

Developing a Critical Approach to Looking at Photographs

Viewing, Thinking About, and
Responding to Photographs

SESSION ONE

1. Introductions
2. Overview and Expectations
3. Discussion: What is Art?
4. Discussion: What is “Art Criticism”?
5. How Does Criticism Apply to Photography?
6. Examples
7. Homework for Session Two

INTRODUCTIONS



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OVERVIEW AND EXPECTATIONS

1. “ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO APPRECIATE AN IMAGE IS TO OBSERVE, THINK, AND TALK ABOUT IT.” Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Photographs: An introduction to understanding Images*. 1990.
2. COMPARE AND CONTRAST “CRITICIZING” AND “JUDGING” PHOTOGRAPHS.
3. LEARN BY DOING:
 - A. SPEND TIME LOOKING AT ASSIGNED IMAGES
 - B. PREPARE WRITTEN RESPONSES TO IMAGES
 - C. DISCUSS YOUR REACTIONS TO IMAGES

BY THE TIME YOU COMPLETE YOUR STUDY OF THIS MATERIAL, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO:

1. THOROUGHLY DESCRIBE A PHOTOGRAPH
2. DISCUSS THE SUBJECT AND FORM OF A PHOTOGRAPH
3. PRODUCE A PERSONAL INTERPRETATION OF A PHOTOGRAPH
4. PROVIDE REASONS FOR YOUR EVALUATION OF A PHOTOGRAPH
5. **STATE A WELL REASONED OPINION, SUPPORTED BY EVIDENCE, OF A PHOTOGRAPH**

CLUB CONTEST JUDGING

(IN CONTRAST TO “CRITICISM”)

- PURPOSE: PICK WINNERS AND BY EXTENSION, LOSERS!
- METHOD: RANK ORDER IMAGES RELATIVELY QUICKLY.
- RESULT: A FEW RIBBONS, MAYBE A PAT ON THE BACK, AND IF YOU ARE LUCKY, SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT.

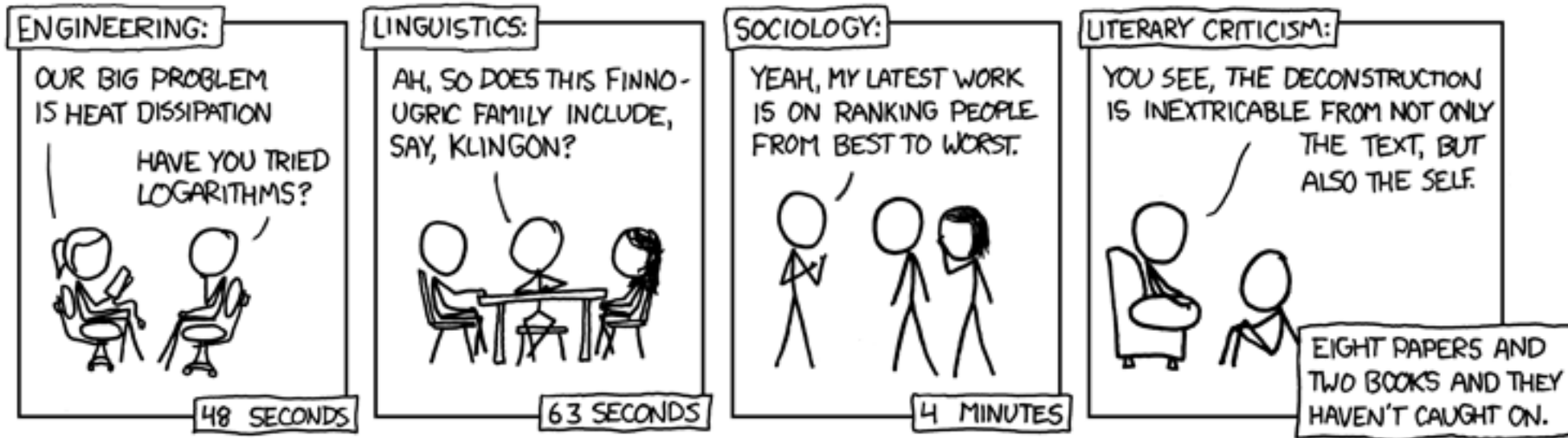
KEYS TO A SUCESSFUL ENTRY

1. Capture an Interesting Subject
2. Take Advantage of the Best Light for your Subject
3. Use Compositional Tools to Enhance your Subject
4. Avoid/Eliminate Distractions
5. Follows the Contest Rules/Guidelines

WHAT IS “CRITICISM”?

MY HOBBY:

SITTING DOWN WITH GRAD STUDENTS AND TIMING
HOW LONG IT TAKES THEM TO FIGURE OUT THAT
I'M NOT ACTUALLY AN EXPERT IN THEIR FIELD.



