

University of Massachusetts Amherst
Journalism 391R
Instructor: Richard B. Newton

"I photograph to see what things look like photographed" Gary Winogrand, 1928-1984

Travel Photography 101 *On Becoming a Better Thief*

Introduction

Photography is a peculiar human activity where the act of using the tool is quite detached, in our minds, from the object that the tool produces. We are entertained simply by using cameras, without giving much thought to the images that they ultimately produce – images that end up stacked in desk drawers, stuffed into dusty scrapbooks, or stored on computer hard drives. There appears to be no limit to our need to photograph everything we see. Digital cameras and cell phones have aggravated the problem by removing the financial barrier that the cost of film and processing may have imposed in years past. Traveling, apparently, can bring out the worst of this behavior. Modern tourists seem unable to experience the world without the imposition of a camera between them and the new and curious places that they find themselves. In her collection of essays entitled, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag blamed the western work ethic - photography becomes a purposeful activity that somewhat assuages the guilt we feel for taking time off from our responsibilities for something as trivial as a pleasure trip. While this may have been true a generation ago, it doesn't seem to explain our modern, obsessive-compulsive need to verify and document every bloody thing we see with snapshots - often with friends and family prominently displayed in the foreground and the exotic destination peeking out from behind. Are we becoming unable to experience and remember the highlights of our lives without a taking photo every five minutes? Do we have some need to prove to somebody/anybody that we were actually there? Several years ago, a young exchange student from China showed me the photographs "he took" on his trip across the United States - he was standing prominently in the foreground of every single one!

We could all benefit from becoming more aware of **why** we photograph the things we do. Through a discipline of contemplating the purpose of a photograph before we take it, we may find that many of our (now fewer) photographs become more meaningful – perhaps ending up framed in the living room instead of stuck beneath a refrigerator magnet in the kitchen. The critical first step is to learn to

conceptualize the **product** of our endeavors (the photograph) while we entertain ourselves with the **tool** (the camera).

Email from an anonymous student in Italy:

Siena is much smaller than I expected, but I'm happy about that because everything is relatively close by. It's really beautiful here... I've taken at least **400 pictures in just a week and a half**. I wish I could send them out to everyone right now, but the computers here are really old and don't even have USB ports, so I can't upload them yet. Some of the people in my group brought their laptops though, so I should be able to get those on the internet soon. :) For now though, here are some pics I found online, just so you can get a little taste of what I see everyday. Or -just do a Google Image search for *Siena*, and you'll find nice things. :)

Let's Start by Changing the Verb

I think it's no accident that in our culture we use the verb "to take" when we refer to the activity of producing photographs with a camera. We gather and collect, using our camera as the scavenging tool – small acts of petty thievery. Like the little seashells and stones we find along the shore and casually put in our pocket, we take pictures of things that we'd like to bring home but cannot. These photographs document an object, a person, or a place, providing a paper facsimile for our collection of travel trivia. But at the beach, the extra shells we pocket, the "not so pretty" ones, we leave in the parking lot or give back to the sea –realizing that we can't carry them all back home. With the camera, our misdemeanor turns to grand larceny. We steal the world to put it in an album, store it on a disk or, God forbid, we put the entirety of the images on-line and send the link to everyone we know.

What if we start our transition by changing the verb to "make"? Instead of **taking** pictures, let's think of the process as "**making**" photographs. This verb better describes what we really should be trying to do. The camera is a tool for making images, not a real-time entertainment device. Its purpose is to create photographs - flat, two-dimensional, paper rectangles, derived from the real world, but in fact, new objects that never before existed. They contain all of the visual elements that we have learned to appreciate in art – composition, pattern, figure-ground relationships, color interactions, etc. Our control over these qualities comes from choices made before the shutter is released. What's in the frame? What's out? Where are you? Where is the camera? What is the light doing at that moment? What is the subject doing? How will the camera settings affect the outcome? Experienced photographers can **visualize** and **anticipate** the result of their efforts – that is, the **finished photograph**. This process goes far beyond the

simple act of collecting. It is a creative process that uses a camera to **design** photographic images - independent of, but intellectually and emotionally connected to, the original subject. If you can begin to think this way, even your collection of photographic "sea-shells" will have more value to you when you return home. Instead of simply recording the things you see, you can bring back images with more power and meaning, possessing aesthetic qualities that speak not just to you, but to all who view them.

