

# Writing Like a Camera

## ENGL3329: Major Authors in American Literature

**Professor Donal Harris**

**Time: TBA**



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 creative writing as working like a camera, a device that until quite recently was thought to be 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 2020s. We'll consider how a number of authors and photographers – and authors who are *also* photographers – imagine the relationship between the verbal art of literature and visual art of photography. We'll read works that call themselves photography (Dos Passos's "camera eye" sections of the *U.S.A. Trilogy*), were inspired by photographs (Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," which began as a photo she took of a woman ironing her clothes in a post office), incorporate photographs (Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*), or have inspired 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 Cortázar, Adrienne Rich, Ishmael Reed, and Teju Cole.

Assignments will include semi-regular response papers, a mid-term, and a final research or creative project. Students will also be introduced to archives and research tools in the University of Memphis Special Collections.

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