

**Photo Essays**

**Michael Cebuliak**

**University of British Columbia: ETEC 540**

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## What is a Photo Essay?

Perhaps one of the most interesting discoveries while exploring the world of photo essays is that there really doesn't seem to be a consensus as to what constitutes such an essay. The only agreement seems to be that it must contain photos. That's it. Nothing more. While there is little dispute about the photograph part, it's the "essay" part which appears rather contentious. As an English teacher I know that there are many different types of essays. We have persuasive essays, synthesis essays, narrative essays and the list goes on. Yet, there is still disagreement amongst us English teachers as to what are the most important elements within each type of essay and how the structure of each essay should be attained to fulfill each specific purpose. While English teachers have had some interesting disagreements, those within the photographic community have had far less success at trying to achieve consensus as to what are the most important elements of a photo essay and their inherent structure and form. And maybe this is a good thing as it provides for the possibility of greater creativity, dynamism and growth within the genre. Playing with perceived conventions is always an interesting exploration of expectations and purpose.

## Time Sequence Photo Essays

Nonetheless some intrepid souls, such as Christopher Dick (2010), have acknowledged different types of photo essays. A popular structure is to work within a **time sequence**. This type of essay, popularized by LIFE magazine, makes note of a clearly delineated timeline for an essay. A linear series of photos typically depict things such as a day in one's travels, an effort to capture some elusive species or a day in the life of fire fighters. W. Eugene Smith's seminal work of 1948 "Country Doctor" is the gold standard for time sequence photo essays that are dependant on a linear narrative. Smith's work is a reminder of the impact one person can have in a single day upon a whole community. While viewing the essay, we are not only touched by the very human expressions of vulnerability, we are reminded of the importance of social responsibility and the value of human kindness.

## Location Photo Essays

Sometimes chronological order is not a critical factor within one's work. Location photo essays allow for work that is not linear. Such works could explore New York City's inner ghettos, the Gaza Strip, or Canada's national parks. For an example of a **location** type of work, Mizue Aizeki's (2010) "Photo Essay" shows a series of photographs exploring the border between Mexico and the US. Borders are often metaphors. They, of course, have political, geographical and emotional considerations which are exploited within Aizeki's work. There isn't a lot of text. The images do the talking and it is this eerie solitude that creates tension. Whose voice is heard? Whose isn't? The work seemingly shows that racism is a living breathing place with human consequence born from some nefarious spirit meandering, and living from, all that separate the two countries. In spite of this, the last image of the essay seemingly illustrates the old adage that living well is the best revenge.

## Photo Essays that Explore Ideas, Concepts and Themes

Photo essays that explore **ideas, concepts and themes** are popular means of illustrating issues such as gender roles, first world affluence and drug abuse. Eugene Richard's (1996) *Cocaine True Cocaine Blue* examines the crack epidemic in the United States while exploring the human consequences within a

framework of abject poverty, marginalization and socioeconomic disadvantage. Such empathetic depictions give voice to those that have lost theirs when they stumble about in an underworld of addiction. We as viewers of the work are reminded that we live in sharp contrast to the subjects as we see their lives, while they are far removed and oblivious to ours. Patrick Sutherland (2016) writes : “The images of human relationships contribute substantially to the emotional tone of the work. Many of the photographs are of interactions between people who are rarely depicted as communicating with each other or making eye contact” (pg. 118). These people live much like ghosts: haunting our conscience when known but hidden from our daily life.

### **Event Photo Essays**

Another popular type of photo essay is that depicting an **event**. This could include such things as exploring a war, social issues, disasters and the like. Perhaps it is the most pervasive of all essays as it can include all the previous types as well. However, an event photo essay need not be about occurrences of epic proportions sometimes they can be as simple as a birthday party, a first date or an examination of how people celebrate valentine’s day. Such an example of this type of essay might be within Brazil’s Sebastio Salgado’s *The Scent of a Dream: Travels in the World of Coffee*. Such works personalize and humanize the production of coffee which is a sobering, but necessary, reminder of the people, and lives, behind products. Economists and business interests always herald the anonymity of the market. Salgado’s work gives a face, a family and future for fair trade, environmentally sustainable, coffee production.

### **History and Frequently Utilized Elements**

Now that we know some types of photo essays it might be good to look at how the photo essay genre emerged and what elements initially characterized it and live on today.

If we look at the known origins of photo essays, or at least when they became popularized, we would have to go back to mass circulated magazines such as LIFE. Here the defining elements of the photo essay were clear. It had to be a narrative that was produced by journalists and photographers, that would sometimes work closely together, and sometimes not. The photo essays popularized by LIFE, and other such publications, were primarily image led: photographs guided one’s eye across the page and the multiple means of textual representation moved one’s focus from left to right. However, this wasn’t always the way in which a reader would make sense of the work. Words and images that were visible both forwards and backward from the reader’s present point of viewing provided a foundation for one’s understanding and helped one make predictions while forging new relationships between seemingly disparate elements. Reading such a photo essay was an active and engaging enterprise. Captions, typography and printed text were laid across several pages and formed something akin to a collage. Each individual photograph could tell a story by itself but could further expand upon the overall narrative of the essay. The composition, and layout, of a successful photo essay was critical, in order for there to be dynamic interaction between all elements. Sometimes one element, say a photograph, would augment another element, perhaps a caption, but other times the elements would be arranged in such an order so to create juxtaposition and contrast. This is true not just of photographs but with printed textual representation as well and this was often employed so as to develop conflict. Works such as “Country Doctor” show considerable drama with all the breadth of mood and emotion that would characterize the life in a day of a doctor.

