

Picturing the Real: The Power of Images in German Fiction



GERM BC 3057

Spring Semester 2021

"Picturing the Real: The Power of Images in German Fiction"

Lecture course: Mon & Wed 10:10—11:25 (online)

Instructor: Prof. Erk Grimm, Barnard College

Milbank Hall 320 b

1. COURSE CONTENTS AND AIMS

What is this course about?

We are surrounded by images and enjoy our visual culture because we have become image-makers ourselves in modern times. This course reflects on the profound impact of pictures in everyday life and how writers and poets alike have responded to the new medium over the century—from great pioneers (such as women photographers in modernity) to the contemporary selfie makers and users of Instagram. To shed light on the intimate relationship between writers of fiction and the medium of photography we will examine short prose texts and excerpts from major novels in visual contexts such as fashion photography, playful avant-garde montage, war reporting and illustrated travelogues. Our approach is driven by the intellectual desire to explore and examine the intimate relationship between the literary text and the photographic image; to understand multiple forms of aesthetic cross-fertilization, we will take a closer look at how innovators and common practitioners, poets and novelists alike, visualize the world and themselves. Modern images can capture something deeply personal, but they also raise expectations about authentic and objective renderings of reality. This is why we include the rich treasure of a family's photo album as well as travel reports since each of these literary projects will provide us with exciting insights about a foreign culture and society. We will find out how eye-witnesses experienced their journey through Germany and how they perceived countries such as Spain, the U.S., and Afghanistan. But there is another side of modernity which has been acknowledged in recent years: material images can also have a profound trigger fantasies things and person who are no longer visible. For example, one of the most celebrated modern novels, Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, includes an episode which builds a bridge to the occult and raises important questions about the limits of human perception. By approaching two of such "ghost stories," we will enter an important discussion about the uncertainty that surrounds the photographic image. In addition to Mann, you will become acquainted with iconic figures such as Kafka or Brecht and the voice of contemporary writers such as W.G. Sebald, Judith Hermann or Monika Maron. Some of these writers—especially Annemarie Schwarzenbach—invite us to follow their footsteps and enter the hidden realm of the Middle East in the 1930s. A film by Wim Wenders will transport us to the age of polaroid shots and America in the 1970s. The semester ends with a reflection on how writers respond to the power of the hidden camera and the snapshot in a visual culture that has been increasingly defined by "selfies" and ubiquitous cellphones. By discussing the huge impact of "images" on German literature, you will acquire the knowledge of major texts in an interdisciplinary contexts; you will appreciate the exposure to multiple perspectives and contexts, each of which showing you the great relevance of modernity's involvement with new media, new gender roles, and new representations of "the self" and "the other" in 20th/21st c. visual cultures. Throughout the semester, the "power of images" will be at the center of our discussions.

2. COURSE READINGS

Course reader in installments (Courseworks)

3. REQUIRED ACTIVITIES AND GRADING POLICY

Criteria for final grade: 3 term papers; exam; participation and blog

4. COURSE SCHEDULE

Workload: primary sources (such as c. 3 poems; or: c.20 pp. short stories; or: excerpts from novels c. 30 pp., depending on the richness of the text);

WEEK 1: Jan 11 and Jan 13

- Session 1 Introduction: reading modern literature in the age of visual media—
what is “visual culture”? what is “phototextuality”?
- Session 2 New views of the human face: posing in front of the camera
Poems by Rilke, Hofmannsthal; Roland Barthes, “Garbo’s Face,”
photo portraits by Sander, Leibovitz, Penn, Steichen

PART ONE: THE PRESENT MOMENT

WEEK 2: Jan 18 and Jan 20

- Session 3 no meeting
- Session 4 Camera as a weapon: capturing “the beast”

Kurt Tucholsky, *Germany? Germany! Satirical Writings*
Bertolt Brecht, *War Primer*, edited by John Willett (2017)

WEEK 3: Jan 25 and Jan 27

- Session 5 Modern Fragmentation: The Human Body in Photomontage—from Dadaist to Dandy
- Session 6 Blumenfeld, *Eye to I: The Autobiography of a Photographer*, transl. Mike Mitchell (1999)
From Athlete to Fakir

