

Digital Photography Semester 2

Unit 0

Documentary & Action

"A documentary photograph is not a factual photograph per se. It is a photo which carries the full meaning of the episode."

-Dorothea Lange

Photos capture one moment in time. It may be tempting to think of photos as static, still moments, but the reality is that the world moves around us constantly. The wind blows, birds fly, people walk past us, and animals run to catch their next meal. While photos only capture a moment, leaving movement and action out of our photos leaves out a great portion of our world. In this unit, we will consider action and documentary photos, those photos that capture moving subjects with that one moment in time.



Poor mother and children during the Great Depression. Elm Grove, California, USA.

Photographing Sports

Whether you aspire to photograph professional sports or friends engaging in a pick-up game, the basics for photographing sports are similar. We see sports images all around us, from the front of the sports section in the newspaper to autographed pictures of favorite players to the iconic images that have helped define particular sports. From photos of Michael Jordan dunking a basketball to Muhammad Ali boxing an opponent, photos of sports define not only the sport, but the moment in time that drew people (sometimes millions of them) together as fans and spectators.



Surfing in Hawaii

If you've ever tried to capture an image of a sporting event, you probably already know that getting a good photograph is hard. Sporting events create a number of challenges for the photographer. First, sports involve moment. To capture a great image, you not only have to capture the movement, but you also have to anticipate the moment that it will happen. Photograph a baseball swing and a fraction of a second determines whether you got a picture of the bat connecting

with the baseball for the home run or whether you've caught the swing too early or too late. Another challenge is that we often have limited access to photograph sporting events. For professional sports, amateur photographers are limited to the stands, which can be removed from the action. The farther away you are from the action, the harder it will be to get the great image that you are looking for.



The Challenge... a moment

One of the keys to photographing sports is to catch that decisive moment. Sports photography is all about timing. One of the best ways to begin catching these moments is to get to know the sport that you want to photograph. Knowing the sport well can help you predict what might happen and the timing of the moment. For example, if you want to photograph hockey players, you would gain a greater knowledge of when someone might shoot the puck or when a big hit might happen if you were familiar with the sport. Having knowledge of the game helps you identify where to point your camera and also helps you to know when to press the shutter button. Your knowledge won't guarantee that you'll always get that great decisive shot, but it will increase your chances.

Location is also important in photographing sports. Obviously, you can't take a picture of what you can't see. Having a blocked view or being too far away from the action can influence the quality of the pictures that you take. In most cases, photographers are not allowed on the playing areas of professional sports. In these circumstances, those who have press passes are allowed only in particular areas. For amateur sports, try to get as close as you can to the action without disrupting the action.



Air Time

With sports photography, you typically want to have a large depth of field. This will help keep the various aspects of the photo in focus, in a way similar to landscape photos. A large depth of field will also allow for a fast shutter speed, which will help you capture the action in the shot without blurring the motion.

Panning

Sometimes when photographing motion, you might want to include some blur in the photo to illustrate the motion. Panning is one technique to help you achieve

some in-focus areas and some blurred areas. **Panning** is a technique where you pan, or move, the camera in the same direction as the movement of the person or object you are photographing. In other words, as the object or person moves past you, you will move the camera in the same direction, keeping the person or object in the viewfinder. This produces an effect where the subject will be in focus and the background will be blurred.



Pan

Why would you use the effect of panning? One of the biggest reasons to use this technique is that it adds a sense of motion to the photo and can create some interesting elements. Any fast moving object, such as a car, motorcycle, runner, or skateboarder, is a good subject for a photo that uses panning. The technique emphasizes the movement and speed of the object or person in a way that an ordinary photograph cannot. Panning is perhaps best used when you have an object moving in a more or less straight line.

Panning can be thought of as almost the opposite effect as using a slow shutter speed for motion. With a slow shutter speed, the object or person moving is

blurred, while the parts not moving remain in focus. With panning, the object that is moving remains in focus while the parts that are not moving are blurred.

