

UNDERSTANDING PHOTOGRAPHY
CLA9022



Teacher:

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BRIEF COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the central questions concerning the nature and functions of photography. It approaches photography from a number of theoretical viewpoints, covering **ontological questions** (e.g. what is special about photography as a representational medium?), **epistemic questions** (e.g. how do photographs provide knowledge?), **aesthetic issues** (e.g. does the 'mechanical' nature of photography somehow make the medium aesthetically inferior to other art forms?), and **ethical questions** that photography gives rise to. The main focus of the course will be on general questions like the ones above, but some attention will also be given to more specific, art-theoretical issues pertaining to photography (e.g. genre, artistic themes, and interpretations of particular photographs). A special focus will be given to how photography as a medium can be **creative**, in at least two respects: first, as a medium that has through its history

involved numerous innovations for image-making (from Daguerrotypes to Smartphones); second how photographers have constantly explored various stylistic avenues to refute the sceptical challenge that photography is inferior to other art-forms due to its alleged mechanical nature.

The course will include a **practical component** related to the making and appreciation of photographs. On two occasions during the course, students will take photographs that relate to one or more topics discussed in the course (general issues, or more specific art-theoretical notions), and they will also write a short exhibition text explaining how they have interpreted the task. At the end of the term, there will be an exhibition of students' photographs and texts—either at a venue on campus, or online.

SCHEDULE AND READINGS

21.1 Introduction

24.1 What is Depiction? I

28.1 What is Depiction? I

Reading: Excerpt from N. Goodman, *Languages of Art*

31.1 What is Depiction? II

11.2 What is Depiction? II

Reading: R. Wollheim, 'Seeing-as, Seeing-in, and Pictorial Representation'

14.2 The Powers of Photography: Realism, Objectivity, and 'Transparency'

[18.2 No class, due to Conference Leave]

25.2 The Powers of Photography: Realism, Objectivity, and 'Transparency'

Reading: K. Walton, 'Transparent Pictures'

28.2 Photography as an Art: The Sceptical Challenge

4.3 Photography as an Art: The Sceptical Challenge

Reading: R. Scruton, 'Photography and Representation'

7.3 Photography and Creativity: How to Refute the Sceptic I

11.3 Photography and Creativity: How to Refute the Sceptic I

Reading: Excerpt from D. Lopes, *Four Arts of Photography*

14.3 Photography and Creativity: How to Refute the Sceptic II

18.3 Photography and Creativity: How to Refute the Sceptic II

Reading: Excerpt from D. Lopes, *Four Arts of Photography*

21.3 **Mid-term Exam**

25.3 **Presentation** and Discussion of Students' Photographs

28.3 **Presentation** and Discussion of Students' Photographs

1.4 Photographic Content I: Fictions

4.4 Photographic Content I: Fictions

Reading: G. Currie, 'Pictures of King Arthur'

- 8.4 Photographic Content II: Absences
11.4 Photographic Content II: Absences
Reading: M. Pettersson, 'Capturing Shadows'

- 15.4 Photos and Ethics
18.4 Photos and Ethics

Reading: D. Davies, 'Susan Sontag, Diane Arbus and the Ethical Dimensions of Photography'

- 25.4 Moving and Still Images
29.4 Moving and Still Images
Reading: A. C. Danto, 'Moving Pictures'

2.5 Review and Discussion of **Exhibition Texts**

[the above are the required readings; supplementary readings will be distributed during the course.]

Learning Outcomes

After completing this course, students will be able to:

1. Identify some of the main topics, theories and approaches in the theory of photography.
2. Appraise some of the central claims about the nature and diverse values of photographs.
3. Reflect, in a creative manner, on how photographs have meaning.
4. Reflect on aspects of the history of photography and its technological developments, and of photography theory
5. Analyse various aspects of how photography can be creative.

Measurement of Learning Outcomes

1. Students will discuss the assigned topics and readings. They are expected to be able to reflect deeply and in an informed manner on the issues related to the session's topic (to assess LO 1-5.)
2. Students will write an essay/take-home exam. They are expected to be able to integrate what they have learned in class with their own readings. The essay question will serve to assess students' understanding of the relevant theoretical debates covered in the course, and their own critical evaluation of them (to assess LO 1-4).
3. Students will take photographs relating to topics discussed in the course and write (short) exhibition texts explaining how they have interpreted the task (to assess LO 2, 3, 5).
4. Mid-term exam will assess students' engagement with the required readings and other course content with an eye to the realization of course learning outcomes (to assess LO 1, 2, 3, 4).

Assessment

In-class participation: 10%
Writing of exhibition texts (in relation to students' photographs):
10%
Mid-term examination: 35%
Final Essay: 45%

Important Notes

(1) Students are expected to spend a total of 9 hours (i.e. 3 hours of class contact and 6 hours of personal study) per week to achieve the course learning outcomes.

(2) Students shall be aware of the University regulations about dishonest practice in course work, tests and examinations, and the possible consequences as stipulated in the Regulations Governing University Examinations. In particular, plagiarism, being a kind of dishonest practice, is "the presentation of another person's work without proper acknowledgement of the source, including exact phrases, or summarised ideas, or even footnotes/citations, whether protected by copyright or not, as the student's own work". Students are required to strictly follow university regulations governing academic integrity and honesty.

(3) Students are required to submit writing assignment(s) using Turnitin.

(4) To enhance students' understanding of plagiarism, a mini-course "Online Tutorial on Plagiarism Awareness" is available on <https://pla.ln.edu.hk/>