The Social Conscience and American Photography, 1839-1975

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Wednesdays, 6:30-9PM

Note: this syllabus and all course materials will be posted on Moodle. If you need help in using Moodle, Olin Library librarians or IT can assist you. It is essential that you are conversant with this essential course resource.

Cell phones must be turned off unless you clear it with me first (e.g., are waiting for an essential call). If you use a laptop to take notes, you may not use the internet during class. If you leave your phone on, text, or use the internet, you will be dismissed from the course.

You are expected to attend all scheduled classes. If unable to attend, it is important you contact the instructor as soon as possible.

Read this syllabus carefully; it functions as a contract.

"The camera never lies," but it certainly can persuade. From its inception, photography has been enlisted in the cause of social change throughout the United States. During the Civil War, images from the Brady studio helped persuade the Union of the justice of its cause. Anthropological images made from the 1860s to 1880s helped define the vanishing Native American communities of the west; the romantic images of photographers like Edward Curtis created sympathy among white easterners for “the vanishing race.” In the later 19th century, photography became the handmaid of progressive reform in the hands of Jacob Riis, whose book How The Other Half Lives convinced the public of the need for urban reform. In the 20th century, sociologist Lewis Hine found his photographs of child laborers far more effective than text alone in stimulating change. And in what may be the most comprehensive photographic project yet undertaken, the Farm Services Administration (1935-1943) during FDR's New Deal created a body of iconic images of the great Depression that abide today. We will examine how the FSA photographers Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Jack Delano and Gordon Parks, among others, served the agendas created by the agency head, Roy Stryker, and the photographers themselves. Both World War II and the iconic images from the Vietnam War form the final part of the course.


Please read not only the readings but consider the questions on the syllabus as you prepare for class. It will help our discussions.

Schedule of classes and assignments:
1. Sept. 14: Intro to the course; interrogating photography; inventing photography Wells, pp. 11-28


In this introductory class, we will look at photographs and consider the history of photography, and will start honing our analytical skills and visual analysis. Be prepared to show some photos you carry with you (on paper or on a device).

In 1923, artist László Moholy-Nagy, wrote “A knowledge of photography is just as important as that of the alphabet. The illiterate of the future will be ignorant of the use
of camera and pen alike.” He outlined 8 properties of photography that he felt altered vision. Consider how they changed the paradigm of how we see the world. We aim to become visual literates in this class, able to analyze photography and tease out its agenda, its unstated claims, its goals and effects.

2. Sept. 21: Applying some theoretical tools of photography

PDFs on Moodle: Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936)
Geoffrey Batchen, “Photogenics” (1998)

Benjamin’s article is arguably the most influential essay on visual culture of the 20th century. We live in an image-saturated culture and thus take many of his breakthrough ideas for granted. Be prepared to discuss why this article was so important and what effects it may have had. Think about digital reproduction. What has happened that Benjamin could not have foreseen, and what has stayed the same? What happens to something, work of art or image, when it is constantly reproduced?

Batchen’s essay delves into the arena of digital photography, reproduction, ownership, and “reality.” His work builds on the ideas of Benjamin but takes up technologies Benjamin never knew.

Burgin considers various ways of “reading” photographs.

And no, I didn’t choose these readings because the authors’ names all begin with “B”!

3. Sept. 28: “Illustrious Americans” and the Matthew Brady studio

PDF on Moodle: Alan Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs, pp. 1-60 (introduction and “Illustrious Americans”)
Wells pp. 134-177
Wells, pp. 235-241 (“Photographic portraiture and commodity culture”)

Having one’s portrait taken meant different things in the 19th century from what it does in the digital era. Think about what happens when one’s picture is taken. What is meant by “commodification”? What are the ethics of making and selling images of people? How does social class play into the types of photographic portraiture of the 19th century? What portraits or visual reminders do you carry around? How has digital and cell phone photography changed how we carry our memories?

4. Oct. 5: Postmodern illustrious Americans: Social media, social conscience, my selfie, myself

Wells, pp. 178-188

***Short paper due***
Discussion of your paper choices will be part of class. Please bring in your image or video, either on a flash drive or on the internet.

In a seismic shift, digital social media has radically altered how we consume news and react to world events, whether it is cell phone video of police action, animal cruelty (or humor), atrocities by entities like ISIS, or the performances of political candidates. This is more true than ever during this election season. For this class, bring in an image or short video that you wrote about; we will view and discuss how the public conscience has been altered—or should be altered—by the imagery you analyze. Please remember collegiality and respect for classmates during what will doubtless be a lively class discussion!

Jean Baudrillard’s ideas, though often challenging to process, are fundamental to understanding digital media. It was he who suggested that we judge things on how well they conform to the image we already know and points out the dissonance many feel when seeing something known through reproductions (such as the Mona Lisa or Grand Canyon) and seeing it in person. Understanding Baudrillard’s ideas about simulation will help you in understanding digital media.

Ibrahim’s article usefully reviews the history and use of selfies in its first section, then transitions to selfies made at disaster sites, perhaps offering the ultimate in “I was there” proof. What are the ethical implications of disaster selfies?

