ENGL 494: Rhetoric of the Selfie

Prof. Aimée Morrison  
Hagey Hall 269, 888-4567 x37533  
Office hours: Mondays, 12:00-1:00

Email: ahm@uwaterloo.ca  
Twitter: http://twitter.com/digiwonk

Course description:

This course considers the rhetoric of the image in the age of digital photography, particularly in its social media forms. We will situate these forms historically, in terms of prior print and analog technologies and practices. We will also situate them theoretically, in terms of auto/biography studies, theories of photography, and new media studies. We may consider more or fewer newer or older case studies, as interest dictates and as the class decides.

Content note:

Digital photography in social media often pushes the boundaries of norms of acceptable representational practice as devised in the age of print media. This is a large part of what sets it apart and makes it interesting to researchers. We are looking largely at marginalized communities online, for whom questions of representation are crucial and contested. We will talk about race and culture, and we will see more nudity than in most English courses. It is my job to frame what we look at in order to make the scholarly aims clear, and to ensure respectful talking and respectful looking. I assure you there is a point to it.

The course units and themes are listed in the class schedule: if there is anything there that you know right now is going to be difficult for you, please come have a chat with me and we'll find a way to work together. Sometimes I will introduce new materials as they happen during the term; I will always warn you what's coming, and give options about how or if to participate.

Assignments and Mark Distribution

The following are the graded components of the course:

- Participation 15% (ongoing)
- Selfie-examination 10% Jan. 23
- Response papers (3) 45% Jan. 13-Mar. 25
- Case Presentation 10% Jan. 13-Mar. 25
- Summative Portfolio 20% Mar. 30 / Apr. 1

Detailed handouts describe what is expected of you from each assignment; please read these carefully, do not throw them out, and do refer to them as you complete the
assignments. These are always available under the “Assignment Handouts” tab in the Content area of the Learn site.

Please note: The course is designed to give you ample scope to determine the balance of your work over the term. You get to choose when to submit each of your three response papers and when to sign up for a case presentation. Be intentional about this freedom. Plan carefully.

Course learning outcomes:

The design of the content and schedule of the course is determined by the specific research problem posed in the course description: What is the “rhetoric of the image” in the age of digital photography? How did ‘Instagram influencer’ become a career? However, the course has a more general set of learning objectives related to your development as researchers, writers, and junior colleagues in English.

Foundational Knowledge—by the end of the course you should be able to:
Identify salient characteristics of photographs across a variety of media platforms
Relate digital photography to the history of photography and social media
Theorize the links between digital photography, social media, and autobiography
* Create new media (imaginary or otherwise) in response to new media

Application—over the course of the term you will:
Research instances of digital photography, as forms of life writing
Interpret texts in terms of generic, historical, critical, and theoretical scholarship
Frame persuasive critical positions orally and in writing
* Produce critical media objects that perform argumentation through design

Integration—this course encourages you to:
Develop a clear, concise, and scholarly ‘voice’
Write persuasively, research independently, edit effectively
Collaborate with others to generate and disseminate research products

This course is reading intensive, writing intensive, and participation intensive: as senior English students I expect you to be strongly motivated to acculturate yourselves to the discipline and the way to do that is to read carefully, write frequently, and talk talk talk about your ideas in as much depth and with as much subtlety as you can. In new media studies and, particularly, within Digital Humanities, collaboration, bootstrapping, and public research are normative: expect the course and your role in it to be “front stage” from the first week forward.

Course meeting times

The course meets on Mondays and Wednesdays, from 2:30-3:50, in SJ2 room 2001.
Please feel free to contact me with any concerns or questions you have about the class, the readings, or the assignments. I will be in my office during the hours noted. I’m always very happy to have you drop by during these times, or by appointment at other times. Beyond office hours, contact is probably best initiated via email.

**Email policy**

Email is fast but it is not instant. I am available to you but not constantly or immediately. I will read your email within one business day, and respond within two. I used email to set up appointments, not to answer questions of substance. Please include relevant information in your email: what is your name, what course are you in, what do you need from me?

Oh and social media? I put a lot of social media research stuff on Twitter, if you want to follow me. I will only follow you back if you ask me to, because I don’t want to invade your life without your permission. Speaking of boundaries: we’re not going to be texting, and we’ll not be friends on Facebook, SnapChat, or Instagram. Life lesson: it’s okay to say no.