TYPES OF CRITICS

MUSIC

MOVIE

TELEVISION

LITERARY

DANCE

ARCHITECTURE

THEATER

PHOTOGRAPHY

For some it is an academic endeavor, for others its journalism, and for us,
its way to better understand our craft.

WHAT “*CRITICISM*” IS NOT

Negative
Value
Judgments

What is “Art Criticism”?

How Does Criticism Apply to Photography?

- “Criticism is informed discourse about art to increase understanding and appreciation of art.” (Barrett)
- Criticism is all about asking questions; “Critical Thinking”.
- It follows then, that “criticism” is a way to better understand and appreciate photographs.
- Criticism “***slows down***” viewing time (like using a tripod).
- While the results of the exercise may be a negative opinion of the work, it ultimately leads to informed and rational reactions to images.

DISCUSSION

WHAT IS ART?

“The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.”

“Works produced by human creative skill and imagination.”

Oxford English Dictionary

IS PHOTOGRAPHY ART?

IT CAN BE!





WHAT DO YOU SEE?



BARRETT'S CRITICISM PROCESS

1. **DESCRIBING:** What do you see?
2. **INTERPRETING:** What is the image about?
3. **EVALUATING:** How good is it?
4. **THEORIZING:** Is it art?



BIAS

MINE

Everyone has an opinion.

Not all opinions are equal.

(“The most constructive, and therefore valuable opinions, are based on facts, experience, and study.” *Me*)

BARRETT'S OPINION

“I BELIEVE THAT DISCUSSION OF MEANING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN PRONOUNCEMENTS OF JUDGEMENT AND THAT DISCUSSION INCREASES UNDERSTANDING AND THUS DEEPENS APPRECIATION.”

And by “Meaning”, I think Barrett is referring to what the photograph means to the viewer.

CONTEXT

WHO?

WHAT?

WHERE?

WHEN?

WHY?

Boyd Fortin, Thirteen
Year Old Rattlesnake
Skinner, Sweetwater, TX,
Photograph by Richard
Avedon



Barrett discusses three different critic's reviews of Avedon's "In The American West" show as examples of how different reviewers can come to varied opinions of the same work.

DESCRIBING SUBJECT MATTER

“Descriptive statements about subject matter identify and typify persons, objects, places, or events in a photograph. When describing subject matter, critics name what they see and also characterize it.”

DEFINING INTERPRETATION

“When doing criticism, to interpret a photograph is to tell someone else, in speech or in writing, what one understands about a photograph, especially what one thinks it is about. Interpreting is telling about the point, the meaning, the sense, the tone, or the mood of the photograph. When critics interpret a work of art, they seek to find out and tell others what they think is most important in an image, how its parts fit together, and its form affects its subject. Critics base interpretations on what is shown in the work and on relevant information outside of the work,…”

EVALUATING PHOTOGRAPHS

“The terms *evaluation* and *judgment* are synonymous. When critics evaluate an artwork they make statements of appraisal, stating how good it is or isn’t.”

“A judgement is a *what* that demands a *why*. Judgements, like interpretations, depend on reasons. Judgements without reasons are not particularly beneficial. To declare something “good” or “bad”, “original” or remarkable,” without giving reasons as to why it is thought to be so is merely to offer a conclusion, and however well founded or thought out that conclusion might be, it is not very revealing or helpful if the the reasons behind it are not offered in its support.”

THEORIZING

Theorizing seeks to answer questions about an image as whether it is “*art*” or not, and if it is in fact, a “*photograph*”.

Barrett, in the final chapter of the book says, “Perhaps this (*topic*) should have been the second chapter of the book, before Description, rather than the last.”

EXAMPLES AND PRACTICE

Edward
Weston,
“Church
Door
Hornitos”,
1940



1. DESCRIPTION?
2. INTERPRETATION?
3. EVALUATION?
4. THEORY?



Edward Weston,
"Pepper #30", 1930

On the back of a print of one of his peppers that he gave to a friend, Weston wrote, "As you like it – but this is just a pepper – nothing else – to the impure all things – are impure." (Wikipedia)



