

Englit 1486
Spring 2006
Saffron, J.

Photography and Its Social and Political Context, ENGLIT 1486
Spring Term 2006
Monday, 6 – 8:30 p.m.
David Lawrence 209

Course Description:

This course explores the nature and function of photography as social action. Social documentary images of labor, conflict, politics and social issues are discussed in relationship to their impact on American public consciousness, particularly through the media, reportage, activism, and independent media. The course explores how images have impacted the collective understanding of and reaction to historic events and trends such as the Great Depression, Vietnam, and civil rights. Points of inquiry: Who propagates images and for what? What makes an image political? What deserves to be publicly seen and who decides?

Photography and Its Social and Political Context primarily addresses images and events from 1935 until today. Photography by those such as Sebastião Salgado, Letizia Battaglia, Eddie Adams, Fazal Sheikh, and Robert Capa is examined and discussed. Readings from the course packet include essays by leading photo critics and critical theorists such as Ken Light, Susan Sontag, and Martha Rosler.

Methods and outcomes:

- Students participate in lively class dialogue, as the primary course methodology is not a standard slide lecture but rather an active discussion and debate regarding the slides and the readings. Class discussion is led by a series of “points of inquiry” which are initially generated by the professor and, as the term goes on, begin to be generated by the students.
- Students should expect approximately five – eight hours of work a week outside of class. Coursework includes short expository papers and in-depth journal writing. Journals, usually about 40 – 50 pages upon completion (approximately 3 pages per entry), are based on questions given by the professor, are regularly reviewed throughout the term, and are shared in-class with peers. The short papers are generally 4 – 5 pages in length. Assignments are reviewed ahead of time and, particularly because the class only meets once a week, are reinforced in a weekly email from the professor to the students.
- Group visits to exhibitions and collections at the Silver Eye Center for Photography and Hillman Library complement in-class coursework. Students are also expected to review web-based photographic archives from the Library of Congress and others (please see attached listing of websites).
- A midterm will be given, comprised of a choice of three out of five essay questions about the topics covered up until that point in the term. For the final, students deliver a 15 minute class presentation on a topic of their choosing (related to the coursework) along with a short paper summarizing the presentation. Students develop topic ideas in one-on-one conference with the professor.

Prerequisite: Completion of Seminar in Composition

This course fulfills the School of Arts and Sciences general education requirement of the Arts.

SYLLABUS: Photography and its Social and Political Context
Instructor: Jennifer Saffron, M.F.A., jsaffron@fcas.pitt.edu

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"Everything in the world must be shown and people around the world must have an idea of what's happening to the other people around the world. I believe this is a function of the vector that the documentary photographer must have, to show one person's existence to another."

—Sebastião Salgado

Course Guidelines:

1. Your grade will be earned by an even percentage distribution of the following:
 - **Writing Assignments.** This includes short papers and a journal.
 - **Class participation and effort,** including active participation in discussions and good attendance. Each unexcused absence will mark this portion of your grade down by a full letter grade. 4 or more absences = an F for the entire class. Class participation includes punctuality, being respectful and civil to students and the instructor, and the use of appropriate language and behavior. Students will adhere to the Academic Integrity Guidelines.
 - **Midterm and final presentation.**
2. You are expected to be at all classes unless you have an emergency. If you are requesting a pre-excused absence, please call ahead of time at (412) 624-6607 and arrange to receive the assignment. Students with pre-excused absences must turn in their assignments on time, regardless of whether or not they will be in class. Students who miss more than one class in a row due to illness need to bring a doctor's note.
3. If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact the instructor and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union, (412) 624-7890 as early as possible in the term.
4. Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh policy on Academic Integrity will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz, exam, or paper will be imposed. Complete Academic Integrity Guidelines are at <http://www.fcas.pitt.edu/academicintegrity.html>
5. No late assignments will be accepted, unless you have an emergency. This class includes reading, writing, visits to the library, and visits to exhibitions. Extra credit assignments will be offered; extra credit is equal to ½ of one writing assignment. Papers are to be 1.5 spaced with 11 or 12 point font. Do not email papers or leave them in the faculty mailbox unless instructed to do so. Bring your journal to every class, as we will have periodic in-class writings.
6. Office Hours are noon – 1 p.m., Wednesdays and Thursdays in room 153 Thackeray Hall and by appointment. Email jsaffron@fcas.pitt.edu or call (412) 624-6607 to make appointments, or just stop by during office hours.

Course Sessions

January 9 **The Photograph**

Inquiry: What is an Image? What makes an image political? What is the "collective image bank?" How is this different than the "personal image bank?" How does the "collective image bank" function? At what point is something historical?

Discussion: Introductions, review the syllabus. Discuss the history of the camera. Discuss the scope and history of the documentary image.

Assignment: Journal assignment: Argue the political nature of an image.

January 23, 30, and February 6 **The Photographers**

Inquiry: What creates the distinction of documentary, ethnography, and journalism? What is the practice/ process of the social documentarist? What is the responsibility of the documentarist? How do images reach the masses?

Discussions: View the video *Looking Back at You*; view slides of, Sebastiao Salgado, Letizia Battaglia and others.

Assignments: Read from *Witness In Our Time*; *Reading American Photographs*. Respond in journal. Read *Media Control* for February 13 class.

February 13, 20 **Media Model**

Inquiry: Can images as social action be anything but "propaganda"? What is "dissent" photography? Who propagates images and for what? Who consumes images?

Discussions: Create Chomsky's media model. View the video: *Control Room*.

Assignments: Visit www.mediarights.org, write journal response. Watch the news three times; 4-5 page response paper and journal due February 20, regarding the analyzing the news in relationship to *Media Control*. Read from course packet for February 27.

February 27, March 13 **Ethics**

****Midterm exam: March 13**

Inquiry: What images deserve to be publicly seen and who decides? What should/should not be seen or heard? Is there a such thing as exploitation? Is censorship justifiable? How do the artistic/photographic "subjects" fit into the media model?

Discussions: Review Bud Dwyer case and discuss; debate the relevancy of journalism and the Geneva Convention; view slides from *The Commissar Vanishes*

Assignments: Readings from the course packet and the web, journal responses to readings; 4 - 5-page paper due March 20.

March 20 **Politics**

Turn in 4-5 page paper for review.

Inquiry: How have photographic images impacted elections? What about this election? How do images change public perception of political leaders? How have photographers and photography contributed to political movements?

Discussions: View images: Portraits of leading political figures, RFK, JFK, Bush/Kerry

Assignments: Readings from course packet for March 27, *journal response*.

March 27, April 3 **War**

Inquiry: Images of war vs. "war stories"; how does the difference between the two shift popular consciousness about war? How do images rally people around national causes? Can decorative art be political? What is happening with images of current conflicts?

Discussions: US policy towards war imagery. **Guest lecturer on Vietnam.** Slides: WWII, Abu Ghraib; Israel

Assignments: Readings from (*Witness in Our Time*: Susan Meiselas and Wayne Miller, Pp 231 – end in Reading Amer.)) respond in journal. 5-page paper due April 10.

April 10 Social Issues

****JOURNALS DUE**

April 10 – turn in 5-page paper.

Inquiry: How have images played a role in motivating grassroots response?

Discussions: View slides: FSA images; Soviet constructivist images; civil rights images

Assignments: Readings from *Witness In Our Time*, *Reading American Photographs*, Sally Stein essay from course packet; respond in journal. Prepare for final presentations.

Final Presentations on April 17 and 24.

Reading List

- **The following books will be read in their entirety and will be available at the Book Center starting this week:**
Chomsky, Noam. *Media Control: the Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*. Second Edition. New York: NY. Seven Stories Press: 2002

Light, Ken. *Witness in Our Time: Working Lives of Documentary Photographers*. Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000.

Trachtenberg, Alan, *Reading American Photographs*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1989
- **A course packet comprised of articles and critical essays will be handed out at the second class.** Students are expected to pay a nominal fee (approximately \$5) to cover the costs associated with copying this packet.
- **Students will receive an email of hotlinks associated with the syllabus.** These hotlinks are to websites of images that are to be viewed as part of the class assignments.