PH347-15 Philosophy of Photography

22/23

Department
Philosophy
Level
Undergraduate Level 3
Module leader
Diarmuid Costello
Credit value
15
Module duration
10 weeks
Assessment
20% coursework, 80% exam
Study location
University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

Photography is ubiquitous. Advertising, the internet and social media depend upon it. With this come worries about image-manipulation and (so-called) “fake news.” Prior to worries about the possibility for manipulation afforded by digital images, photography was generally taken to be a reliable source of knowledge about the world: assuming that images have not been digitally manipulated or misleadingly staged, we have reason to believe what we see in forensic, scientific and medical photographs, if not advertising or propaganda—certainly by comparison to what we see in hand-made images. We rely on crime scene photographs rather than drawings for a reason. Call this photography’s (relative) “epistemic advantage” It depends on the intuition that machine-generated images are free of certain kinds of unreliability (selective attention, false beliefs, etc) that compromise human beings as recording agents.

But photography is also taken to be aesthetically rewarding: it is widely collected and well-established in museums, and we appreciate different photographer’s styles or oeuvres for different reasons—not least because photographers depict the world in very different ways, focusing on very different subject matters and stressing some features while ignoring others. Call this photography’s “aesthetic capacity.” Note that such capacities are precisely what photography’s alleged “epistemic advantage” depends on bypassing. So it looks as though the reasons given for photography’s epistemic and aesthetic capacities, and the underlying intuitions they depend upon, conflict. If so, both cannot be true and one must be surrendered.

This has led to a debate between “orthodox” and “new theorists” of photography over the past decade. Orthodox theorists tend to foreground photography’s epistemic capacities; new theorists tend to stress its aesthetic capacities. Spoiler: I’m a new theorist. One reason for being a new theorist is that allows us to take the intentions, beliefs and other mental states of photographers seriously, and this opens up the possibility of using photography for various purposes—artistic, ethical and political, some of which we will look at on this course. The challenge for new theorists is how to account, in a manner consistent with their interests in artistic and political uses of the medium, for photography’s epistemic capacities. We will consider whether new theorists have compelling answers.

Module aims

An introduction to a new and lively field of debate in contemporary aesthetics. A range of authors will be studied, mainly from the last 30 years, and a variety of aesthetic and epistemic questions raised by photography as an art and an aid to vision will be considered. Central concerns will be whether photography’s epistemic privilege, vis-à-vis other forms of depiction, comes at the cost of its aesthetic capacities, and what an adequate account of photographic agency might look like. Photography's relation to other depictive art forms such as painting and film will also be considered. The module will thereby introduce students to what it means to do the philosophy of a particular art form.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

The following syllabus is intended to be indicative. Specific week-by-week topics covered within the field of Philosophy of Photography may change from year to year:
Week 1 – Introduction to the Philosophy of Photography
Week 2 – Foundational Problems (Bazin and Cavell on Realism and Automatism)
Week 3 –Aesthetic Scepticism (Scruton and Lopes on Intentionality and Representation)
Week 4 – Transparent Photographs (Walton on transparency and ‘imagining seeing’)
Week 5 – Depiction and Detection (Maynard on photography as a technology)
Week 6 – Reading Week
Week 7 – Experiencing Photographs (Benjamin and Barthes on aura and punctum)
Week 8 – Analogue ‘vs’ Digital Photography? (Savedoff, Mitchell, Manovich)
Week 9 – Fact or Fiction (Currie and Atencia-Linares on Trace, Testimony, Fictional Competence)
Week 10–Ethics of Photography (Sontag and Friday on Photographers and Spectators TBC)

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- i. Demonstrate an understanding of the central arguments and substantive issues in the set texts and secondary literature
- ii. Critically assess the key claims and arguments of the core texts, and the debates to which they have given rise
- iii. Articulate their own view of the relative merits of different positions in the literature, and

engage critically with other points of view

- iv. Demonstrate an understanding of what is at stake in competing methodological approaches to photography in philosophy;
- v. Explicate what is philosophically interesting and significant about photography as an art and an aid to vision.

Indicative reading list

André Bazin, What is Cinema? Vol. 1, University of California, 1971
Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Vol. 2, part 2 and Vol. 4, Harvard 1999/2003
Stanley Cavell, The World Viewed, Revised Edition, Harvard, 1979
Diarmuid Costello & Dom Lopes (eds.) ‘The Media of Photography,’ JAAC 70:1, 2012
Diarmuid Costello, On Photography, Routledge, 2018
Jonathan Friday, The Aesthetics of Photography, Ashgate, 2002
Dominic McIver Lopes, The Four Arts of Photography, Wiley-Blackwell, 2016
Patrick Maynard, The Engine of Visualisation, Cornell 1997
William Mitchell Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era, MIT 1998
Barbara Savedoff, Transforming Images: How Photography Complicates the Picture, Cornell, 2000
Roger Scruton ‘Photography and Representation’, in Critical Inquiry 7:3, 1981
Scott Walden (ed.) Philosophy and Photography: Essays on the Pencil of Nature, Routledge, 2008
Kendall Walton, ‘Transparent Pictures’ Critical Inquiry 11 (Dec 1984)
Kendall Walton, Marvelous Images: On Values and the Arts OUP 2008