Franz Kafka, “A Hunger Artist,” “The Great Swimmer”

WEEK 4: Feb 1 and Feb 3

[Feb 3: reply to prompt: feedback before Feb. 8]

MODERNITY AND ITS OTHER: ITS AFTER IMAGES (GHOST STORIES IN THE MODERN AGE)

- Session 7 Thomas Mann, *Magic Mountain*
Thomas Mann, “An Experience in the Occult”
- Session 8 Judith Hermann, “Nothing But Ghosts,” *Nothing But Ghosts* (2005)

WEEK 5: Feb 8 and Feb 10

PART TWO: A RECONSTRUCTED PAST

VISUAL MEMORIES AND THE FAMILY ALBUM

- Session 9 Childhood in Benjamin, Kafka, Rilke

Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka”
- Session 10 Heinrich Böll, *Group Portrait with Lady*

Images from Chargesheimer, *Pictures of a Street*

WEEK 6: Feb 15 and Feb 17

Session 11 W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

Session 12 Sebald, *Austerlitz*

WEEK 7: Feb 22 and Feb 24

Session 13 Monika Maron, *Pavel's Letters*

Session 14 Monika Maron, *Pavel's Letters*

WEEK 8: Mar. 1 to Mar. 5 [spring recess]

PART THREE: FACING HOSTILE PLACES

WOMEN IN WAR: PHOTOGRAPHY AS CRITICAL INTERVENTION: RETOUCHING IMAGES

WEEK 9: Mar 8 and Mar 10

Session 15 The Photographer as Activist

Ann Goldstein, *The Girl with the Leica*

Session 16 The Photographer as Activist

Lynn Hilditch, *Lee Miller, photography, surrealism and the Second World War: from Vogue to Dachau*

PART FOUR: EXPLORING FOREIGN PLACES

PHOTOGRAPHERS ON THE ROAD: EYE-WITNESSING

WEEK 10: Mar 15 and Mar 17

Session 17 Annemarie Schwarzenbach, *All the Roads Are Open: The Afghan Journey*

Images from Annemarie Schwarzenbach, *Selected photographs and writings*

Session 18 Traveling to Afghanistan—then and now

Schwarzenbach, *All the Roads...*
Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003);
Anja Niedringhaus: At War, ed. Jean-Christophe Ammann

WEEK 11: Mar 23 and Mar 25

TRAVELERS ON THE ROAD: BETWEEN HOME AND OKLAHOMA

Session 19 Kafka's Postcards and fictitious Photographs

Franz Kafka, *Amerika: The Missing Person*

Session 20

Kafka, *Amerika*
Robert Frank, *The Americans* (2008);

WEEK 12: Mar 29 and Mar 31

POSTWAR JOURNEYS: FROM GERMANY TO MANHATTAN

Session 21 The Refugee Experience: From Mecklenburg to Manhattan

Uwe Johnson, *Anniversaries. From a Year in the Life of Gesine Cresspahl*

Session 22 Snapshots of America

Uwe Johnson, *Anniversaries*;

Alice in the Cities, dir. Wim Wender (1974)

WEEK 13: Ap 5 and Ap 7

VISUALIZING NEW YORK CITY: TWO HISTORICAL SNAPSHOTS (1972/2001)

Session 23 Visiting America in the 1970s

Becker, *New York 1972*, ed. Boris Becker (2012)
Thomas Struth, "Streets of New York" (1978)

Session 24 Migrant Stories

Katharina Hacker, *The Have-Nots*

WEEK 14: Ap 12 and Ap 14 [Last day of Spring Full-term]

PART FIVE: FUTURE TASKS

INVESTIGATORS AND INFLUENCERS

Session 25 What's so interesting about a warehouse?

Heike Geissler, *Seasonal Associate*
Andreas Gursky, "Amazon"

Session 26 Selfie culture and aging

Poetic self-portraits (Wagner, Krechel etc)
Adam Gopnik, "Finding the Self in a Selfie"
Steve Crist and Megan Shoemaker, *The Instagram Book: Inside The Online Photography Revolution*

Questions? Contact the instructor at egrimm@barnard.edu