Photography and Identity: Images of the Self

*DRAFT SYLLABUS 2019-02-04*

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

Wednesdays 2-4.30 pm

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

We all use photography to express, show and prove our identity (just think about your student ID). But to what extent is it in fact photography that shapes and constructs who we are? Do our various identities really exist outside their many representations and images? These are some of the key questions we will be exploring in this class. To do so, we will investigate a wide variety of photographic images, including art images, historical archives, internet imagery and press documents. With these images, we will explore the role of photography in constructing, mediating and circulating a wide range of identities, including not only race, gender and class, but the very idea of the individual, as well as that of the human. Moreover, our inquiry will span the whole range of photographic history, from the nineteenth century to the present day. We will address major topics and questions, such as: what does the multiplication of images do to our sense of self? what are ethical ways of representing identities other than one’s own? How does photography confirm or contest identities? In addition to exploring these issues through images, we will consider the works of major thinkers, including Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, or Roland Barthes. Throughout the class, the study of theoretical texts will therefore be closely associated with the discussion of specific images.

Desired Outcomes

- Learn how to interpret and analyze images.
- Acquire knowledge of some key theoreticians 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, discussions, 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. (see section below for more information about participation)

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. Please bear in mind that the purpose of the class is not just to give you information, but instead – through our collective discussion – to help you understand and think with the course materials. To prepare for class, you therefore need to do more than simply read the text. You need to try to understand its meaning, whether by writing notes to yourself, doing research on-line and in the library, or by discussing it with your fellow students. In addition, you are always welcome to share your thoughts with me outside class in my office hour or by email. If you are having difficulty understanding something, have an interesting question or idea, or would like me to recommend additional reading, I will always be happy to help. Most
weeks, I will also supply questions in advance to help guide your reading, to guide you in your reflection.

To summarize, here is what you need to do to prepare for each class:

- **Come to class with the assigned text**, whether by buying/borrowing the book, or by printing out the reading from NYU Classes.
- **Identify points of interest or questions about the text to contribute to discussion**. Were there any passages you found interesting? Any that resonated with other texts we have read together? Any that reminded you of issues you have confronted in your own life? Any that you found boring? Any that you found hard to understand? Come to class with two or three discussion points in mind, and expect to talk about them with me and your fellow students.
- Do your best to make **active contributions** to the class discussion. The aim of the seminar format is that you get to learn through discussion with others. The better prepared you are, the more likely it is that you and your fellow students will be able to help each other understand and think.

**Assignments:**

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

   See description provided on syllabus (week 2)

2) **Midterm: Image analysis** (20%)

   Research, analyse and discuss one or several images that you have seen during our visit to the museum. 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 5 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 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.

5) Final 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. Please note that as a nonsectarian, inclusive institution, NYU policy permits members of any religious group to absent themselves from classes without penalty when required for compliance with their religious obligations.

**Use of electronic devices:**

The use of mobile phones is not permitted in class (unless it is required for our discussion). In general, if you are able to, you are encouraged to take notes and read texts on paper rather than on a computer, as this will help you focus and avoid distractions.
Schedule

Week 1: General Introduction

3 September

Thinking about images: vocabulary, method and key concepts.

Reading (to be done in class): Charles Sanders Peirce ‘What is a sign?’ (1894) (3 pages): http://www.iupui.edu/~peirce/ep/ep2/ep2book/ch02/ep2ch2.htm

Week 2: Photography and the Presentation of the Self

10 September

Readings:

Images to be discussed:
- Portraits by Seydou Keïta
- A selection of Instagram accounts
- Students’ selfies (cf. assignment 1 guidelines below)

First assignment due: What do your selfies say about you?

After reading Goffman’s text and revising some of the vocabulary and concepts from week 1, 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?
Week 3: Control, Surveillance and the Making of the Individual

17 September

Readings:

Images to be discussed:
- Bertillon cards
- Instagram as panopticon?
- Examples of facial recognition

Week 4: Otherness and Objectification

24 September

Reading:

Images to discuss:
- Diane Arbus (selection)
- Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*
- Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*
- Robert Frank, *The Americans*
- Valérie Belin, *Black Women.*

Week 5: Methodology and Midterm Prep

1 October

Research, argumentation and image analysis

Week 6: Trip to Museum/Art Gallery (tbd)

8 October

Relevant readings will be assigned to prepare your visit.

Week 7: Midterm Due (No class)

15 October – legislative day.
**Week 8: Gender and Sexuality**

22 October

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

Images for discussion:
- Cindy Sherman’s self-portraits
- Jon Uriarte, *Men Under the Influence*
- Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases*
- Claude Cahun, Self-portraits

**Week 9: Making Race Visible**

29 October

Readings:

Images for discussion:
- Anthropological photographs (selection on NYU classes)
- Louis Agassiz, Slave Portraits.
- Francis Galton’s Composite portraits
**Week 10: Race and the Politics of Portraiture**

5 November

[If possible, this session will feature an invited speaker who will talk to us about her research on black portraiture and talk to the students both about the topic and about her experience as a researcher].

Readings:

Images for discussion:
- Zanele Muholi’s self-portraits
- Portraits of Fredrick Douglass
- Sojourner Truth’s carte-de-visite “I sell the shadow to support the substance”
- Cindy Sherman and blackface

**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), pp.1-60
- Richard Billingham, *Ray’s a Laugh*
- Martin Parr, *The Last Resort*
Week 12: Visualizing the Universal

19 November

Readings:

Images for discussion:
- The Family of Man

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

Week 13: Presentations

26 November

Students present their final project + feedback

Week 14: Presentations

3 December

Students present their final project + feedback

Week 15: Conclusion

10 December

Conclusion, collaborative essay clinic.