When you have an object or a person that you think would be a good candidate for panning, the first thing you'll want to do is to adjust the shutter speed to a bit slower than you would to capture the movement with a stationary camera. 1/30 shutter speed may be a good starting point, and you can adjust the speed if needed. You'll want to avoid too slow of a shutter speed, however, as that will often introduce camera shake in addition to the blurring that you want. When you first practice panning, you may want to opt for a little faster shutter speed and then lower it, depending on the light and other conditions, once you start getting more consistent results.



Underbones

As you first prepare for panning a moving object, here are a few tips to keep in mind:

- Think about your location. You'll want an unobstructed view of the person or

object throughout its range of motion. Things like light poles, other moving objects, people, trees, or buildings can all wreak havoc on the picture.

- Try to find a location where you are parallel to the moving object. This will often result in better photos than if you are higher or lower than the moving object, although these positions can work in some circumstances.
 - Consider how you will focus. An autofocus camera will probably be able to focus on the object, if you press the shutter release about halfway done. This will be part of the first movements that you'll make before pressing the shutter release all the way to take the picture. If you don't have an autofocus camera, don't want to use the autofocus, or your camera doesn't have a fast enough autofocus, you will need to pre-focus the camera on the area where the object or person will enter the scene.
 - Take note of the background of the photo. In some cases, the background may be too busy or colorful once the panning occurs. This will obscure or overshadow the object or person that you are taking the picture of. Aim for scenes where there will only be a few colors in the background, if possible. For example, a dog running through grass would make a good, simple photograph for panning since the single color background (the green grass) will provide a nice backdrop for the dog. You may not always be able to control the background, and in some cases, you may want to try the shot anyway and see how it turns out.
 - Consider any lag time. If you have an older digital camera or one where you get a bit of lag time from pressing the shutter to the actual picture being taken, you'll want to include this consideration in your planning. If you have shutter lag, you will need to anticipate the movement of the person or object and adjust for that. In some cases, you may need to press the shutter button before you typically would on a camera without shutter lag to capture the picture you want.
- Once you have the location and focusing down, it will be time to take the actual photograph. You will want to begin to pan the subject as you gently press the shutter release button. Try to do this as carefully as possible since you want to reduce any possible camera shake on the image. Continue to pan with the moving

object for a second or two even after you hear the shutter close on the camera. This will create a more seamless image and will reduce any abrupt movements that stopping could cause. Make sure to keep the moving subject within the viewfinder throughout the photo. In most cases, the more that you can keep it in the same frame of the viewfinder, the more clearly focused the subject will be.



Drag Race (panning)

Panning a moving object takes practice to get the picture down. It is not uncommon for beginners with this technique to become frustrated. If you are at an event or have only a couple of chances to photograph a particular moving object, your best bet at the early stages of learning the panning technique is to use both panning and regular action shots. This way you'll increase your chances of getting at least one good photograph from the session. If you want to practice panning, it is as easy as finding a street with cars passing by on regular intervals. While the photos may not be your perfect choice of a subject, cars moving on the street provide a good source of practice material. If you have the choice, it is also better to start with slower objects until you get the hang of it. Cars on a residential street in the city will be easier to photograph with the panning technique than cars moving around a race track.

It is important to note that the subject may not be perfectly in focus when using panning. The key is to get the subject in good focus compared to the blurred background. In some photos you may even want the subject to be a little out of focus, as it can add to the sense of movement and speed in the photo.

Photographing Animals

Animals are another favorite photography subject, and while you can sometimes find them in a stationary position, you'll just as often find them moving. Even animals that appear to be still may suddenly move, swish a tail, or shake their heads. In other words, the principles of action photography often apply to animals.

When you think of photographing animals, what do you think of? Maybe you think of a safari or photographing in an exotic location with exotic animals. While these can make great photos, the animals in your home, your backyard, and your city can also make great subjects. Many people like to photograph their pets, whether they are dogs, cats, lizards, or rats. Even urban areas have animals around, including squirrels, birds, and bugs. Parks and other natural areas are often home to small mammals. Zoos and wildlife sanctuaries offer another opportunity to photograph animals, including exotic animals that you wouldn't be able to find around your home.