## **Evolution of the Photo Essay**

In respect to the evolution of photo essays one needs to remember that they enjoyed their heyday before the popularization of television. From the 1950's to the 1990's, there was certainly an audience for photo essays within major newspapers, but since the recent demise of newspapers newer modes of media have eclipsed their commercial viability, and popular appeal. There appears once again to be what Jay Bolter (2001) has called a remediation of text as much of the narrative element of photo essays, as they were defined by LIFE and other popular forms of media, have been supplanted by video found within both television and movies. The types of photo essays that have survived have done so because they offer elements that are difficult, if not impossible, to achieve within other forms of media. Photo essays like those produced by Trevor Paglen (2014) and Peter Fredlake (2017) wouldn't be at all recognizable to previous audiences. Sutherland (2016) has noted that modern audiences tend to be far more visually literate than their earlier counterparts and can better appreciate the complexities and nuances of visual representation. Some may even state that modern audiences expect to be challenged. As stated earlier, playing with perceived conventions is always an interesting exploration of expectations and purpose and challenging convention is often reflective of evolution.

## **Strengths of Photographic Essays.**

It really is a paradox to find that older means of representation often offer authors affordances than can not as easily, or necessarily at all, be achieved through newer technology. Video cassette contraptions and newer digital media players, with their pause, stop, fast forward and rewind buttons, have nothing on the photo essay when it comes to viewer autonomy and control. A viewer of a photo essay can pause, explore and reflect on an image, and text, with ease and convenience that is unmatched by newer technologies. This means of representation is almost entirely transparent. One's thoughts aren't interrupted while one tries to figure out the remote or one doesn't have to wait, at the author's discretion, to enjoy other areas of the text. It's mind boggling to think of how much information one can absorb, in so little time, while simply scanning the work of a photo essay. The impact can be immediate as frequently found within the visual arts: there needn't be any long-winded development, or any fancy footwork, to land a right hook. When we look at Eugene Richard's image it stands on its own without a segue. There is nothing needed either before or after for one to understand that addiction is a problem that defies reason and sometimes even hope. However, because of the essay nature of the presentation, this image has a social context, that lingers between, other images and words of addiction and their very human consequences.

## **Photo Essays and Objectivity**

The brutal honesty that is displayed in such images is not derived from photography's supposed objectivity. In fact, one can make an argument that, in actuality fewer art forms may be more subjective. When one has acquired a camera, one is immediately in a place of affluence and often protected by money, politics or simply good fortune from what exists on the other side of the lens. As soon as one determines where to point their camera they can give up all claims of objectivity. Deciding that one thing is worthy of photographing is tantamount to deciding that something else is not. From the choice of lens angle utilized, extent of cropping, aperture used to provide focus and depth, degree of exposure to light, a photographer's choice of graininess and color bias of films, photography is an art with too many variables at the author's hand to qualify for objectivity. When combined with printed text, one finds that words have similar properties that can be used in juxtaposition or harmony to photographic

means of representation. In printed textual means of representation, or through words, there are similar considerations such as: one's point of view, topical focus, attention to detail, use of words that reflect mood and tone, use of words that provide texture, and the connotative and denotative meaning of words, which all lend themselves to similar subjective affordances to those found within photography.

## **Conclusion**

Photo essays are truly greater than the sum of their parts. As they include many means of representation and each one is capable of augmenting or expanding on the other. The dynamic interaction between photographs, words, and layout create a unique perspective from which to both represent one's work and interpret another's. But, are photo essays the best means of representation for every need of expression? Every means of representation is said to offer affordances that may be lacking in others. Fosnot (2013) speaks of such affordances when she states, "there does seem to be an interaction between symbol and thought when one compares representation across media, such as language, dance, music, or drawing. For example, different features of a cup are depicted depending on whether one is representing symbolically in clay, with pencil and paper, or with language. In clay, the most important feature to symbolize appears to be the contour and the volume of the container; with pencil and paper, the handle and side are depicted; with language, subjects described the function of a cup" (location 629-632). From this, one may believe that text that combines different types of representation afford one greater accuracy. However, accuracy may not always be the objective. Some authors may want to focus solely on depicting the physical properties of a subject without any subjective interpretation and photo essays may not be the best means to this end. Still, with the sometimes competing, and sometimes complimentary elements of a photo essay, they do, as we have seen, have many applications to different circumstances and this affords the genre considerable breadth in respect to what one wishes to represent and how one chooses to do it.

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