

Burden of Truth: Photography, Seeing & Ethics

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Howard Dinin

If it hasn't already been made clear from the absence of a second name on the roster of visiting faculty for this course, there has been a change of strategy. Rather than the drama and the frisson of actual opposing views presented in real time from two differing perspectives: that of the working artist, and that of the classically trained art historian and critic, we will have to work with the best of my skills at inviting you to play a deeper role, while I wear both those hats—likely sometimes at once. I have a long history of not minding looking ridiculous for the sake of seeking truth and helping others in the same quest, as we all pursue what wisdom there is to be found in this world.

We have lost to the vagaries of life and mortality a great teacher, who would have added her unique, possibly inestimable, knowledge and wisdom to what we both anticipated and hoped would be lively discussions. For my part, I dedicate my efforts this semester to the memory of my partner and great friend, Professor Joanna Ziegler. And now, down to the business of this seminar.

The Seminar: Objectives, Methodology

The mechanisms by which teachers evince the kind of participation that make a seminar come to life have been invented, debated, denounced, and applauded likely since the time of Socrates. No matter. I am no ideologue. I have no pedagogical principles to apply. And my agenda is simple.

I will be in the room as your guide, your teacher, your first source for hints on where to look when you have a question or an idea for which we may discover none of us has the immediate answer. But my primary role, as I see it, is to be a guide.

The reason is simple. The objective of the seminar is singular and, I think, powerful. We might say it's monolithic. My hope is that once we are done with our studies, our discussions, our forays into the world of thinking systematically about that which is the opposite of systematic—our subjectivity, what Roland Barthes would likely have called our “consciousness” in the various states in which we find ourselves—we will have found a way that works for each of us to see the world and what is in it as we had not before.

The photographic look has something paradoxical about it which is sometimes to be met with in life: the other day, in a café, a young boy came in alone, glanced around the room, and occasionally his eyes rested on me; I then had the certainty that he was looking at me without however being sure that he was seeing me: an inconceivable distortion: how can we look without seeing? One might say that the Photograph

separates attention from perception, and yields up only the former, even if it is impossible without the latter; this is that aberrant thing, noesis without noeme, an action of thought without thought, an aim without a target.

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Section 46

Our aim is to look at photographs, to discuss what we see (and what will come to light as what we haven't seen), to read what others have said about the whole business of "seeing," and the specialized kind of seeing that must be applied when the subject is a photograph, to discuss what they have said, and come to terms with it.

Finally, if our aim has been true, what will have happened by the end of the term is we will each have discovered that we have individually found new ways of seeing, perhaps discovered the act of "mindful" seeing for the first time in our lives, and we will have come to an understanding about how this kind of seeing may have an impact in a positive way on our sense of what it is to be alive, that is to be mortal and conscious of the fact.

In short, that word "Ethics" added after the ampersand in the title of the course is there for a reason. It may, indeed, be the most important verbal component in the name of this seminar.

I hope that the connection is not obscure, even at the start of our work.

Ethics really having to do with action, we (some of us, anyway) find ourselves trying to figure out not only what to do, but how to act. We understand intuitively the ways in which the usual suspects have an impact on how we choose to conduct our lives: parents and family, other loved ones, friends, peers, colleagues, and people in the public eye. The list goes on, but this isn't a sociology course.

We learn somewhere along the line in our early educational preparation about the role that certain of the arts can play. Theater is singled out particularly, along with its sister and daughter arts, film, the dance, dare I say music (which may be the mother, not the child, I realize)?

Some of us are intuitively aware, some of us are lucky enough to be taught if we lack the innate sensibility, of the equal power of the so-called plastic arts: painting, sculpture, and, of course, since the first quarter of the 19th century, photography to induce us to a frame of mind, or a way of looking at the world that somehow instills a sense of how to lead a more fulfilling life in the sense connoted by calling it an "ethical" life.

