Photographic Analysis Sheet

**Interpreting Photographs**

Like political cartoons, photographs must be carefully analyzed. Many people think that photographs have no bias because the image is a snapshot of an exact moment in time.

However, there are many factors to consider when analyzing photographs. The photographer has bias, and can influence the outcome of the snapshot. It is important to remember that a photographer can influence, mislead, misrepresent, or dramatize; just as other artists can, using their distinct medium.

**General questions to consider**

* Who took the picture?
* What was the purpose of the photograph?
* Why did the photographer take a picture of this image?
* What were the photographer’s point of view and what message was being conveyed?
* Was it ‘staged’ for effect or was this a spontaneous (candid) shot?
* Was there an interest group who paid to have the image taken?
* Was it created for propaganda, as a record of family history, or even as a joke?
* What is missing, or was omitted?
* What lies outside the frame of the photograph?
* Is there a caption, and, if so, does this influence your reaction to and meaning of the photograph?

**Part 2: Detailed Observation**

Now that you have thought about the photographer and the purpose of the photograph, it is time to observe the images themselves. This may be organized into four main categories: background knowledge, objective observations, subjective reactions, and inferences.

1. Background Knowledge:

To obtain a deeper understanding of a photograph, the observer must have some background knowledge of the historical context of the times. This is to be able to understand the political, social, and economic issues within the image.

* **What is your knowledge of the snapshot, based on your background knowledge, studies, and experiences?**
* **Can you surmise the geographical location of the image or the date or era in which it was created?**

Note: ‘Grounding’ the photograph in a place and space can aid in the understanding of the picture.

1. Objective Observations:

Next, describe your ‘objective observations’ of the images. Avoid personal feelings, and instead concentrate on the objects, structures, people, facial expressions, clothing, etc.

* **Is there an event taking place? Describe, but do not interpret, what you see.**

1. **Subjective Reactions:**

After this step, it is time to interpret your objective observations.

* **How does the visual make you feel? Describe your personal feelings and judgments about the image, based on what you have seen.**

1. **Inferences:**

Lastly, once you have studied the historical context of the image, and analyzed it objectively and subjectively, it is time to write down your conclusions.

* **What can you infer about the photograph now that you have analyzed it?**

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