

The Image and Nonfiction

Robin Hemley

211 EPB 4:30-7pm Tuesday

Office Hours: Tuesday 2-4, Wednesday, 3-4

E-mail: robin-hemley@uiowa.edu

“The history of photography could be recapitulated as the struggle between two different imperatives: beautification, which comes from the fine arts, and truth-telling, which is measured not only by a notion of value-free truth, a legacy from the sciences, but by a moralized ideal of truth-telling, adapted from nineteenth-century literary models and from the (then) new profession of independent journalism.”

--- Susan Sontag, ON PHOTOGRAPHY

Required Texts:

A Postcard Memoir – Lawrence Sutin

Remote David Shields

On Photography – Susan Sontag

Camera Lucida – Roland Barthes

Another Way of Telling – John Berger

Fun Home – Allison Bechdel

The Rings of Saturn W.G. Sebald

The Ongoing Moment Geoff Dyer

Required Tools:

A camera of some kind.

Let’s start with the supposition that photography and nonfiction often share the same attitude towards the world. The twin imperatives, sometimes at odds, between beautification (or aesthetic concerns, at least, if we can’t bring ourselves to utter the “B” word) and truth-telling. Both are supposedly representative forms. Both don’t lie, and yet we know they do. In both forms, the viewer sets the terms, not the viewed. Of course, the same could be said of painting, at least pre-photographic painting as Susan Sontag points out in ON PHOTOGRAPHY. With the advent of the photograph, the painter was freed from the obligation to record and represent the world. Painters passed on the task of recording to the photographer, who took to the task with ambivalence from the start. While some photographers sought to provide a record, historical or social, others

preferred to focus (forgive the pun) on the detail, the close-up, the cropping of so-called reality.

Both photography and nonfiction have been regarded with suspicion as not true art forms. Photographers for years exhorted one another on ways to pursue their calling as an art form and not simply a mechanical action. In the same way, nonfiction in recent years has had to take on the clumsy mantle of “creative nonfiction” to prove its worth, and much time is spent trying to define what creative nonfiction is rather than actually writing it.

In this course, we will examine the relation of the image, specifically the photographic image, but not exclusively, in relation to nonfiction. How do we apprehend reality, and what is meant by reality in our attempts to capture and represent it in photographic and literary terms? How is the photograph enhanced by words and how is it hindered? How is the word enhanced by the photograph and how is it hindered? Is the subtext of the photograph always ambiguous? Does it necessarily impart beauty even as it tries to suggest ugliness? In what manner is a “moralized ideal of truth-telling,” to use Sontag’s phrase, irrelevant or obstructive to the nonfiction writer’s task? And is the task of the nonfiction writer finally as blurry as an out-of-focus photograph?

Much of this course will be devoted to reading, viewing, and writing about various images that others have created: the snapshot, the postcard, visual art, media images, home movies. In many instances, we’ll use these outside images as prompts for personal or lyric essays or essays we can’t even classify. Part of the class will also involve us going out into the world armed with cameras and actively hunting for images that we will use as prompts for further essays.

You can expect a writing assignment every week or so, but these assignments will not be critiqued or even handed in until the end of class when you will choose two or three of the pieces you find most successful and hand them in with a companion essay. This is essentially a reading class and you will be graded primarily on your contribution to the discussion. Part of the aim of this course is to generate material in an original and perhaps experimental manner. I’d like for you to consider all of your work in this regard as an exercise. I’ll ask people to read from their work every week, but we won’t be critiquing them in the traditional workshop manner. That’s something you can get from your other courses. As this is a large class, if we tried to critique everyone’s work, we would be slowed to a crawl. Instead, we’ll talk as much about the process as the product. Halfway through the course, we will schedule individual conferences to talk about your work. These are mandatory and you cannot pass the class without meeting with me.

Grading:

If you are not taking this course on a pass/no pass basis, please see me at the start of the term.

Attendance:

Diligent Attendance is a must for this course.