What the course will aspire to do, with everyone's cooperation and the combined energy of our efforts in the seminar room, and out in the field, is teach us how to see the world—possibly in ways we've never seen it before, for all the looking we may do. The result can be a life-long mode of seeing that assists in whatever our endeavors, whatever our vocation, whatever path we choose.

If there seems to be not a small amount of philosophical intent, that's because there is. Famously, "the unexamined life is not worth living," or so every philosopher in almost three thousand years would have us believe—I speak of course of all but the keepers of the ivory tower, with their deep inquiries into language and logic. I would add as corollary that "the unseen life is a diminished life." Photography will be our doorway into the act of seeing mindfully.

Readings

There is a debate that still sometimes rages, worthy of engagement no doubt, but we will not venture, as to the question of whether photography is an art, perhaps of a lesser form, perpetually qualified or somehow adumbrated. We'll proceed in the spirit of the self-assurance of the great Alfred Stieglitz that his craft, indeed, was art, and worthy of being hung in the company of Goya and Dürer's work, when The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York finally, after 28 years of importuning, accepted a collection of his photographs for the permanent collection in 1926.

From before that time and since, much has been written, and the pace accelerates. To whatever extent the legitimacy of the medium is measured in the volume and impenetrability of academic prose generated on the subject, art's place in history is assured, and were this a more conventional course, we would have plenty of material. That is in both the available number of primary sources, the works themselves, as well as in the number of texts, of every sort, from critical theory, to critique, to dyed-in-the-wool scholarship.

Our own readings will be drawn more from the former, and less, if at all, from the latter category.

It's deep in the syllabus to say this, but I've already asserted it elsewhere. This is not a history of art course per se. No dates and plates. For our purposes, when it's necessary (and ultimately, it's always necessary for some reason; I was trained as a scholar, and I understand its value: in this case, it is the science of the study of art) we'll be mindful of who did what when, and we will use all the computer-based aids and tools at our disposal to make short work of the "research." We want to reserve our time together for looking at the work and talking about it.

There is a core group of texts I've selected for our primary reading, and we will concentrate our attention on these. However there is a far lengthier "select bibliography" of other books (and an even larger reserve of titles to which I can refer you, should your thinking and inspiration take you farther afield). This select bibliography we will dip into. That is, I will dip into it and ladle out the richer brew for your delectation. We shall all freely refer to the other texts as they become pertinent, should they become pertinent. I'll skip the poetry for a moment to make sure it's clear that the assignments will not entail reading all but one or two of these texts in their entirety. They will be excerpted.

Core Readings

*Barthes, R. (1982). *Camera lucida : reflections on photography*. New York, Hill and Wang.

*Benjamin, W., M. W. Jennings, et al. (2008). *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media*. Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. [only selected essays]

**Danto, A. C. (1986). *The philosophical disenfranchisement of art*. New York, Columbia University Press. [only selected essays]

Fried, M. (2008). *Why photography matters as art as never before*. New Haven, Yale University Press. [only selected chapters]

**Maynard, P. (1997). *The engine of visualization : thinking through photography*. Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press. [only a selected chapter]

*Scarry, E. (1999). *On beauty and being just*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.

*Sontag, S. (2000). *On photography*. London, PENGUIN BOOKS. [only selected sections]

Sontag, S., P. Dilonardo, et al. (2007). *At the same time : essays and speeches*. New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

The select bibliography, including these texts, appears at the end of the syllabus. But these will be the key texts. Those that are starred (*) are available in relatively cheap paperback editions; the double-starred (**) are less cheap, but are still trade paperbacks. And I've chosen writers, not only for their high level of provocation singularity of thought, and power of insight (however wrong-headed), but their strength of character (which permitted them to live not only with very large brains, but very large egos in some cases, and in turn with being wrong-headed). Hence, you will be tempted to write in the margins. You can decide if it's worth defacing library property. Throughout the semester certain readings will be made available as hand-outs, or PDF-downloads, which will save wear and tear on the collections of the College, and leave you more money for pizza and beer, or your comestibles of choice.

