

Lingnan University
Department of Philosophy

Course Title	: Understanding Photography
Course Code	: CLA9022
Recommended Study Year	: Any
No. of Credits/Term	: 3
Mode of Tuition	: Sectional approach
Class Contact Hours	: 3 hours
Category in Core Curriculum	: Creativity and Innovation Cluster
Discipline	: -
Prerequisite(s)	: Nil
Co-requisite(s)	: Nil
Exclusion(s)	: Nil
Exemption Requirement(s)	: Nil

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.

Aims

The course aims to:

- provide students with an understanding of theoretical issues pertaining to photography.
- present some influential discussions and arguments involved in theoretical reflections on photography.
- enable students to reflect on and improve their own uses and understanding of photography.
- offer students an understanding of the creative aspects of photography.

Indicative Content

1. definitions of ‘photography’ and the ontology of photographs
2. photographic depiction and content
3. realism and the evidentiary status of photographs
4. technology and agency in the making of photographs
5. the multiple uses and values of photographs
6. art photography and its genres (landscape, still life, portraiture, etc.)
7. the interpretation and appreciation of artistic photographs
8. photography and the other arts (painting, photography, narrative)
9. the history of theoretical reflection on photography

Teaching Method

Sectional, including lectures, student presentations, discussion, small group assignments, practical photographic assignments, and essay writing.

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%

Required Readings

(selections from the following as well as selected papers from philosophy and art-theoretical journals):

Abell, Catharine, and Katerina Bantinaki, eds. (2010) *Philosophical Perspectives on Depiction*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Costello, Diarmuid, (2018) *On Photography: A Philosophical Inquiry*. New York: Routledge.

Lopes, Dominic, (2016) *Four Arts of Photography*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.

Sontag, Susan (1973) *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Walden, Scott, ed. (2008) *Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Walton, Kendall L. (2008) *Marvelous Images: On Values and the Arts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Supplementary Readings

La Grange, Ashley, ed. (2005) *Basic Critical Theory for Photographers*. Oxford: Focal Press.

Lenman, Robin, ed. (2005) *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Includes a helpful bibliography and list of relevant websites.

Maynard, Patrick (1997) *The Engine of Visualization: Thinking through Photography*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Sandler, Martin W. (2002) *Photography: An Illustrated History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Savedoff, Barbara E. (2000) *Transforming images: how photography complicates the picture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

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/>