

If I could tell this story in words,  
I wouldn't need to lug a camera.

-- Lewis W. Hine

Photography in American History  
American Studies 317



Photography in American History  
American University of Central Asia

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Course Description and Goals:

A photograph can be compelling, can be moving, like no other document. There is an immediacy and frankness to a well-made, “straight” image that cannot be denied. Photographs themselves have been catalysts in many historical events. Either called propaganda or journalism, the manipulative power of a photograph is great. In this class we will examine some key photographs and how they have been used, both in and out of context, to persuade—to move—at pivotal moments in American history.

The power and place of photographs in the American past—and in the analysis of that past—is a historical and historiographical fact, yet the photographs and their makers are often conspicuously absent in much American historiography.

One goal of this class is to attempt an integration of the photographic image into all phases of historical research, to cross disciplinary boundaries in order to expand all study of history to encompass an unexpected dimension, a visual one. The photographer was an eyewitness to the event preserved on film; with this class I would like to impart some of the skills required to access the narrative told in the photograph and help you understand the past from a different, complementary perspective.

John Szarkowski, former curator of photography at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, paraphrases W. Eugene Smith’s ideas on the standard required of the photojournalist: “Smith said that the photographer was responsible for producing a series of pictures that by the justice of their evidence and the grace of their form would convey the psychological and moral truth of a subject.” Smith, the long-time photo-essayist for *Life*, thereby espoused a standard by which photojournalists would be measured, up to the present day. But, when speaking of topics such as “psychological and moral truth,” old questions of relativism and honesty surface. One photographer’s “moral truth” is another’s clever deception or arrogant pontification.

Especially in the age of digital manipulation, the honesty or accuracy of a photograph is often in question. However, the discussion of the real in photography is not one generated by digital (or other) manipulation; it predates even what we now understand the technology of photography to be: the act of fixing an image. There are inherent characteristics of even un-manipulated, straight photography and how it is displayed that raise issues of “reality.” In this class, we will attempt to understand the nature of

the real in photography—including the issues raised and some of the proposed ways of defining an idea, an analysis that can be mazelike in its complexity—and how the study of history is both complicated and simplified by the consideration of the photograph as a primary source historical document and as an artifact of human creation.

**Texts:**

Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A History of Photography*

**Selections from:**

James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Mick Gidley, *Edward Curtis*

Wendy Kozol, *Life's America*

Leon Litwack, *Without Sanctuary*

Susan D. Moeller, *Shooting War*

Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing*

Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*

George H. Roeder, Jr., *The Censored War*

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

Alan Trachtenberg, *America and Lewis Hine*

Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*

Others TBA

**Assignments:**

1. Reading: Readings should be completed by Monday of the week they are assigned. You are expected to read the assignment completely each week and be prepared to discuss it on the first day of class that week. You will not be able to participate in the discussion of the ideas unless you come to class prepared. Occasionally I will give in-class assignments (yes, the pop quiz endures) designed to test whether you have read the material. These cannot be made up. We might not cover all of the reading in class, but you will be responsible for it nonetheless.

2. Writing:

You will be assigned to write one narrative essay and several short journal entries. The guidelines and requirements for these assignments will be handed out separately.

3. Exams:

There will be one midterm and a final exam.

4. Attendance:

Attendance in every class meeting is required. You cannot do well in this class if you do not attend and are not prepared to discuss the material. Four unexcused absences will result in a grade of F.

5. Academic Integrity:

You are expected to be familiar with the letter and spirit of the AUCA academic honesty policy. Plagiarism will not be tolerated and will be reported to the relevant authorities.

**Grades:**

Exams: 50%

Narrative essay: 25%

Class participation: 25%

**Weekly Assignments:**

**Week 1:** Introduction

Read Sontag, *On Photography*, “In Plato’s Cave,” 3-24.

**Week 2: Images and the Historian / The U.S. Civil War**

Read Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, “Albums of War,” 71–118.

**Week 3: Picturing a Nation and the Artifice of Realism**

Read Gidley, *Edward Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated*, “A National Undertaking,” 14–43.

**Week 4: The Birth of Social Documentary (Paper Topic Due)**

Read Trachtenberg, *America and Lewis Hine*, all

**Week 5: The Photo-Secession and the 1920s**

Read Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, “Camera Work, Social Work,” 164-\_\_\_\_\_.

**Week 6: Midterm**

**Week 7: African Americans and the Great Migration**

Read Leon Litwack, *Without Sanctuary*, “Hellhounds,” 8-45  
Read \_\_\_\_\_

**Week 8: The Great Depression and Social Documentary I**

Read Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 231-85.

**Week 9: The Great Depression and Social Documentary II**

Read Gordon, “Dorothea Lange: The Photographer as Agricultural Sociologist,”  
*Journal of American History* 93 (Dec. 2006):  
<<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/93.3/gordon.html>>  
Lange and Taylor, *American Exodus*, all.

**Week 10: Photojournalism I, World War II**

Read George H. Roeder, Jr., *The Censored War*, \_\_\_\_\_.

**Week 11: Life Magazine and Postwar America**

Read Kozol, *Life’s America*, Preface, “Documenting the Ordinary: Photographic Realism and Life’s Families,” 1–18.  
Steichen, *The Family of Man*, all.

**Week 12: Photojournalism II, Vietnam and Civil Rights**

Read Susan D. Moeller, *Shooting War*, Vietnam.

Read Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*, chapter 2.

**Week 13: Paper Due and Seeing Photographically**

Read Sontag, *On Photography* “America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly,” 27–48.

**Final Exam**