If I were an itinerant preacher (and in a way, I suppose I am) and you the congregation, which happens to come to meeting in a modest Beaux-Arts jewel by the esteemed firm of McKim Mead White (we'll use our imaginations to turn it, and the nearly state-of-the-art classroom in which we sit, into a humble wooden chapel, of much the type that Walker Evans made immortal in his rambles through the American South) we'd have a text from which to depart. That would be the great and moving rumination, the "reflection" on photography, as his translator titled it in English, by Monsieur Roland Barthes.

I hasten to point out that I do not feel this is, nor do I suggest to you that you read it as, a bible. I am no preacher, though I do hold forth, and you are expected (with the right

reserved to make it a requirement) to keep me from doing so. This is a seminar. It's for the free exchange of ideas, thoughts, diversions, divagations, notions, and betrayal of feelings about the work among all of us, not a select few, and never only for me to lay on you. "Exchange" means we trade...

I hope by now you all have already had instilled in you a healthy ambivalent relationship with any great thinking as it appears in print, to love it for the thinking and the expression, but always with a robust skepticism. In my case, I keep this latter quality alive by exercising a certain combativeness evinced by the voice entombed between the covers. These may be dead guys, some of them (it's not only men, and they're not all dead yet), but their thinking lives, and it is with the thoughts we will grapple.

However I will always encourage you to think for yourself, because at some point, that's what you'll have to do. The aim of this reading then is not to have it fed back, to me, to one another, in some meaningless recursive, if not solipsistic, loop. It's to spur more thought, and more importantly, to energize our discussions.

Sightings

We shall be looking at a lot of photographs. Some sessions we will view only a few and spend more time talking, on the sheer presumption that they inspire more to say.

In other sessions, the room may take on the faint whiff of the ancient art history amphitheater, the magic lantern projectors emitting heat and the smell of burning dust, as slide after weary slide plays *obbligato* to the insistent drone of the professor, citing venue, dates, and facts later to be laboriously embedded in memory. But the analogy will stop only at the numbers of images. It will be more evident why, especially when we talk about the Düsseldorf School of Photography, the Bechers and their progeny.

However, in the brief history of photography as a genre of pictorial visual stimulation, many photos have been produced. The current score card from the academy once again accords Joseph Nicéphore Niépce the designee of producer of the first photograph, a tableaux of a meal, apparently lunch (it took an eight-hour exposure, so presumably the sun was out. That was in 1822. In a little less than 200 years (Lascaux, I'll remind you was 30,000+ years ago) we have produced thousands, and then millions, and now, I am told by the Internet, the number of images uploaded to Facebook in 2009 was on the order of 30 billion a year. By whatever algorithm of extrapolation, there are more images we could ever hope to look at.

Hence we will be, as always, selective, but mindful of the social, philosophical, cultural, anthropological, and ethical impact of the ease with which we can expand the universe of visual stimuli we call photographs, and consider how the conclusions to be reached by observing specimens through our filtering qualitative lenses apply, if they do at all, to a human population, also in the billions in the aggregate, who at any time may be seeing myriad images of diverse quality, never mind content.

We will look, as touchstones, at the work of the great and near great:

William Fox Talbot
Louis Daguerre
Nadar (père et fils)
Matthew Brady
Jacob Riis
August Sander
Eugène Atget
Alfred Stieglitz
Edward Steichen
Paul Strand
Walker Evans
Robert Frank
Bernd & Hilda Becher and the Ruffstruthskys (Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth,
Andreas Gursky, et alia)
The Fabricationists
The Conceptualists
Nan Goldin
Duane Michals
Irving Penn & Richard Avedon
Magnum photographers: Henri Cartier-Bresson, David Seymour, Robert Capa, et
al.