Some Definitions

Documents

Documents inform. They are records showing that at a certain time, on a certain day, a person, place, or object existed - a rectangle drawn loosely around an interesting thing – a visual note. Many, many travel photographs are such documents. We want to show friends and family where we've been and what we've seen. Most will end up in a stack or stuffed in an album, but we all "take" them and will continue to do so, I'm sure and little thought and creativity, however, can make some of them much more interesting. But every now and then, we need to ask ourselves "Why?" before the shutter is released. Does the world really need yet another picture of Plymouth Rock? "Oh, wait, it doesn't have one (until today) with me in front of it!" Click!

News Photography is a special type of document, trying to objectively show the world what just happened. Content (what is it, when is it) is primary in news photography. The emotional content of the photograph is usually derived from the circumstances depicted in the image. The journalistic goal of objectivity would seem to restrict these images rigidly to the document category, but good photographers can "adjust" the emotional content through aesthetic decisions made in the field or by cropping and tonal decisions made in the (digital) darkroom.

Snapshots

Snapshots remind. They are very personal documents. They usually have meaning only to the photographer, and perhaps the subject, and they always need to be explained. (*"Oh! Remember this? It's the night Samantha had too much wine and was flirting with that cute Sicilian waiter in Taormina."*) Think of them as entries in a diary made of pictures. One that will remind you of a past experience but are of little value or meaning to anyone else. Future journalists should also keep in mind that snapshots are **not** a replacement for good journal writing. They don't contain the smells, the sounds, the feelings, or your impressions of the

moment. Take your snapshots, but always keep a detailed journal. You will value it greatly in the future – likely more than the pictures.

Photography Elevated to Art

Great photography, like great art and music, has universal appeal and can evoke strong feelings. These photographs are enriched by aesthetic qualities based on universal concepts from the fields of drawing and painting. Emotion is dramatized or even derived from the colors, rhythms, relationships, and other visual elements that most find compelling (or, maybe even disturbing, depending on the nature of the photographer's message). Knowing what the actual subject might be, or learning the story behind it, can enhance one's experience with the image, but it's often not necessary for a viewer's enjoyment of the photograph. Think of a portrait so powerful that we forget to ask who it is; a landscape that evokes the "Wow!" before the "Where is it?"; a delightful pattern of intense yellow that, by the way, is actually a cluster of lemons on a tree in Sicily.

Travel Photography

Although travel photography, like news photography, is strongly directed toward content (what, where, who), great travel photography is closer to art. It may be journalism, but it is not news. Travel images should entertain as well as inform. To do this, the photographer must be aware of the same aesthetic issues as the fine art photographer. Often, the actual subject is secondary to some other visual quality such as light or texture or color. These photographs may need no explanation or caption to have universal appeal. While knowing the "where and what" contributes to the intellectual interest in the photograph, many viewers can enjoy the image without knowing.

Let's try to "**make**" a few of these in Sicily while we're "taking" our snapshots and collecting our documents. You may begin to see the world in exciting new ways; changing the way you think about your photography and enriching your life back home with exciting and meaningful images – matted, framed and given away as presents when you can't afford anything else because you spent all your money going to Sicily!

Your Assignment: Where, What, When, and Why

Find (rob your dentist's office if need be) 4 travel photographs that you like and that fit these categories:

1. **“Where”** is the most important attribute of the image. This could be either in a global sense or the image could be composed beautifully.
2. Find an image where the subject (**What**) or dominant theme is not the “thing” that was photographed.
3. In this image, timing (**When**) should be the most important feature: time of year, time of day, or a unique moment.
4. **Why?!!** Find one of each: a document, a snapshot, and a universally appealing travel photograph.

Due: