

“Photography, Modernism, and Post-Modernism,” an exploration of film and photography in relation to the historical disciplines and other fields

James Krippner, History (Leader)
Kim Benston, English
Laurie Hart, Anthropology
Graciela Michelotti, Spanish
John Muse, Fine Arts and Philosophy (Mellon Fellow)
Debra Sherman, English
Gus Stadler, English
Christina Zwarg, English

This seminar investigates the links between images and contexts from the invention of photography in the early 19th century through the present. It will provide an interdisciplinary forum engaging a series of questions generated by the emergence of photography and its transformations over time. As we shall see, photographs provide fragmentary traces of the past as well as partial representations of the present, creating all sorts of fascinating interpretive dilemmas for social scientists and humanists alike. How do photographic images record, reflect, challenge and occasionally even change social relationships of power? What types of links to specific historical contexts do they provide and how might the objectivity of the medium itself be transformed as technology changes? How does the subjectivity of the photographer influence the tenuous and fleeting realities captured on film, and what types of evidence do photographs provide for subsequent interpretations? This seminar will provide a sustained interrogation of these questions, allowing us to work through recent scholarship while entering into enduring theoretical debates.

The seminar presumes that social scientists can benefit from reading images as art historians and critics are trained to do, even if the images they choose to analyze transcend art historical boundaries. The seminar also presumes that art historians and critics can learn from social scientists about the contexts that influence the production, circulation, and consumption of images, including those traditionally associated with the fine arts. Our goal will be to establish and enhance an interdisciplinary dialogue allowing us to integrate images more effectively into our research and teaching. Participants will have the opportunity and be encouraged to share their ongoing scholarly efforts.

The seminar will be organized along thematic as well as chronological lines. The first few meetings will explore the theoretical issues pertaining to photography and history as we strive to develop a common vocabulary across our various perspectives and positions. We shall then trace the evolution of the medium over time and across space, as it becomes increasingly intertwined with the social, intellectual and artistic currents of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Possible topics include photography and the real; romanticism and positivism; the emergence of modern social classes; photography and surveillance; practices of collection and display; colonial and post-colonial settings; the urban and rural environments; photography and race; the production of gendered and sexualized bodies; photography and violence; the tensions as well as affinities between

social documentary and art photography; photography and literature, photography and nation-state formation; contextualization and de-contextualization in the internet era, and the reception of images as technologies, norms and expectations change in a variety of settings.

The seminar also mounted “Framing Photographs: Contexts and Transpositions,” a multimedia exhibit drawing on canonical images from the College’s own Special Collections—Berenice Abbott’s “James Joyce,” Robert Capa’s “Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death,” Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother”— along with an eclectic mix of supplemental materials: artists’ projects, merchandise, books, video clips, and posters.

By juxtaposing these artifacts, the exhibit examined the travels and travails of particular images, thus creating syntactic relations between images that exposed their malleability over time and across spaces. Attending to the production, circulation, and display of these works, the exhibit challenged viewers to examine how changing frames and diverse media affect the meaning of photographs and how those photographs resist those very efforts at interpretation.