But that's merely a core list of image producers, just as there's a core list of texts. We'll otherwise improvise.

The principle here, as with the readings will be to allow the course to conform to the skills inherent in the enrollment and the specific members of the seminar. I don't believe in a rigid curriculum. We're not working together to prove anything. We're working together towards an objective: the development of a core capability not only for further, more enriched academic achievement, or artistic accomplishment, but for a way to approach life in general that makes it more rewarding.

The Practicum

Some learns by reading, some learns by doing. We'll do both, as promised.

The "studio" portion of the course (in scare quotes, because I'm loathe to hint that this is a studio course) may or may not allow you to hone your photographic skills. I've been a professional photographer, among other things, and am now doing what I hope is art. I've been doing it a long time, and I know a lot of tricks and am comfortable with a lot of technologies, but this is not a course for learning advanced image manipulation, or to concentrate on honing your skills at composing and framing the shot.

The semester-long assignment is designed to assist in the furtherance of the goal of the seminar. To put your eyes and your hands, and your technological skills to work in the actual production of images, even as you are more and more instilled with an informed

and mindful way of seeing: seeing the world around you, seeing it photographically, “seeing” the results of your exertions at capturing that world by these means.

We won’t worry about whether what you do is art. That may, in the end, be for others to decide. We’ll be mindful of the issues and problems of aesthetics, but this, among other things it is not, is not a course in defining art. Let’s not get near that one. It’s a challenge that hasn’t been settled in several thousand years, despite the efforts of people at least as smart, and as skilled, and as clever as I suspect (and at least hope) we turn out to be.

The Assignment

I’d like to say, the assignment starts today (Tuesday 2011January 25), but let’s say it will start next week, after the dust settles, the snow is cleared, and the enrollment is stabilized.

What you will do is what artists have done likely without thinking about it, since the urge to replicate an image or a vision occurred to anyone to try with the means at hand. You have two choices as to what the subject of your photos will be:

1. a favorite subject, and I strongly advise a non–animal subject: the examples I prefer are Cezanne’s lifelong favorite subject, Mont Ste.–Victoire, or the subject that filled Edward Steichen’s final years, a beloved shadblow tree that resided on his property in Connecticut; if you’re familiar with the work of either of these artists, you know that they depicted these subjects under all conditions, in all seasons, and through the seasons, even with the passage of years
 - obviously you don’t have years, not for the requirements of the seminar, but you never know... this could be the start of a beautiful friendship; you, your muse, and your progressively more refined sensibility as it expresses itself in the work
2. a major theme, of universal scope, at its grandest one of the mass nouns, or one of the great everlasting labors of mankind: Men, Women, Horses, Eating, Farming etc.
 - you may consider sub–genres, *e.g.*, the great eccentric icon of street photography, Gary Winogrand, did a book, *Women are Beautiful*, and there is some merit to narrowing the focus of your efforts—this is only one course, and it is only one semester long; not the appropriate venue or circumstance to do a global and philosophically encompassing theme, as Robert Frank did, in *The Americans*

This studio exercise is part of the requirements of this seminar. It will require your engagement, as will attendance and participation in each single weekly meeting of the seminar, throughout the semester, and, in its final form, will be submitted near the end of the course.

It is expected to demonstrate not “progress” in the usual sense of a quality improvement that can be measured by some index of assessment. Rather it is expected your collection of images will reflect a progression in your seeing. That is, it will be a visual record of how our studies and discussions have affected your ability to see more closely, more mindfully.

It is expected that, within the limits of what requirements I can impose given your resources, plus this not being a course that strictly meets studio requirements, you will put together, with my counsel and assistance, a professional quality presentation of your work: as a portfolio, or a book, or even a website, any one of which may be simply a reflection of where your greatest skills lie without an undue extra exertion of effort.

