

# Writing Like a Camera

## ENGL3329: Major Authors in American Literature

Professor Donal Harris

T/Th: 9:40 – 11:05pm



Gatsby's Selfie, *The Great Gatsby*, dir. Baz Luhrmann (2013)

"I am a camera with its shutter open." That's how, in the early 1930s, the novelist and memoirist Christopher Isherwood described his approach to writing. What does it mean to imagine one's literary writing as working like a camera, a device that until quite recently was decried as too mechanical, impersonal, and automatic to be capable of true artistic expression?

This course will follow some of the forking paths of American literature and photography, from modernism and street photography in the 1920s to Instagram and autofiction in the 2010s. We'll consider how a number of authors and photographers – and even some authors who are *also* photographers – think about the relationship between the verbal art of literature and visual art of photography. We'll read works that began as photographs (Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," which originated as a photo she took of a woman ironing her clothes in a post office), others that incorporate photography (Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*), and still others that have become photographs (Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* inspired major photographic projects by Gordon Parks and Jeff Wall). We'll end by considering how social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter, which blend verbal and visual expression, fit into the contemporary literary field. Likely authors include Welty, Wright, Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Julio Cortazar, Sylvia Plath, Ishmael Reed, W.G. Sebald, and Teju Cole.

This course will introduce students to research tools in the University of Memphis Special Collections. Assignments will include semi-regular response papers, a mid-term, and a final research or creative project.

Please contact Donal Harris ([donal.harris@memphis.edu](mailto:donal.harris@memphis.edu)) with any questions.