

Conference Cycle

# Documentary Style Reconsidered. Contesting Walker Evans

Directed by Jorge Ribalta

**KBr**

Fundación **mapfre**

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Fundación Mapfre's current exhibition dedicated to Walker Evans (February 26-May 24, 2026) provides an appropriate setting from which to review the history of documentary discourse in photography and engage in a debate that goes beyond commonplace ideas. In a late interview, Evans introduced the influential concept of "documentary style" to categorize a photographic practice that until then had been understood as social in nature, not just artistic. This redefinition was not without controversy and was instrumental in shaping some of the new documentary aesthetics that proliferated in the 1970s.

In 1926, John Grierson, the official father of the documentary genre in film history, defined this genre as a "creative treatment of actuality". Since that time, this cinematic and photographic rhetoric has been considered a hybrid space between art, media, and archival work. Although cinematic history has established a strict division between fiction and documentary, the latter genre is somewhat more ambiguous and complex than is often thought, a form of fiction in itself, arising from the historical need to represent the ordinary citizen in the era of mass democracy during the interwar period, a time that also saw a revolution in visual culture characterized by the prominence of photography in the mass media, the illustrated press, advertising, cinema, propaganda exhibitions, and so on. This hegemony of photography continued throughout the middle of the 20th century, until the advent of television. The reinvention of the documentary genre in the 1970s, driven by new discourses in the social sciences post-1968, was also not unrelated to the end of photography's supremacy in Western visual culture. Evans was to die in that same decade, perhaps as a sign of a changing era.

The program is organized around two periods: the first focuses on the 1920s and 1930s, when documentary discourse as such was born; and the second on the 1970s and 1980s, a period in which the reinvention of the documentary emerged as a critical reaction to the humanism that dominated photographic culture during the Cold War.

**Jorge Ribalta** (Barcelona, 1963) is an artist, researcher, editor and independent curator. His most recent retrospective was presented at Fundación Mapfre, Madrid in 2022. He has curated a tetralogy of exhibitions at the Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, that compose a political history of documentary photography, including *A Hard, Merciless Light. The Worker-Photography Movement, 1926-1939* (2011); *Not Yet. On the Reinvention of Documentary and the Critique of Modernism* (2015); *Marc Pataut. First Attempts* (2018); and *Documentary Genealogies. Photography, 1848-1917* (2022). A selection of his essays and interviews is published in Spanish in *El espacio público de la fotografía. Ensayos y entrevistas* (2018).

*Dates*  
**March 10, 17, 24  
and April 14, 21, 28.**

*Time*  
**7:00 pm**

*Simultaneous translation  
into Spanish will be  
available if the lectures  
are delivered in another  
language.*

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**10.03  
2026** **Christian Joschke**  
**Documentary Practices and Class  
Struggle Politics in the 1920s  
and 1930s. The Cases of Germany  
and France**

In-person and online

The workers' photography movement that emerged in the mid-1920s pursued two objectives that differentiated it from the "documentary style": a critique of the images from the conventional press, considered incapable of showing social reality as it was; and a desire to offer a testimony "from below", close to the working people. Around these two, dialectically intertwined objectives, a vast organization linked to the revolutionary movement originated. This sought to create an environment, establish values and promote a communist ideal through the use of imagery, in short, to bear witness as a catalyst for action, to transform social relations. Undoubtedly, this spirit of commitment and its roots in the working class are its most distinctive feature. And when, in the 1970s, political photography and cinema came back to the fore, they were inspired by the memory of the working-class photographers and filmmakers of the 1920s.

(Activity in French with simultaneous translation into Spanish)

**Christian Joschke** (Munich, 1975) is Professor of Art History at Beaux-Arts Paris and co-editor of the journal *Transbordeur. Photographie histoire société* published by Macula (Paris). He has published articles about history of photography in Journals such as *La Revue de l'art*, *Les Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, *Études photographiques*, and a book, *Les Yeux de la Nation. Photographie amateur et société dans l'Allemagne de Guillaume II* (2013, Les Presses du réel). He recently published *La révolution suspendue. Photographie et presse communiste dans l'Allemagne de Weimar (1918-1933)* (Macula, 2025), and *Le Tribunal de l'art. Philip Guston et l'antifascisme américain* (Gallimard, 2026).