Interdisciplinary

This module will enable students to further develop core skills of philosophy (close reading, analysis, argument and so on) but to do so by bringing these skills to bear on a range of photographs and products of photography, both artistic and utilitarian. Photographic examples will be used extensively throughout and will be treated seriously in their own right. In doing so students will be encouraged to develop skills of visual appreciation and critical insight in dealing with images. Though the module will focus on debates from the last 30-40 years, and particularly the last decade, we will tie these more recent debates back to the invention of photography in 1830s and its historical reception. This will enable students to appreciate the extent to which current, more analytic, debates have a much broader cultural history. To this end we will also look at some examples of more art historical and critical writing on photography.

Subject specific skills

i. Demonstrate an understanding of what it is to do the philosophy of a particular art form
ii. Show an appreciation of photography's artistic, technological and instrumental functions
iii. Grasp the aesthetic and epistemic capacities of photography and how these relate
iv. Understand some of the moral and political issues raised by photographic representation
v. Develop a competence in recent theoretical and philosophical debates about photography

Transferable skills

i. begin to develop skills of close visual analysis, criticism and appreciation
ii. appreciate how arguments can bear on images and vice versa
iii. further develop the capacity for close reading of complicated texts
iv. further develop analytic and argumentative skills.
v. develop a capacity to engage critically with culturally important forms of representation
vi. understand what it is for arguments and art forms to have histories.

Study

Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	9 sessions of 2 hours (12%)
Seminars	9 sessions of 1 hour (6%)
Private study	123 hours (82%)
Total	150 hours

Private study description

No private study requirements defined for this module.

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Students can register for this module without taking any assessment.

Assessment group D1

	Weighting	Study time
1000 word essay	20%	
1000 case study looking at a particular photographic image in light of a particular theory		
Online Examination	80%	
2 hour exam		
~Platforms - AEP		

Feedback on assessment

Students will receive written feedback on their essay and their examination answers.

Past exam papers for PH347

Availability

Courses

This module is Optional for:

- UPHA-V700 Undergraduate Philosophy
  - Year 2 of V700 Philosophy
  - Year 2 of V700 Philosophy
  - Year 3 of V700 Philosophy
  - Year 3 of V700 Philosophy
- Year 4 of UPHA-V701 Undergraduate Philosophy (wiith Intercalated year)
- Year 4 of UPHA-V702 Undergraduate Philosophy (with Work Placement)
- Year 4 of UPHA-V7MM Undergraduate Philosophy, Politics and Economics (with Intercalated year)

This module is Core option list A for:

- Year 3 of UMAA-GV19 Undergraduate Mathematics and Philosophy with Specialism in Logic and Foundations

This module is Core option list B for:

- UMAA-GV17 Undergraduate Mathematics and Philosophy
  - Year 2 of GV17 Mathematics and Philosophy
  - Year 2 of GV17 Mathematics and Philosophy
  - Year 2 of GV17 Mathematics and Philosophy
- Year 2 of UMAA-GV19 Undergraduate Mathematics and Philosophy with Specialism in Logic and Foundations

This module is Core option list C for:

- Year 4 of UMAA-GV19 Undergraduate Mathematics and Philosophy with Specialism in Logic and Foundations

This module is Core option list F for:

- UMAA-GV18 Undergraduate Mathematics and Philosophy with Intercalated Year
  - Year 4 of GV18 Mathematics and Philosophy with Intercalated Year
  - Year 4 of GV18 Mathematics and Philosophy with Intercalated Year

This module is Option list A for:

- UPHA-VL78 BA in Philosophy with Psychology
    - Year 2 of VL78 Philosophy with Psychology
    - Year 3 of VL78 Philosophy with Psychology

This module is Option list B for:

- UMAA-GV18 Undergraduate Mathematics and Philosophy with Intercalated Year
    - Year 2 of GV18 Mathematics and Philosophy with Intercalated Year
    - Year 2 of GV18 Mathematics and Philosophy with Intercalated Year
- UPHA-VQ72 Undergraduate Philosophy and Literature
    - Year 2 of VQ72 Philosophy and Literature
    - Year 3 of VQ72 Philosophy and Literature
- Year 4 of UPHA-VQ73 Undergraduate Philosophy and Literature with Intercalated Year

This module is Option list D for:

- UHIA-V1V5 Undergraduate History and Philosophy
    - Year 2 of V1V5 History and Philosophy
    - Year 3 of V1V5 History and Philosophy
- Year 4 of UHIA-V1V6 Undergraduate History and Philosophy (with Year Abroad)
- Year 2 of UHIA-V1V7 Undergraduate History and Philosophy (with a term in Venice)