PETS

Photographing a pet can provide good practice as well as give you a memento of the pet and its unique characteristics. When photographing pets, the key is often to capture the pet's personality. If it is your own pet, think about some of the interesting characteristics that the pet has. Does your dog sleep in a weird position? Does your cat watch the birds out the window? Does your horse like to run in the field? Use those unique characteristics to help you capture the pet's personality.



Stalking

The tendency when photographing pets is to photograph them in cages if they're small like rats or lying on the couch if they're dogs and cats. These can be good photos, but taking them up a notch can give you a better, more interesting photo. By using some of the rules of composition, along with some of the principles of action, you can get that better photo.

- Look for action. While it may be harder to get a picture of your dog running than it is to photograph him lying on the couch, the running photo will

probably be more interesting.

- Think about what your pet does on a regular basis. This can help you identify those moments that will capture a pet's personality.
- Sidelighting can help you bring out the texture of animal fur or hair.

Pets can provide hours of practice for photographing animals since you have an available subject. Whether you have your own pets or you borrow one from a friend for a few hours, they can be great practice for photographing other types of wildlife as well as providing you priceless images of your own.

WILDLIFE

Photographing wildlife can present its own set of challenges. However, wildlife can also create stunning photos, as evidenced by the wildlife photography that we

hang on our walls and see in magazines. While we might be tempted to think that only exotic animals such as lions, elephants, whales, bears, and tigers make great subjects for wildlife photography, sometimes the local wildlife in the areas where we live can create photos that are as interesting and pleasing as those exotic choices. From squirrels to birds to deer, even common forms of wildlife make great subjects.

Perhaps the biggest challenge that people face when photographing wildlife is to find the wildlife. Many wild animals are conditioned to avoid human contact. Finding them to photograph can take patience, perseverance, and research. Start by finding out as much as possible about the wildlife in the area where you'll be photographing. If you



Bear in Alaska

have a particular animal or bird that you want to photograph, you'll also want to know as much about the species as possible, including the habitats that it likes, what it eats, how it typically behaves, and so on. All of that information can help you pick a spot where you might have the best chance of finding wildlife.

Many wildlife photographers camouflage themselves. This might include using a

blind to sit in, wearing clothing that blends in, and even changing what they smell like. Depending on your location and what you hope to photograph, this may or may not be necessary. However, you should keep in mind that scents, movement, or noise can scare wildlife away. Make sure to turn off any sounds on your camera, move slowly and quietly, and avoid using your flash. Then it becomes a matter of patience as you wait for the animals to show up. Be prepared to spend time without seeing the animal that you hoped for. If the animal is rare or elusive, you may spend quite a bit of time (days or even months) waiting for it to appear. You'll also want to have your camera as ready as possible so that you don't miss the shot when the animal does appear.



Wolf taken at the Highland Wildlife Park, Scotland

Keep in mind that you can also find wildlife in zoos or wildlife sanctuaries. These animals will generally be easier to find and photograph, but you will have to deal with manmade structures. In

these cases, you might choose a shallower depth of field to blur the parts of the picture that are not natural to the animals' habitat. If that's not possible, focus on a close shot of the animal's head, filling the frame with the animal to eliminate the artificial elements altogether.

Here are a few other tips for photographing wildlife:

- Practice photographing action before you try to catch the shot you want, particularly if you only have a few chances. You may only have one shot at catching a whale breach the ocean or a lion running after prey. By being prepared and used to panning and other techniques to catch action, you'll be in a better position to catch that great moment.
- Try faster shutter speeds and continuous shooting settings to help you capture the wildlife's movement. Depending on the situation, you may need to adjust the settings. You'll generally also want to use a mode other than the automatic one. Some cameras have wildlife modes, but you can also use sports/action modes, landscape modes, and even macro modes, in some cases. Manual mode will give you the most flexibility in adjusting your settings.
- Get low. Avoid the perspective of shooting the picture from eye height looking down at the animal. Instead, try crouching or lying on the ground to get at the animal's level. However, keep in mind that you want to do this safely. While an eye-level photograph with a rattlesnake might be a good picture, you don't want to risk getting bit.
- Get as close as you can, but stay safe. For possibly dangerous animals, you'll want to give them their room and use longer telephoto lenses. With other animals, you can get closer and use a shorter lens.
- Look for interesting, funny, or exciting moments to photograph. You may not always have the option, but photographing wildlife in interesting actions or behaviors can create the best shots. You can also keep an eye out for wildlife interacting with each other. A monkey grooming another or a bird feeding its chicks adds interest to the photo.
- Use common sense, stay safe, and have patience. These three guidelines cannot be stated too many times when talking about wildlife photography. Ignoring them can leave you injured or worse.