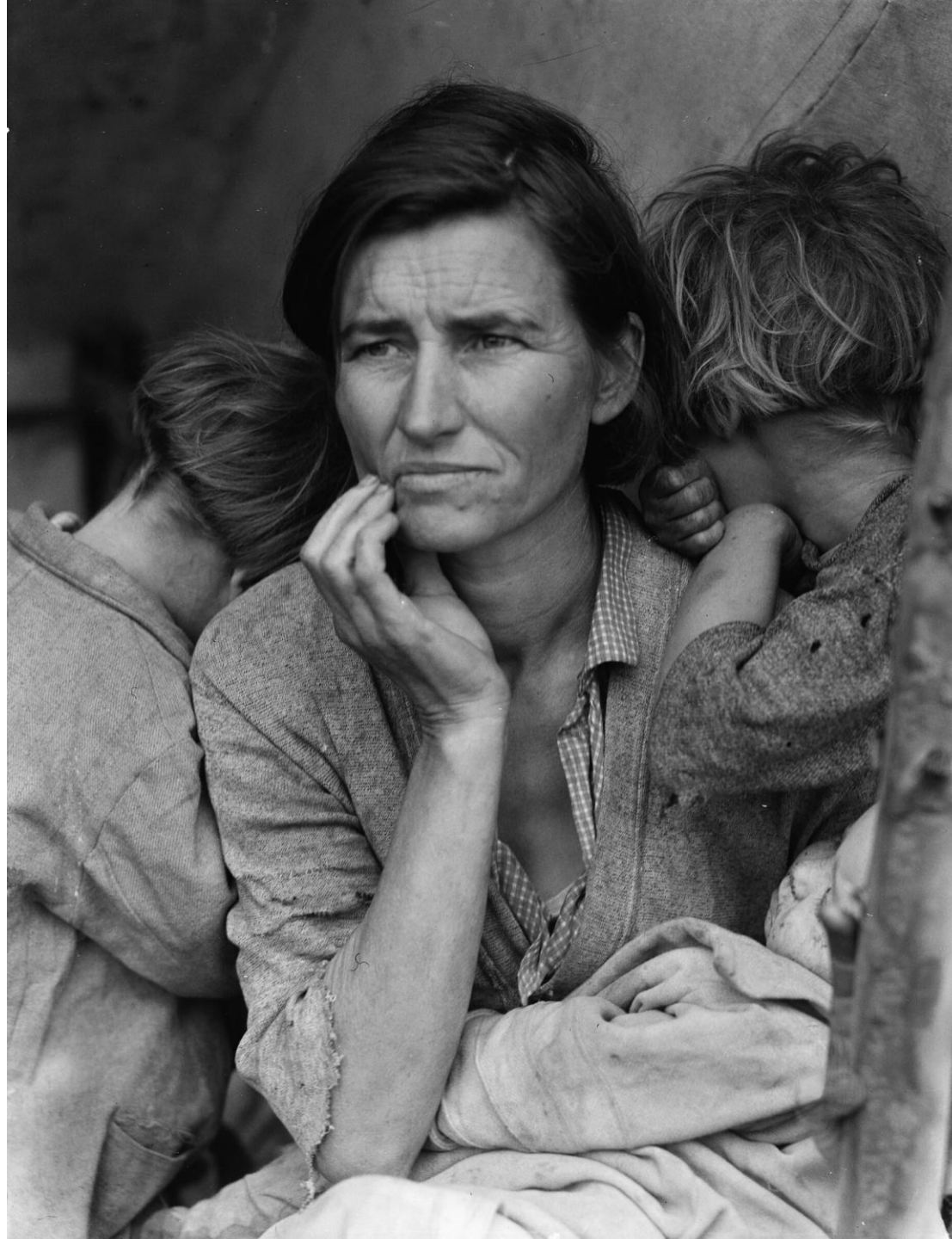
1. DESCRIPTION?
2. INTERPRETATION?
3. EVALUATION?
4. THEORY?

Edward
Weston,
"Nude",
1927

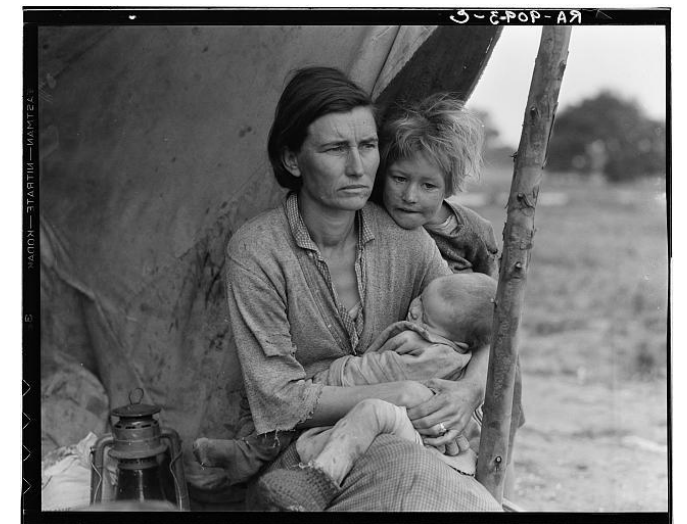
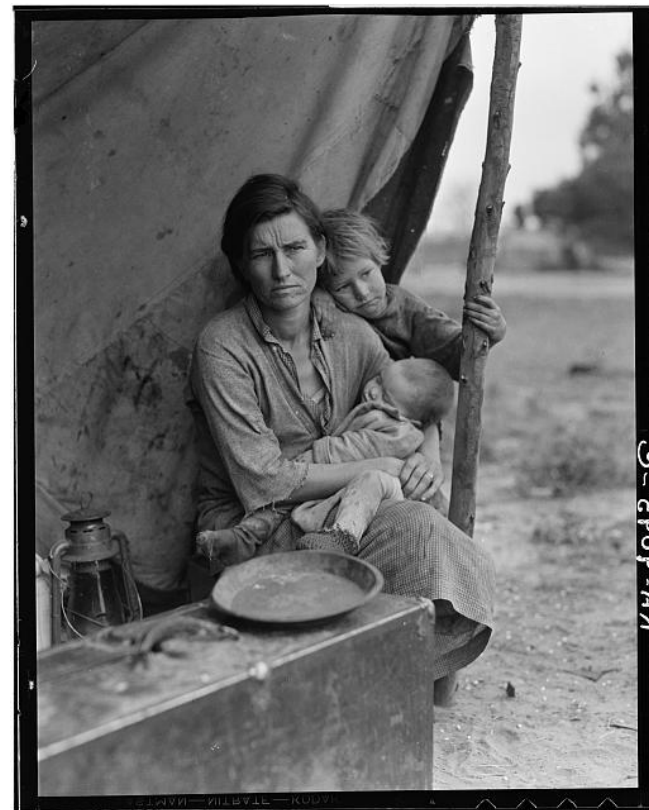


