ENGL 494: Rhetoric of the Image: Digital Photography and the #selfie

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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 will consider genres such as the the family album, the social activist photo, the social media selfie, and the portrait.

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. You will see body parts, body hair, and some body fluids in linked images. I assure you there is a point to it.

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 ‘selfie’ become word of the year in 2014, and why can’t my mom figure out how to take a decent one? 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 twice weekly, Mondays and Wednesdays from 10:00-11:20, in the Quantum Nano Centre, room 1507.

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?

Required and Recommended texts

We are going to be reading a lot. Most of the reading is available as PDFs on the course website on Learn. You are responsible for printing or otherwise making your own these readings. But there are books, too:
Must buy:

Think you would enjoy (but these are on reserve at the library):
- 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)

The rest of the course’s article-length readings will be found online: you will need access to a computer, and to an internet connection to read much of the material for this course. Our primary texts are photographic and online: longer, required critical readings (ie, scholarly articles and book chapters) will be made available through the LEARN site: print them out, as appropriate. You will need to add to and to read the class blog also, at the address listed at the top of the syllabus.

**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.

**Assignments and Mark Distribution**

The following are the graded components of the course:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>(ongoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response papers (3)</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>16 Jan.-27 March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Paper/Project Proposal</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>6 March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annotated Bibliography</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20 March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submitted Paper/Project</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>3 April</td>
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</tbody>
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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.

**Absence and Late Policy**

Absence from class requires **advance** permission: your attendance and participation are important to our shared learning. *Unexcused* absences will result in a loss of five percent of the total participation mark, taken off the top, for each absence. More than two *unexcused* absences will trigger a meeting where we discuss your future in the course.
Assignments are due at as noted on the assignment sheets; **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.

**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
- assert forever that Twilight Sparkle is best pony
- 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. Like Princess Luna you risk a 1000 year banishment to the moon. 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.
Schedule

4 January:
- Introduction
- **Task**: consider “practice selfies” and “revenge porn” examples on website

9 January:
- **Read**: Hutchy, “Affordances”
- **Read**: Welch and Long, “A Small History of Photography Studies”
- **Task**: Consider the affordances of Snapchat

11 January:
- **Read**: Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image”
- **Read**: NYT, “The Selfie Stick Takes Manhattan.”
- **Task**: Consider the meaning of Instagram filters

16 January:
- **Read**: Sarvas and Frohlich, “The Portrait Path”
- **Read**: Sarvas and Frohlich, “The Kodak Path”
- **Watch**: “A Quick History of Photography”
- **Watch**: “Early Photography: Making Daguerrotypes”

18 January:
- **Read**: Sontag, “Melancholy Objects”
- **Read**: all linked materials on Kim Kardashian “break the internet”
- **Read**: all linked material on race and photography

23 January:
- **Read**: Barthes, Camera Lucida excerpts
- **Task**: HONY site, Dear Photograph site, shelter animal photography links

25 January:
- **Read**: West, “You’re so Brave”
- **Task**: Leonard Nimoy photographs, “I Hope every Fat Girl” photo essay, body positivity image tags.

30 January:
- **Read**: Smith and Watson, “Tool Kit”
- **Task**: review photo projects already examined
1 February:
• **Read:** Hirsch, “Family Frames”
• **Task:** linked work by Chino Otsuka and and Haley Morris-Cafiero

6 February:
• **Read:** Cobley and Haefner, “Digital Cameras and Domestic Photography”
• **Read:** Rose, “Family Snaps, Only Better”
• **Task:** bring a family photo or 100 of them

8 February:
• **Read:** Zuromskis, “Intimate Exposures”
• **Task:** Awkward Family Photos site, more of your family photos

13 February:
• **Read:** Smith and Watson, “Virtually Me”
• **Task:** read “NSFW student project” and Rupi Kaur’s Period Project on Instagram

15 February:
• **Read:** Shove et al, “Reproducing Digital Photography”
• **Task:** consider platform materialities—Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat

[[ READING WEEK ]]

27 February:
• **Read:** Garde-Hansen, “Friendship Photography”
• **Task:** #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #feministselfie, Noah K Everyday

1 March:
• **Read:** Duguay, “LGBTQ Visibility through Selfies”
• **Read:** Tembeck, “Selfies of Ill Health”
• **Task:** #GirlsLikeUs, Awkward Years Project

6 March:
• **Read:** Villi, “Distance is the New Punctum”
• **Read:** Larsen, “The Case of Tourist Photography”
• **Task:** “Who is Louise Delage” case study

8 March:
• **Read:** Sandbye, “Japanese Purikura Photography”
• **Read:** “My Little Sister Taught Me to Snapchat Like the Teens”
• **Task:** Kara Walker piece, Snapchat filters

13 March:
• **Read:** All the stuff on doing selfies wrong
• **Task:** All the wrong selfies and why

15 March:
• *Student research and presentations on how to take a good selfie, when and where and why and how, and who to share with. Group creates a list of do’s and don’ts.*

20 March:
• **Read:** Miguel, “Visual Intimacy on Social Media”
• **Task:** rules of photographs in online dating

22 March:
• **Read:** Gaby and Cambre, “Screened Intimacies”
• **Read:** Norman on screen affordances
• **Re-read:** Hutchby, “Affordances”
• **Task:** photographs, swiping, online dating

27 March:
• **Read:** Lister, “Overlooking, Rarely Looking and Not Looking”
• **Task:** TBA, honestly I’m not sure right now.

29 March:
• **Read:** Sontag, “Heroism of Vision”
• **Read:** Morrison, TBA (once I finish writing it …)
• **Task:** review sources from the term

3 April:
• **Task:** present project or paper, hand it in