We can discuss the meaning of this last paragraph at a later point in the semester. In the meantime, there is no reason to think of the final form of presentation so much as there is reason to make a choice of subject you can embrace, as you will live with it, effectively, from now until the beginning of May.

We will have at least one, and possibly two sessions, in the digital media lab in Fayerweather for work in connection with the gathering and treatment of images for this collection of photographs as the practicum portion of the course.

Course Requirements

This paragraph is in lieu of a repetition or recapitulation of the pertinent and appropriate sections of the Student Handbook, and in particular the Honor Code, and more specifically adherence to the “Statement of Intellectual Responsibility.” The College, and therefore I, expect you to have reviewed the Student Handbook, in its entirety and in the form of it in “Brief,” which I understand has long since been distributed to you. The Student Handbook is of course conveniently available on-line.

Participation

As this is a seminar, its success or failure is contingent above all on the level of participation of all members. I’m well-equipped and suited to carry the entire load, but this is not meant to be, nor will I conduct it as a lecture course.

A significant portion of your course grade assessment will be based on the extent and nature, as well as the quality of your contributions to seminar discussions.

This is meant to be a colloquy, for the free exchange of ideas, and the questioning of any and all assumptions. There are no rules to learn, no absolute truths to be memorized or tattooed (unless we stumble on some true absolutes, in which case, we’ll take steps to make sure we are famous as a result)

Your participation in class may constitute as much as one-third of your final grade assessment.

Creative Assignment

Again, a critical and proportionately larger part of your requirement for the course. If you are ill-equipped to meet this requirement, because of only the most rudimentary photographic and technological skills, you might re-consider wanting to participate (in the course). Albeit this is a semester-long effort in honing your ability to see mindfully, it’s best to start from a place of minimal experience with the medium.

There is no requirement as to the photographic technologies you choose to exploit, but this is not the time, nor is this the course, in which to try out those theories you have about re-inventing the genre of the cyanotype.

On the other hand, just as mastery of writing skills is a basic indicator of capability of college level performance, especially at an institution of the caliber of Amherst College, a similar basic level of mastery will be necessary to demonstrate the acquisition of a more refined level of sensibility and photographic seeing.

The final submission of your work, which necessarily will reflect a continual and continuing effort throughout the semester will be the basis for assessing the strength (or grade, if you prefer) of more or less one third of your performance.

Written Assignment(s)

During the course of the semester each seminar member will be expected to make a presentation, with written support, in the form of an annotated and properly cited and documented hand-in, which will entail assuming leadership of class discussion. The assignment will be self-selecting, and will be based on some part of the reading for that seminar meeting. In short, you will prepare a brief seminar paper, and then lead the discussion based on your comments.

There will also be the administration of a written assignment, which will be time-constrained, using the IT tools available on-line. The topics and the subject matter, in the form of a select group of photographic images, will be distributed in advance. You will have any and all access to any materials you wish, your own notes or exclusively personal work product, or primary and secondary sources (to be appropriately cited and documented) either during the administration of the submission of the assignment or beforehand. In plain English, you may, if you wish, prepare the written document called for in the assignment in advance and simply upload it at the time that access is made available on-line. Any failure to leave, i.e., upload, a document as will be described in further detail with the distribution of the topics and the subject photographs will require a medical excuse, or an explanation of technological failure from the College IT department.

You will also have the choice of taking the actual time allowed on-line, which will be two hours, to write spontaneously. There will be no demerit for the usual solecisms: typos, sentence fragments, etc. under such conditions. On the other hand, there will be additional credit granted for a letter perfect document prepared meticulously in advance. The honorable thing to do will be to take two-hours, whether timed by the computer systems, or by your wristwatch, to write a cogent, substantive essay to meet the requirement of this particular written assignment.

The combination of your level of performance on these two instances of what I've styled "written" assignments will constitute the last third of your overall course assessment.

On the last pages are the entire selected bibliography for the course as of this date. There will be additions for your further reference and edification.

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