**17.03  
2026** **Bernd Stiegler**  
**August Sander and the  
Invention of Social Documentary  
Portrait Photography**

In-person and online

By the end of the 1920s, photographers Karl Blossfeldt, Albert Renger-Patzsch, and August Sander had firmly established themselves as the undisputed trio of German New Objectivity photography. Within a year, three canonical photography books were published: in 1928 *Urformen der Kunst* [Art Forms In Nature], by Blossfeldt; and in 1929 *Die Welt ist schön* [The World Is Beautiful], by Renger-Patzsch, and *Antlitz der Zeit* [Face of Our Time] by Sander. This last book quickly became a favorite of the left-wing press, which celebrated it as a photographic and political revelation. This assessment was based on Sander's radical repositioning of portrait photography. He placed the individual image in a context that sought to represent society as a whole. In other words, Sander's portraits are, in a complex way, portraits of society. The talk presents Sander's concept and work.

(Activity in German with simultaneous translation into Spanish)

**Bernd Stiegler** is a lecturer in modern German literature in the media context at the University of Konstanz. His research focuses on the history and theory of photography, as well as 19th- and 20th-century German and French literature and the relationship between literature and the media. His most recent publications include: *Nadar. Bilder der Moderne* [Nadar. Images of Modernity] (Cologne, Walther König, 2019); *Bilder für Reisende. Rive: ein Fotoatelier in Neapel* [Images for travelers. Rive, a photography studio in Naples] (Halle an der Saale, Hasenverlag, 2022); *Bildpolitiken der Identität. Von Portraitfotografien bis zu rechten Netzwerken* [Visual policies of identity. From photographic portraits to far-right networks] (Berlin, August Verlag, 2024), and *Gedanken sichtbar machen. Oscar Gustav Rejlander und die viktorianische Fotografie* [Making thoughts visible. Oscar Gustav Rejlander and Victorian Photography] (Leipzig, Spector Books, 2025).

**24.03  
2026** **Stephanie Schwartz**  
**Walker Evans and the Problem of Style**

In-person and online

This talk reconsiders the category "documentary style." Coined by Walker Evans in 1971, during an interview with Leslie Katz, the phrase has typically been taken as a description of Evans's work, if not the practice of Depression-era documentary. For most scholars, the phrase confirms that the distinction between art and documentary had been firmly established in the 1930s. My talk argues otherwise, insisting that Evans's phrase must be understood as an invention of the 1970s, when his work was being canonized and debates about the politics of documentary redefined what counted as art. My concern, however, is not to dispense with Evans's phrase. Rather, I insist that style is a key category through which to attend to the photographer's work—specifically, his 1938 publication *American Photographs*. Why, I ask, do accounts of "documentary style" defer to concerns with art and authorship, when style, as Meyer Schapiro argues in 1936, was invented as a means of shoring up racial and national difference? Why, in other words, have histories of national style gone missing from our histories of American documentary?

(Activity in English with simultaneous translation into Spanish)

**Stephanie Schwartz** (New York, 1972) is an associate professor in the Department of History of Art at University College London. Her writing on photography and film has appeared in *October*, *Oxford Art Journal* and *ARTMargins*. She is the author of *Walker Evans: No Politics* (University of Texas Press, 2020) and the editor of the Tate Modern *In Focus* project on Allan Sekula's *Waiting for Tear Gas* (2016). She is currently completing *Allan Sekula's War Work* for MACK Books and developing a new research project on the work of Christopher Williams and the photographic cultures of the Cold War.

**14.04  
2026**     **Larisa Dryansky**  
**On New Topographics and**  
**the Redefinition of the**  
**Documentary Style in the 1970s.**

In-person and online

In 1975 the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House in Rochester (USA) presented the group exhibition “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape.” Although unsuccessful at the time, the exhibition has come to be recognized as a turning-point in the redefinition of the documentary style in contemporary photography. The curator, William Jenkins, had gathered ten photographers whose work focused on the environment of postindustrial America. To qualify the neutrality of their approach, Jenkins referred to the practice of topography, situating the photographs on view within a photographic tradition that encompassed the 19th century topographic surveys of the American West, Walker Evans’s classic documentary images, and the conceptualist snapshots of Ed Ruscha. In this talk, I propose to examine more specifically what Jenkins meant by this “new topographic” style while also looking at how the photographers were inspired by other, less obvious sources, such as film.

(Activity in English with simultaneous translation into Spanish)

**Larisa Dryansky** (Neuilly-sur-Seine, França, 1969) is an associate professor of contemporary art history at Sorbonne Université. Her research focuses on the intersections of art, science, and technology, and on technical images (photography, film, video). Her first book, *Cartophotographies* (2017), examined how artists associated with Conceptual art and Land art experimented with photography and cartography. In addition to this monograph, Dryansky has published widely on topics related to photography both in France and internationally. She is the author of two studies of New Topographics.