Academic Fraud

Plagiarism and any other activities that result in a student presenting work that is not his or her own are academic fraud. Academic fraud is reported to the departmental DEO and then to the Associate Dean for Academic Programs and Services in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. www.clas.uiowa.edu/students/academic_handbook/ix.shtml

Making a Suggestion or a Complaint

Students have the right to make suggestions or complaints and should first visit with the instructor, then with the course supervisor if appropriate, and next with the departmental DEO. All complaints must be made within six months of the incident. www.clas.uiowa.edu/students/academic_handbook/ix.shtml#5

Accommodations for Disabilities

A student seeking academic accommodations first must register with Student Disability Services and then meet with a SDS counselor who determines eligibility for services. A student approved for accommodations should meet privately with the course instructor to arrange particular accommodations. See www.uiowa.edu/~sds/

Understanding Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. Visit www.sexualharassment.uiowa.edu/ for definitions, assistance, and the full policy.

Administrative Home of the Course

The administrative home of this course is the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, which governs academic matters relating to the course such as the add / drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, issues concerning academic fraud or academic probation, and how credits are applied for various CLAS requirements. Please keep in mind that different colleges might have different policies. If you have questions about these or other CLAS policies, visit your academic advisor or 120 Schaeffer Hall and speak with the staff. The CLAS Academic Handbook is another useful source of information on CLAS academic policy: www.clas.uiowa.edu/students/academic_handbook/index.shtml

Schedule:

Week One
August 28th
Introduction

Week Two
Sept. 4th
Read the First Three Essays in Sontag
First half of A Postcard Memoir

Bring in postcards

Week Three

September 11th

Read the next three essays in Camera Lucida

2nd half of A Postcard Memoir

Discuss postcards and redistribute

Week Four

September 18th

Read first half of Camera Lucida

Punctum and studium essay

Week Five

September 25th

Read second half of Camera Lucida

Week Six

October 2nd

Read Another Way of Telling

Ambiguity and contradiction

Write an essay on an object/subject that takes an ambiguous, even contradictory tack towards its subject. Perhaps you have an attitude towards this subject, but you should allow only part of your feelings towards this subject to show, leaving the reader space in which to reinterpret or conjecture. A photo in words. A description of sorts, but a description that has energy and tension. Perhaps the simplest form of this exercise or the most direct would be a description of a photograph that goes beyond the caption.

Week Seven

October 9th

Read "A Metaphysics of Sorts" by Robin Hemley

Read The Uncommon Life of Ordinary Objects

Week Eight

October 16th

Read First Half of The Ongoing Moment

Read "A Hanging" by George Orwell

Take photo or video of something you or society might consider ugly. Consider how your attention makes it beautiful, if indeed it does. Consider the role of the witness. Write a short piece on ugliness – either in relation to your photo or only tangentially so.

Week Nine
October 23rd

Read the second half of *The Ongoing Moment*
Take Cropped Photos and/or purposefully out of focus.
Write companion piece

Week Ten
October 30th

Read 1st half of *The Rings of Saturn*
Take a series of photos of yourself and write a short companion piece, a self-portrait that intensifies, contradicts, confuses, or none of these.

Week Eleven
November 6th

Read second half of *The Rings of Saturn*

Write short piece based on Sebald's use of the embedded photograph.

Week Twelve
November 13th

Video, home movies, documentary
Read video chapter in Akiko Bush's *THE UNCOMMON LIE OF COMMON OBJECTS*.
Read Judith Ortiz Cofer's "Silent Dancing"
Read *Remote*
Write a short piece based on a media image or on Cofer's conceit of the movie or documentary.

Week Thirteen

November 20th
NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week Fourteen

November 27th

Read Fun Home

Close-ups and distance

Photograph close-ups and objects in the distance and

Write companion piece about one, the other, or both

Week Fifteen

December 4th

Graphic essay due – either by way of drawing, collage, or some other largely visual means, you'll create a graphic treatment of the world, your life, or some combination.

Week Sixteen

December 11th

Last class

Turn in final portfolio