

**VAST 299-02: Topics: Photos in Question**  
Thursdays 3-6:20pm | Millard 2, Studio 13 | Spring 2012

Prof. David M. Gyscek

*“Photographs are about what is photographed,  
and how what is photographed is changed by being photographed,  
and how things exist in photographs.”*

-Walker Evans

*“Instead of just recording reality, photographs have become the norm for the way things  
appear to us, thereby changing the very idea of reality, and of realism.”*

-Susan Sontag

**Introduction:**

There are two general aspects of the photographic image that are often intimately connected—as is the case with most, if not all media peddling in imagery. They are: (1) the *techné* or the craft and (2) the content. The *techné* has to do with the objecthood of the image—that is, how the image has come into being. It deals with the process of creating an image and the form that image takes and the structure that holds it. (Think of a painting—it is understood as a two-dimensional image, but it has actual physical substance.) On the other hand, we have the content or the subject matter depicted in an image; it is the idea or the concept that gives the image its purpose and its meaning. Traditionally, these two aspects have been inextricably bound. More-and-more, however, this union is being fractured. The image no longer requires an actual, physical presence for it to exist. This has never been more clear than it is now, when the vast majority of photographic images that we encounter are, at their most basic, a series of 1’s and 0’s organized, stored, manipulated, and disseminated electronically.

Looking over the history of photography, we can see that it has always been an evolving medium, but now, it seems the medium is undergoing a dramatic transformation. Put plainly, we are travelling at ever-faster rates towards a world without film-based photography, which changes our entire framework and understanding of image making. (In fact, Kodak has filed just for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy Protection making the future of film-based photography even less certain!) In this course, as the titles suggests, we will be questioning this moment of transition and the medium in general. The fact is, regardless of the future of film-based photography, the photographic image (most likely produced and often displayed digitally) is here to stay and its impact on our daily lives cannot be understated—although that impact remains difficult to quantify.

What remains clear, however, is that we do indeed live in an image-saturated world; the photographic image is everywhere. We encounter it displayed with pride on the family mantle, on computer monitors, television screens, and smart-phones, in magazines, on billboards, projected in dark theaters, and viewed in galleries and museums. How do these various modes of encounter affect our reading and understanding of the image(s) presented to us? Moreover, with the underlying assumption that photography is in the business of “truth-telling” and with the proliferation of the *altered* photographic image, how are we to position the photograph *and ourselves* in relation to reality? These are some of the questions we will be addressing over the course of this semester.

**Course overview:**

This course will be a collaborative exploration. Although this syllabus provides a basic framework for our joint enquiry—that is, it provides the outline of some core themes that we will address—this course will remain as flexible as possible so we can respond to our discoveries and/or interests as they unfold. In other words, this course should evolve organically. I will act as guide and facilitator, giving you the space to individually and collectively explore this rich and shifting terrain.

To begin, we will read some seminal texts on photography to provide a foundation for our exploration into the state of photography today.

**Assignments:**

Because students in the class come here with a range of experience and skill sets, much of the studio work we do will be collaborative, group-projects. That way, you will be able to learn from each other's strengths while keeping the overall course as dynamic as possible. For the first two projects, you will also submit an individual 5-page companion reflection paper. (Details to follow.)

**Project 1: *The Re-Presented Image*** (due Thurs., March 1)

For this project, you will pair with one of your classmates, choose a work of art from the Worcester Art Museum (a list of options will be provided and you will have the opportunity to see them in person on Feb. 8), and create a photographic pastiche, or re-creation, or imitation of your chosen artwork.

For your reflection paper, keep in mind the concepts and questions posed by Walter Benjamin. Think about the translation of an image from one medium to another (i.e. painting to photography); how is the image changed?; how is the idea changed? Think about originality and notions of the Original; think about representation and signification. Does the "aura" of the original source work of art still exist in your version of it? These, and others, are all areas you can explore and work through in your reflections on this project and related concepts.

**Project 2: *Truth as Fact, Truth in Fiction*** (due Thurs., March 29)

(Details TBA)

**Project 3 : *Still-Life Re-Contextualized & Multiplied*** (due Thurs., May 3)

(Details TBA)

**Final paper: *The Future of the Image*** (due date TBD)

Write a 10-page research paper that draws upon the themes introduced and explored over the course of the semester. You should critically assimilate and digest the various texts, experiments, and discussions from this course and take them a step further. However, to be clear, you cannot solely rely on the texts and content of our in-class explorations. You must do additional research to flesh-out your own point of view and to propose an original argument. Submit a one-page abstract with working bibliography at midterm (March 15).

**Select bibliography:**

This bibliography is a starting point. It includes the two mandatory texts for this class as well as many others that you may find useful in your studies. This list is by no means comprehensive,

but it is a good start in terms of the historical context for studying photography and media as well as some of the more current texts in the field.

Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida. Vintage Classics: London, 1980. Print.

Beaudrillard, Jean. Simulacra and Simulation. University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1994. Print.

Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations. Schocken Books: New York, 1969. Print.

Costello, Diarmuid, ed. Photography After Conceptual Art. Wiley-Blackwell: West Sussex, UK, 2010. Print.

Flusser, Vilèm. Towards a Philosophy of Photography. Reaktion Books: London, 1983. Print.

Fried, Michael. Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before. Yale University Press: New Haven, 2008. Print.

Grau, Oliver, ed. Imagery in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2011. Print.

McLuhan, Marshall. The Medium is the Massage. Ginko Press: Corte Madera, CA, 1967. Print.

Mitchell, W.J.T. What Do Pictures Want?. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2005. Print.

Morris, Errol. Believing is Seeing (Observations on the Mysteries of Photography). Penguin Press: New York, 2011. Print.

Rancière, Jacques. The Future of the Image. Verso: London, 2003. Print.

Ritchin, Fred. After Photography. W.W. Norton & Co.: New York, 2009. Print.

Sontag, Susan. Regarding the Pain of Others. Picador: New York, 2003. Print.

Sontag, Susan. On Photography. Penguin Books: London, 1977. Print.

Turkle, Sherry. Alone Together. Basic Books: New York, 2011. Print.

Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen. Simon and Schuster: New York, 1995. Print.