1. DESCRIPTION?
2. INTERPRETATION?
3. EVALUATION?
4. THEORY?

DOROTHEA LANGE,
“MIGRANT MOTHER”, 1936



1. DESCRIPTION?
2. INTERPRETATION?
3. EVALUATION?
4. THEORY?



A Look at 'Migrant Mother', An Iconic Photo of the Great Depression

<https://petapixel.com/2019/08/24/a-look-at-migrant-mother-an-iconic-photo-of-the-great-depression/>

ANSEL ADAMS

MOONRISE,
HERNANDEZ,
NEW MEXICO
1941



1. DESCRIPTION?

2. INTERPRETATION?

3. EVALUATION?

4. THEORY?



[The Story Behind Ansel Adams's "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico"](#)

[November 1: Recount – On This Date in Photography: by James Mcardle](#)

ARNOLD NEWMAN, "IGOR STRAVINSKY", 1946



1. DESCRIPTION?
2. INTERPRETATION?
3. EVALUATION?
4. THEORY?



[PIXLS.US Blog - Arnold Newman Portraits](#)

CHARLES CRAMER

“TREE DETAIL,
AUTUMN, ZION
VALLEY, UTAH,
1994”



1. DESCRIPTION?
2. INTERPRETATION?
3. EVALUATION?
4. THEORY?

REFERENCES

- Barrett, Terry. Criticizing Photographs: an introduction to understanding images. 1990.
- Szarkowski, John. Looking at Photographs: 100 pictures from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. 1973.
- Barr, George. Why Photographs Work. 52 Great Images: who made them, what makes them special and why. 2011.
- Alex Kilbee, [Simple Idea At The Heart Of Great Photography](#)
- **Learn the Skill of Critiquing Photographs With These 5 Tips**
<http://www.lightstalking.com/critiquing-photographs/>
- <https://fstoppers.com/education/how-critiquing-photography-others-improves-your-own-307560?utm>

MORE

The Problem With 'Art' Photography Explained For Beginners <https://youtu.be/WxZcPH4fK1M?si=2AePnwjsEIUlx8Z3>

WHERE THE HELL TO START WITH LEE FRIEDLANDER! [SHOW & TELL EPISODE 23: WHERE THE HELL TO START WITH LEE FRIEDLANDER!](#)

[In the American West: Photographs by Richard Avedon Opens at Fort Worth's Amon Carter Museum 20 Years After 1985 Exhibition | Amon Carter Museum of American Art](#)

[Richard Avedon's Rugged American West Comes to Paris](#)

[In the American West — Tim McLaughlin](#)

[PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW; AVEDON TAKES A DARK VIEW OF THE WEST - The New York Times](#)

[Avedon's West – Southern Changes](#)

[Faces of the West – Texas Monthly](#)

[Exhibition Talk: Laura Wilson](#)

Susan Sontag, 1973, *On Photography*, ISBN 0-312-42009-9

Baumont Newhall, 1982, *The History of Photography*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York

HOMework

FOR NEXT TIME:

1. STUDY THE REFERENCED MATERIAL
2. SELECT AT LEAST ONE PHOTOGRAPH
3. WRITE A CRITIQUE(S) (**NO AI!!!**)
4. EMAIL ME A COPY (lpetterborg@gmail.com)
5. COME TO CLASS PREPARED TO DISCUSS YOUR WORK