Documentary Photography

Documentary photos are created to produce a historical record of an event,

place, or person. The purpose of the photos is not to produce an artistic work, although some are incredibly moving and fascinating photos. Instead, these photos seek to document what is “real” or “true” in a place or within an event and may be used to help create social or political change. You have probably seen some examples of documentary photos in the newspaper, in books, or on websites. Many famous examples are also featured in museums, galleries, and other special exhibits.



Slum in Glasgow, 1871

Documentary photos became popular during the 1930s. If you remember, it was about this time that cameras began to become more available and popular. While many professionals engaged in documentary photography during this time, in part to highlight the extreme poverty during the Great Depression, amateurs also engaged in documentary photos of the events of which they were a part. Some of these snapshots have become part of our cultural heritage, even though the original photographer may not have intended to take such an iconic

image. Part of the idea behind documentary photography is that photos “never lie.” Thus, documentary photography tries to tell a story about an event that is as realistic and honest as possible.

Many documentary photos that we see are in black and white. In part, this was because the first documentary types of photos were taken in black and white so

there is a tradition present. It can also help to highlight the raw emotion of the scene. However, there are no hard and fast rules about this. You will also find some documentary photos in color, as well. Since you'll probably be shooting in color and editing later, you can always see which image of the scene you prefer: color or black and white.

Perhaps the most important aspect of documentary photography is to tell a story of the event. With a single photograph, you want the viewer to have a sense of what is going on, even though it will often be impossible to fully express all aspects of an event or place. It is often a good idea to begin with wide angle shots to capture the event, although you can also include more narrowed, focused shots as well. Each has its place in documentary photography.



Power farming displaces tenants from the land in the western dry cotton area. Childress County, Texas Panhandle

Here are a few more tips for doing documentary photography:

- Be sensitive to the people involved. When documenting events like war, natural

disasters, and crime scenes, it is important to be sensitive to the individuals involved and their families. Many of the famous photos of events filled with sadness, grief, death, and destruction were done with sensitivity. It is often possible to tell the story without using unnecessary gore or going for the shock value in the photo. While you may not be photographing scenes like these yet, if you aspire to documentary photography as a career, it's a good idea to begin practicing this code of ethics even in mundane shots. Keep in mind that documentary photography is not paparazzi photography. You shouldn't be driven to get the photo regardless of the personal cost to the individuals involved.

- "Shoot with your heart." Documentary photography is about telling a story and evoking emotion. Having empathy for those in the situation and how they must be feeling can help you capture some of that feeling in your photograph. Look for sensitive ways to capture the emotion in the event or place.
- Be prepared. Getting a great documentary photograph is often about being in the right place at the right time. For example, you might be in the perfect spot to get the photo of a mother reunited with her child or of a celebratory hug after a candidate wins an election. Even smaller events like capturing a child alongside a parade route or of graduates throwing their caps require great timing and placement. At the same time, you need to be mindful of others in the situation. If there are emergency personnel or law enforcement official present, you need to stay out of their way. You also need to make sure that you are in a position of safety when photographing events. For example, while a photo of an oncoming stampede might be interesting, it could also be very dangerous. Choose positions for the photos that will keep you safe.
- Think about the composition of the photo. Keep in mind that people look at photos for only a few seconds, on average. Within those few seconds, you want to convey the story to them. If you find that the background of a photo is too distracting, use a shallower depth of field to help blur the background a bit and place emphasis on the action in the foreground.
- Be honest in your photos. In today's world, it is easy to manipulate photos and