**21.04  
2026**     **Thomas Weski**  
**About Michael Schmidt**  
**The End of a Tradition?**

In-person and online

The work of the German photographer Michael Schmidt (1945–2014) is widely understood as a documentary practice. Initially, it focused on his hometown of Berlin in the 1970s and 1980s, before later opening to more universal topics such as history, the visual languages of political systems, and contemporary food production. Having begun photographing as an autodidact and documenting the Berlin neighborhood in which he lived and worked, Schmidt quickly gained international recognition as an important representative of a generation of photographers involved in the reinvention of documentary photography in the 1980s.

Although he employed a straight photographic method, Schmidt did not believe in the photograph as a document in itself. He understood the documentary as a construction of authenticity—one that offers the viewers the opportunity to actively generate their own interpretation and meaning.

(Activity in English with simultaneous translation into Spanish)

**Thomas Weski** (Hannover, Alemania, 1953) has worked as a curator specializing in photography at various national museums. Following Michael Schmidt’s death, he catalogued the photographer’s archive and prepared his international retrospective, which was shown in Berlin, Paris, Madrid, and Vienna. Currently, Weski is compiling Schmidt’s *catalogue raisonné*.

**28.04  
2026**     **Documentary between Cinema**  
**and Photography. Fictionalizing**  
**Reality. A Conversation Between**  
**Marcelo Expósito, José Luis Guerín**  
**and Paulino Viota**

In-person and online

The documentary genre, with John Grierson as its official intellectual father, has its origin and main theoretical output in the field of cinema, not photography. Although the two media share a certain technical and aesthetic genealogy, cinema soon became the dominant medium in modern mass visual culture. The participants in this round table are artists from the world of cinema and audiovisual media, whose practice is permeated by the documentary genre, which each approaches in their own way. In addition, they all combine their artistic work with writing, teaching, and theoretical reflection on the medium. The round table seeks to explore the complex and changing semantic field of the documentary concept, beyond the simple dichotomy between reality and fiction. It also seeks to reevaluate certain canonical figures of the genre and explore possible affiliations between cinema and photography.

**Marcelo Expósito** (Puertollano, Ciudad Real, 1966), a multidisciplinary artist and political activist, has been a resident at the Spanish Academy in Rome (2022-2023) and his work has been shown in recent exhibitions at institutions such as La Virreina (Barcelona), Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo-MUAC (Mexico City), Parco d’Arte Vivente-PAV (Turin), and Parque de la Memoria (Buenos Aires). He was also a guest artist at the XVI Cuenca Biennial (Ecuador, 2023) and La Biennale di Venezia 2024 as part of the collective audiovisual project *Disobedience Archive*, focused on the relationship between artistic practices and political action. His latest book, *Interrupciones y movimientos. El arte politizado en la crisis del neoliberalismo* [Interruptions and movements. Politicized art in the crisis of neoliberalism] was published in 2024 in Chile by the publishing house Metales Pesados.

**José Luis Guerín** (Barcelona, 1960) is a key filmmaker on the contemporary Spanish scene. His first feature films were *Los motivos de Berta* [Berta’s Motives] (1983), *Innisfree* (1990) and *Tren de sombras* [Train of Shadows] (1997). In the midst of the renovation of Barcelona’s Chinatown for the opening of the Rambla del Raval, he made *En construcción* [Work in Progress] (2001), for which he won a Goya Award and which, along with his recently released *Historias del buen valle* [Good Valley Stories], filmed in Vallbona, forms a fundamental and unique diptych on popular and declassified Barcelona, beyond clichés and identity stereotypes.

**Paulino Viota** (Santander, 1948) is a filmmaker and the auteur of *Contactos* [Contacts] (1970), a classic of Spanish experimental cinema. Since the 1980s, he has mainly devoted himself to writing and teaching and has become one of the most brilliant and original essayists on cinema in the Spanish language. He is the author of, among other books, *La herencia del cine. Escritos escogidos* [The Legacy of Cinema. Selected Writings] (Madrid, Asymmetric Editions, 2019) and *La familia del cine* [The Film Family] (Seville, Athenaica, 2024), as well as monographs on John Ford, Jean-Luc Godard and Sergei Eisenstein, all also published by Athenaica.

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