5. Oct. 12: The Civil War in pictures: the first living room war
   PDFs on Moodle: Jeff Rosenheim, “Gardner and His Photographic Sketch Book,” from Photography and the American Civil War (New Haven: Yale) 2013
   Trachtenberg, pp. 71-118 (“Albums of War”)
   John Berger, “Photographs of Agony”
   Wells, pp. 77-95 (on documentary photography and wartime images)

   What is the difference between a conflict one reads about and a conflict one views in photographs? Propaganda has always been on the agenda among those who make and control photographs of war: what ethical complications does this suggest? What don’t we get to see in pictures of war, whether on TV, the internet, or in print?

6: Oct. 19: The frontier west, the “vanishing” Indian, surveys, and railroads
   Wells, pp. 96-106
   PDFs on Moodle: Alan Trachtenberg, excerpts from “Naming the View,” from Reading American Photographs

   If you can’t get there from here, it remains unknown. What changes when you can get there (like on a railway)? The ideas surrounding Manifest Destiny, which both Trachtenberg and Buerger refer to, were the substrate on which the structure of ownership was built in the American west. It seemed like a good idea at the time…but think about prices that were paid.

   Trachtenberg’s history of the survey projects that resulted in iconic photography of the American west ask us to consider what happens when you “name the view”? What
is implied by the act of naming? In Beurger’s wide-ranging article, she considers how 19th century photography served a number of agendas regarding the American west. Be sure to look up the reference to Ultima Thule from her title and consider what it means in the context of the article.

7. Nov. 2: The west, tourism and ethnicity

Wells, pp. 96-98; 102-106; 271-280

Marguerite S. Shaffer, ““See America First”: Re-Envisioning Nation and Region through Western Tourism.” from Pacific Historical Review, v. 65, n. 4, Nov. 1996

Mp3, Nat King Cole

Tourism is an industry and a big one, and photography its handmaid. What do you see sold today that remains the same as that sold in 1880? Do consider ethnicity and “exotic” cultures as commodities in this context. Today, air travel links continents just as rail travel linked the American west to the east. Consider how western travel has commodified Native Americans. Neumann and Shaffer’s articles both discuss ways in which tourism and the American west are industries; consider who benefits from these industries. The idea of reconstructed ethnicity and heritage commodification, formulated by travel theorist Dean MacCannell, play out to meet tourist expectations in the west. What are examples of this?

The internet is fundamental to this industry; most travelers find and book their travel on the internet, usually with the aid of sites like TripAdvisor.com. What happens when you enter terms like “exotic travel” into a search engine? How has the internet helped to commodify tourism in the American West?

And based on the mp3 posted on Moodle, what does Nat King Cole recommend when you go west?

8. Nov. 9: ***Paper due***

Discussion of papers. Please be prepared to present your topic for about 10 minutes, to be followed by question and answer. Bring in your imagery on a flash drive, or you can access it on the internet.

Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, social work, and Camera Work; Frances Benjamin Johnston
Wells, pp. 64-66; 98-101
PDFs on Moodle: Martha Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography),”

James Guimond, American Photography and the American Dream, ch. 1-2 (1-53) and ch. 3 (56-98)

The issues surrounding child labor in the US are linked with religion, immigration, and xenophobia; with progressive politics; and with changing views of what
“childhood” entailed. As Mugatu said in *Zoolander*, “these children want to work!” The issue as alive now in developing countries as it was in the US, and then, as now, is predicated on the creation of cheap commodities and profit. So what’s an entrepreneur to do?

Rosler’s essay demands our attention. On page 264, she writes “Documentary testifies, finally, to the bravery or (dare we name it?) the manipulativeness and savvy of the photographer, who entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay, or combinations of these and saved us the trouble.” Whoa. How complicit is the middle-class audience in looking but not doing?

Guimond’s analysis of Frances Johnston’s “Hampton Album” asks us to consider what part of “the American dream” could a black citizen earn? and suggests that it was white paternalism that conferred it. Johnston meant well and probably did not see her work as patronizing; she reflected progressive thinking of her time. With our hindsight, choose an image or two and be ready to talk.

In Guimond’s discussion of Hine, how does the American dream change Hine and his pictures?

9. Nov. 16: Continue with previous week’s topic if needed;
FSA photography and the Great Depression: Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Arthur Rothstein
*Wells, Intro: 42-48 (on “Migrant Mother); pp. 111-114
Photographic “truth” is less self-evident that it seems at first blush. The photographer uses the camera’s reputation for telling the truth as an important tool for social change. Revisit Rosler’s contention that the photographer saves us from having to personally confront social ills and the heroism of the photographers who do so.

In Carlbach’s article, he analyzes how Roy Stryker constructed a narrative with a message (propaganda) with FSA photographs. What was the agenda?

