, *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, Chapter 1, 3-26 <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/becker.html>

Walker Evans Revolutionizes Documentary Photography, Read every section on this site

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/fsa/welcome.html>

### **Week 4**

Coles, Robert. Doing Documentary Work. Oxford UP, 1997. Part Three

Becker, H.S., Visual Sociology, Documentary Photography, and Photojournalism: It's All a Matter of Context, Read entire article

<http://home.earthlink.net/~hsbecker/visual.html>

View segment from PBS Ken Burns recent World War II for critical review

### **Week 5**

Coles, Robert. Doing Documentary Work. Oxford UP, 1997. Part Four and Epilogue

Mathison, Sandra , Seeing is Believing: The Credibility of Image Based Research and Evaluation ) Article will be handed out)

**Week 6**

Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, pp. 3-50

Wang, Caroline, *Using Photovoice as a Participatory Assessment and Issue Selection Tool* (will be handed out)

*Prepare mid five page mid term paper for next week along with five of the photos from your project*

**Week 7**

Sontag, Susan, *On Photography* pp. 51-114

Gross, Katz, Ruby, *Image Ethics in the Digital Age*, read Intro and Chapter 1&2

**Week 8**

Gross, Katz, Ruby, *Image Ethics in the Digital Age*, Chapter 3&4

Sontag, Susan, *On Photography* pp.115-152

**Week 9**

Gross, Katz, Ruby, *Image Ethics in the Digital Age*, Chapter 5

Sontag, Susan, *On Photography* pp. 153-183

View segment from PBS World War II for critical review

**Week 10**

Ballerini, Julia, *photography as a Charitable Weapon: Poor Kids and Self-Representation*, *Radical History Review*, Volume 69 Fall 1997, Will be handed out or found on internet

Gross, Katz, Ruby, *Image Ethics in the Digital Age*, Chapter 7&8

**Week 11**

Gross, Katz, Ruby, *Image Ethics in the Digital Age*, Chapter 12

Ballerini, Julia, *Flip: The Homeless Child as Auteur*, from the *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 8:2(1995:Fall) (will be handed out)

**Week 12**

Gross, Katz, Ruby, *Image Ethics in the Digital Age*, Chapter 13&14

Berger, John, *About Looking*, (1980)Pantheon Books, pp.1-47 (will

**Week 13**

Gross, Katz, Ruby, *Image Ethics in the Digital Age*, Chapter 15 and Afterword

Berger, John, *About Looking*, (1980) Pantheon Books, pp. 48-63 (will be handed out)

Prepare and discuss final presentation to class

**Week 14**

Presentation of final papers and images from photo documentary

**Week 15**

Presentation of final papers and images from photo documentary

**Grading**

Class Participation 10%

Photo Documentary Project 20%

Mid-term Paper 20%

Final paper and Documentary Project 50%

**Academic Integrity**

The School of Communication is committed to the highest standards of academic excellence and ethical support. It endorses and acts on the USC campus policies and procedures detailed in the section titled "University Sanction Guidelines." These policies, procedures and guidelines will be assiduously upheld. They protect your rights, as well as those of the faculty. It is particularly important that you be aware of and avoid plagiarism, cheating on exams, submitting a paper to more than one professor, or submitting a paper authored by anyone other than yourself. Violations of this policy will result in a failing grade in the course, and be reported to the Office of Student Conduct. If you have any doubts about any of these practices, you must confer with the professor.

**Disability**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.- 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213)740-0776.