Photography and Identity: Images of the Self

*DRAFT SYLLABUS 2019-08-04*

Seydou Keïta, *Untitled*, 1959 © Seydou Keïta / SKPEAC

Tuesdays 2-4.30 pm

Prof. Cécile Bishop

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Office hours: Rm 621, 19 University Place, time tbd
Description

The course explores the role of photography in constructing, and challenging, our various identities. To what extent does photography shape our sense of who we are? Does identity really exist outside its many representations and images? What does the multiplication of images do to our sense of self? What are ethical ways of representing identities other than one’s own? These are some of the key questions we will be debating in this class. To do so, we will investigate a wide variety of photographic images, including not only art images, but also historical archives, snapshots, and selfies. In order to take into account the impact of photography’s evolution and transformations, our inquiry will span a wide chronological range, from the nineteenth century to the present day. To help us think about identities through photographic images, we will explore the works of major thinkers, including Susan Sontag, Erving Goffman, Judith Butler, and Roland Barthes. Throughout the class, the study of theoretical texts will therefore be closely associated with the discussion of visual materials. By the end of the course, you will have deepened your understanding of photography’s role in constructing, mediating and circulating a wide range of identities, including not only race, gender and class, but the very idea of the individual.

Desired Outcomes

- Learn how to interpret and analyze images.
- Acquire a solid knowledge of some key theorists and artists who have worked on and with photography, as well as on identity.
- Strengthen key skills in reading, writing and public speaking.
- Learn how to set your own research agenda, and to share your research in both written and oral form.
- Learn how to work collaboratively, by receiving as well as providing feedback.
- Understand and reflect on the way images shape your daily life and your sense of who you are.

Delivery

The delivery of the course will include lectures, discussions and debates with the whole class, activities in smaller groups and student presentations. In all cases your active participation is essential and will be highly valued.

Set Texts

You need to have read or watched the relevant materials indicated on the syllabus before each class. All readings and images will be made available to you on NYU Classes, as well as some secondary literature. Each week, I will suggest a few questions for you to think about in preparation for the following class and help you through the material. You will also find additional secondary literature and bibliographies on NYU Classes.
Assignments:

1) Short writing sample: ‘What do your selfies say about you?’ (10%)

Cf. description provided on syllabus (week 2)

2) Midterm: Image analysis (20%)

Research, analyse and discuss one or several images that we have studied in class so far. Your paper should be 6-8 pages long. Prompts and guidelines for this assessment will be provided on NYU classes and discussed in class.

3) Research question and annotated bibliography (15%)

- Write a paragraph describing your research question. Why is it an important topic? What are its implications? What are you hoping to find out by addressing it? How will you proceed? Which resources from the class will you be using?
- Please feel free to come and talk to me about ideas you may have at any point during the semester. My office hours are indicated on the front page of this syllabus.
- Compile an annotated bibliography relevant to your subject. The bibliography should contain at least 10 references. Under each one, write a few sentences explaining the relevance of the source for your project.

4) Presentation of your final project (15%)

Purposes of the presentation:
1. To share with the group what you have chosen to work on, and what you find particularly relevant, intriguing or interesting about it.
2. To get constructive feedback and tips about your ongoing project – research need not be a lonely endeavour!
3. To develop communicational skills and to explore ways of persuading others in discussion, and responding to other points of view.
4. To learn how to manage your time and make your point in the most effective manner.
5. To provide a basis for the final project.

Approach:
- Describe and explain your research question to the group
- Explain which materials you are planning to use to answer it and show us a little preview by giving us an example.
- Share with the groups the potential challenges or difficulties you are facing with your project, ask for their input.
- Presentations should last no longer than 10 minutes, and will be followed by a Q&A with the whole group.

5) End of term project (30%)

The aim of this assessment is to encourage you to think creatively about the topic of the course and to build up your research and writing skills. You are free to design your own research question and to choose which materials are most relevant to address it. Your final
essay should be 10-12 pages long and should show your ability to propose a clear argument, based on the analysis of relevant example and on a discussion available secondary sources.

Please feel free to come and talk to me about the advancement of your project or about ideas you may have at any point during the semester. My office hours are indicated on the front page of this syllabus.

6) Participation (10%)

It is crucial that you come to class prepared to discuss each week’s readings and materials.

Policies

Submission of written work:

- Written assignments must be submitted via email.
- Assignments are due by the end of the day on the deadline (i.e. before midnight). Work that is submitted less than 24h late will be accepted with a 5% penalty. The penalty raises by 5% every 24h. Work submitted more than 72h late will not be accepted.
- Please use the following formatting: Times New Roman pt12, double-spaced.