10: Nov. 30: Russell Lee and American self-reliance
*PDF on Moodle: Jason Reblando, “Farm Security Administration Photographs of Greenbelt Towns: Selling Utopia During the Great Depression,” *Utopian Studies*, v. 25, n. 1, 2014
Read “Savoring Pie Town”
http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/savoring-pie-town-85182017/?no-ist=&page=1
When you read Reblando’s article on selling utopia, pay special attention to how imagery could create and sell a narrative. I want to focus on Russell Lee’s photographs of Pie Town, New Mexico as a special utopian American vision rather than Greenbelt towns, but his article is nonetheless useful. The specifics on Pie Town are laid out in the Smithsonian Magazine article. Be sure to read all four pages.

11. December 7: World War II and the Vietnam War
*Wells, pp. 81-87*

War photography, as we considered regarding the Civil War, serves the agendas of its makers and users. The legacy of WWII photographs in the service of the Allies reinforced the rightness of their cause. Think about how photography may have shaped the views of the Axis; the movie Letters from Iwo Jima may be helpful in your reflections. The Vietnam War was America’s first television war, and many of the iconic photographs from the conflict were first exposed on television news in addition to consumed in print. These images abide in the public imagination; the Associated Press notes that Nick Ut’s Pulitzer-winner image of Phan Thi Kim Phuc and other children fleeing a napalm attack has “a life of its own,” constantly in demand even today. Nancy K. Miller’s article deals specifically with this powerful image. We will consider how these images changed public opinion, and why they continue to resonate.

Recommended as antidote to this material: YouTube videos on cute kittens, dancing parrots (such as Frostie, https://www.facebook.com/FrostieTheDancingCockatoo/) or any of zefrank1’s “True Facts” videos, such as https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Jz0JcQYtqo.

12. December 14: final presentations by the class.

Final work due by 18 December.

Note on the readings. The text edited by Liz Wells has chapters specific to various classes, though I encourage you also to read through the entire text, as it is provocative and useful. For example, in the chapter on photography and museums, several discussions, such as landscape photography and depictions of class, are related to the course material and papers, There is also a useful glossary in the back and an excellent bibliography. The rest of the course readings are posted on Moodle in PDF form, which you can download and print or read electronically.

Class discussion: Read the questions after each reading assignment first and keep them in mind while reading the material. Think about them and come to class prepared to start class discussion with the written questions.

Course requirements
N.B.: Papers have no page minimum or maximum. Write and edit until you are finished. I encourage you to submit papers electronically, preferably in Microsoft Word format; I shall read and comment electronically and email them back to you within a week. If you do not own Microsoft Office, you can purchase a disc at a low price from the Wesleyan computer store, or obtain the keys to downloading the software. This is a valuable resource you should be sure to obtain!

First paper due October 5: (shorter rather than longer)
This paper is designed to develop your powers of visual and social analysis and to interrogate the imagery of social media. It will also allow you early feedback during the semester.

Imagery disseminated by social media can move governments (Egypt, 2011), elections (this fall), change policy, stimulate public outcry, and also foster untruths or half-truths. Choose something from social media that involves imagery, either still photography or video, that has caught your attention and caused you to react. It can be anything, from familial to medical to political, environmental, etc. As you reflect on the imagery, consider what specifically provoked your reaction? How did you react—sending the imagery on to others, taking personal action? Upon reflection, do you question your reaction? Why did you choose this imagery?

Second paper due November 9 (longer rather than shorter)

The media—particularly in travel magazines like “Travel and Leisure,” “National Geographic Travel,” “Conde Nast Traveler,” specialty magazines like “Ski” or “Sport Diver,” as well as in advertisements and travel brochures—are full of photographs and images made to promote travel. Choose an image from this array whose subject is American. Deconstruct the image, applying your analytic skills. What master does it serve? Who benefits and what does it sell? Does it encode any kind of myth or view of ethnicity? How does it relate to the photographs of the American west and the ideologies they have embedded in them?

Final presentations,

You will present an analysis of an aspect of social photography (it can be still or video imagery) to the class, using the theoretical tools you’ve picked up along the way. Your analysis should incorporate some or all of the perspectives (reproduction, spectacle, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc.). Your presentation should take 10 minutes (about 4/5 typed pages), and should include visual support material. This format is typical of conference or professional meeting presentations, and will help you prepare for such events. I will present a conference-style presentation earlier in the term so you have a clear idea of what it is like.

I suggest you use Power Point as a medium of display rather than follow its templates (see “The Cognitive Style of Power Point” by Edward Tufte; I can send it to you as a pdf; it is also posted on Moodle with the syllabus). Another very important reason for this presentation is the feedback and ideas from your colleagues and from me. I will take extensive notes during each presentation and email them to you afterwards to help you shape your final work.

I am also open to a creative project. This is a lot of work, but the few students who have done similar projects in the past blended creativity and scholarship. Be forewarned that creative projects consume a lot of raw time.

You will then submit a final paper/project that will incorporate the ideas and feedback from the class presentation.

Your evaluation will blend your in-class discussion (c. 15%), the two papers during the term (c. 10% on the first, 20% on the second), your presentation (c. 25%), and your final paper/project (c. 30%).