**Required and Recommended texts**

We are going to be reading a lot. Most of the reading will be available as PDFs on the course website on Learn. You are responsible for printing or otherwise making your own these readings. Course notes and case study links are available on the Learn site as well, and are an essential set of readings: check frequently.

Buy this one:

The following books are on reserve at the library, because they’re really good books:
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography* ($13.36 paperback; $11.00 Kindle)
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. ($11.55 paperback)
- Sarvas, Risto and David M. Frolich. *From Snapshots to Social Media—the Changing Picture of Domestic Photography*. ($117.68 hardcover)

*Style matters:* habituate yourself to the rigors of academic writing—good writing and clear thinking proceed hand in hand. The *MLA Handbook* (8th ed.) should be your guide to research, writing, and citation.

**Absence and Late Policy**

Absence from class requires **advance** permission: your attendance and participation are important to our shared learning. You get two freebies: lie in bed and eat ice cream and cry,
or hover over the computer for freshly-released concert tickets, I don’t care, don’t tell me, whatever, you get two. Last year, someone won a radio contest and got last minute flown to LA for the actual literal Grammy awards. Cool. *Unexcused* absences beyond the freebies will result in a loss of five percent of the total participation mark, taken off the top, for each absence, and an email saying that we should meet to discuss How Things Are Going for You.

Assignments are due at as noted on the assignment sheets or on the sign up sheets you added your name to; **unless prior arrangements are made** late assignments will lose 10% per day late, counting weekends. Assignments more than two days late will not be accepted without documentation or explanation. You have been left a good deal of leeway to manage the distribution and timing of your own work, within the necessary limits of my own and the university’s schedules: organizing your finite time to accomplish the seemingly infinite tasks of school is one of your main responsibilities.

**Access Statement**

I strive to make my classes accessible to whatever student happens to cross the threshold. Everyone has a right to the full experience of the university education they have earned by admission and/or tuition payment. Night owls, English learners, introverts, rebels, loud-talkers, assault survivors, grieving students, anime fans but only like the subs and not the dubs, injured students, disabled students, people with dial up internet, people who wear sunglasses indoors because it’s, like, too much. If there’s something you need to help you succeed, lemme know. If something in this document is freaking you out, let’s talk. If you’re registered with AccessAbility Services (man, that’s a LOT of paperwork to fill out!!!!) you can have them send me whatever. Or talk with me. Me, I’m autistic with a VERY LARGE SIDE ORDER of ADHD, so, yeah. Let me help you out here.

**Rights and Responsibilities**

Every member of this class— instructor as well as students— has rights and responsibilities to ensure a pleasant and productive experience for all. We are all answerable to University policies governing ethical behaviour (Policy 33) and academic integrity (Policy 71), as well as to those outlining grievance or dispute procedures (Policy 70). Please consult these documents, available from the website of the university secretariat.

Here are some more specific expectations for this course:

**You will:**

- know the university policies that govern your behaviour
- attend all scheduled classes
- arrive prepared: with assigned reading and writing completed, and with appropriate materials in hand
- participate actively in your own learning, while respecting the rights of others to learn as well: this means active *listening* as well as active *speaking*
• give thoughtful consideration to instructor feedback on written and oral work

I will:

• adhere to the university policies that govern my behaviour
• attend all scheduled classes
• make myself available for consultation in person and over email
• return assignments within 2 weeks
• provide helpful and respectful feedback on your work

On academic dishonesty: it is a serious offense to appropriate the intellectual labour of another to yourself. Plagiarism consists of using the words or ideas of another without proper attribution. I expect that the work you submit in this course will be the product of your own labour, and that your research sources will be scrupulously documented. If you have any concerns or questions about appropriate practice, you are sincerely encouraged to come discuss this with me—I really would like to help.

On academic dishonesty and intellectual property: be aware that this course contains the intellectual property of the instructor—me. Intellectual property includes items such as:
• Lecture content, spoken and written (and any audio/video recording thereof);
• Lecture handouts, presentations, and other materials prepared for the course (e.g., PowerPoint slides);
• Work protected by copyright (e.g., any work authored by the instructor or TA or used by the instructor or TA with permission of the copyright owner).

Course materials are used to enhance your educational experience. However, sharing this intellectual property without permission is a violation of intellectual property rights. Don’t do this. Also, please alert me if you become aware of intellectual property belonging to others (past or present) circulating, particularly online.

A final word

Once more, welcome to the course! I hope you find it as valuable as it will be challenging. I am looking forward to getting to know all of you.