Photography and the World: Theories of Photography from the Medium’s Inception to the Present

We live in an illustrated world, and photographs often determine political, personal, and even the most private of decisions. Who is guilty and who is exonerated; who gets elected and who loses the vote; who and what we favor or despise, will get to know, desire, remember or forget depends on how someone or something has been presented in a photograph. Today more images are produced daily than in the entire history of photography from 1839 until the mass production of digital cameras. There is great danger in this development and immense potential to free ourselves from existing constraints, too. The skills required to interpret photographs is related to our capacity of gauging the role of images in our imagination. It behooves us to know how to turn the current plethora of pictures into tools with which to shape the world we share with others.

This interdisciplinary seminar explores how photographic images create meaning, and how thinkers have responded to photography – as a phenomenon to be reckoned with lest it overwhelms our critical faculties. How do we make sense of the ways in which photographs shape our experience of being in the world – and how do we shape our own lives amidst this flood of images? What does the world mean, in a photograph, and how do we distinguish this meaning from the world outside of photography? What is the relation between meaning, photography, and a worldview? Is it possible to experience someone’s else’s world through photographs? What is the relation between worlds and worldviews, and what role do images play in this relationship?

We will read theoretical and other texts on visuality and photography (Baudelaire, Kracauer, Panofsky, Benjamin, Barthes, Sontag, Batchen, Derrida, Flusser, Cadava, Rancière, Enwezor, and others), and look at a wide range of photographs from the inception of the medium to the present to test theories of photography against the medium’s uncanny and unrivaled power to evoke the real.