Disability Disclosure Statement:

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is www.nyu.edu/csd. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

Attendance:

You are required to attend all seminar meetings and arrive on time. You need to inform the instructor of excused absences in advance of class, or as soon as possible after the missed class. If you miss more than three classes without being able to provide adequate documentation to excuse your absences, you may fail the class.
Schedule

Week 1: General Introduction

3 September

- Presentation of the course.
- How to talk about write about images: vocabulary and method.
- How to read effectively.

Week 2: Key Concepts in Photography Theory

10 September

- Index/icon
- Denotation/connotation
- Studium/punctum

Readings:

Week 3: Photography and the Presentation of the Self

17 September

Readings:
- David Bate, Photography: The Key Concepts (Berg, 2009), pp.67-79

Images to study:
- Portraits by Seydou Keïta: Untitled 1952 (Three fashionable men); Untitled 21 May 1954 (hidden); Untitled 1956 (Two women-background); Untitled 1959 (Portrait of Mr Sissoko, or Man with flower). (≈ 12 pages)
- Portraits by Richard Avedon: Marilyn Monroe (1957); Jacob Israel Avedon (1969); Francis Bacon (1979), Barack Obama (2004); Karl Rove (2004). (≈ 12 pages)
First assignment due 20 September: What do your selfies say about you?

After revising the vocabulary, methods and concepts from week 1-3, choose your favorite selfie and write a short analysis (1-2 pages), based on the questions below:

1. What choices did you make to present yourself and what does this say about you? (e.g. clothing, pose, facial expression, activity)
2. How did you frame the picture to construct meaning about your image? (e.g. Background, lighting, proximity, angle of the camera)
3. Are there other meaningful elements in the picture? (Objects? Other people? Location?)
4. Does your selfie play off other well-known images?
5. How do the elements in questions 1 to 4 contribute to perform race/ethnicity, social/economic status, sexuality/gender?
6. Does the image portray one identity trait more than others? Why/how?
7. What is accurate about your selfie?
8. What is obscured or ambiguous in this selfie?

(This exercise is adapted from an assignment designed by Mark C. Marino)

Week 4: Gender, Performance, and Performativity

24 September

Readings:
- See also, Judith Butler, ‘Your Behavior Creates Your Gender’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc

Images for discussion:

Optional reading:
Week 5: Restaging Masculinity

1 October

Readings:

Images for discussion:
- Zanele Muholi, Faces and Phases (2006-2014) (extracts) (≈ 30 pages)

Week 6: Making Race Visible

8 October

Readings:

Images for discussion:
- A selection of photographs from the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (click on the image for a larger view): (≈ 12 pages)
  o Anthropometric photographs according to Lamprey’s method: http://photographs.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/1945_5_97_3.html http://photographs.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/1945_5_97_22.html
  o Portrait of a Baka girl by Richard Buchta: http://photographs.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/1998_203_1_60_1.html
- Francis Galton’s composite portraits: (≈ 8 pages)
  o ‘The Jewish Type’ (1858-1885): https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/8656ff6f-cc3d-2e31-e040-e00a18061fee
Optional reading:


**Week 7: Midterm Due (No class)**

15 October – legislative day.

**Week 8: Class Trip – Roy DeCarava Exhibition (tbc)**

22 October

https://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/roy-decarava

Reading:


Images to study:

- Selection of images by Roy DeCarava (≈ 40 pages)

**Week 9: Race and the Politics of Portraiture**

29 October

Readings:


Images for discussion:
- Portraits of Frederick Douglass (≈ 20 pages)
- Sojourner Truth’s carte-de-visite “I sell the shadow to support the substance” (≈ 3 pages)

**Week 10: Insiders and Outsiders**

5 November

Reading:

Images to discuss:
- Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (≈ 15 pages)

**Week 11: Picturing the Working Class**

12 November

Readings:
- Stephen Dawber, ‘Martin Parr’s Suburban Vision’, *Third Text*, 18:3 (2004), 251-262

Images for discussion:
- Exit Photography Group, *Survival Programmes in Britain’s Inner Cities* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1982) (≈ 10 pages)
- Richard Billingham, *Ray’s a Laugh* (≈ 10 pages)
- Martin Parr, *The Last Resort* (≈ 10 pages)

**Week 12: Visualizing the Universal**

19 November

Readings:
Images for discussion:
- *The Family of Man* (= 20 pages)

**Assignment 3 due on 21 November: Research Question + Annotated Bibliography**

**Week 13: Inventing One’s Identity?**

26 November

Reading:

Images for discussion:
- Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Self-portraits (= 20 pages)
- Cindy Sherman’s blackface (= 5 pages)
- Samuel Fosso, Self-portraits (=15 pages)

**Week 14: Presentations**

3 December

Students present their final project + feedback.
In order to prepare for this session, each student will need to read approximately 80-100 pages, to be determined in consultation with me on an individual basis.

**Week 15: Conclusion**

10 December

Conclusion, collaborative essay clinic.