

## Instructor Spotlight: Steve Harp

*"In my view the only way we can approach these things (speaking of the Holocaust and other catastrophes of 20<sup>th</sup> century European history) is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation," comments the writer W.G. Sebald in the recent documentary Patience (After Sebald).*

My Focal Point class, *The Emigrants: Image, Text and Trauma*, is devoted to a close reading of Sebald's "novel" *The Emigrants*. Students often enter the class expecting (to the degree that they have any expectations at all) to study "Holocaust literature," which they do. In a way. However, they generally find *The Emigrants* to be quite different from the kind of literature – Holocaust or otherwise – they're used to reading. Simultaneously journalistically precise and maddeningly opaque, *The Emigrants* offers the students an encounter with the complexities of history, with its expression through arts both visual and verbal and with the process of reading itself. The life and work of the class is built around interpreting the book, understanding the significances of its contradictions, recurring details and behaviors; reading what's *not* there in order to understand what *is*.

The class asks questions of the text in order to come up with more questions. I start the first discussion by giving the



students two questions to fall back on: "What am I not getting that I am expecting?" and "What am I getting that I'm not expecting?" From these questions, more grow organically from the text and our discussions. (One of the first they pick up on is: *What keeps returning?*)

As their influence emerges, I introduce the class to (as I describe them) "two absent presences hovering throughout the book." The first is Walter Benjamin – an epigraph to the course syllabus is this quote about Benjamin: "His preparedness to make connections allowed him to see the essential in details," which I tell the students could just as easily be applied to Sebald. *The work is done through the talking* is not only the process of the class but relates to the narrative of the book as well. It also directly conjures up the second "absent presence," Sigmund Freud, whose interpretive method - relying as it does on webs of

associations, recurrences, accumulated meanings, understandings of absences and silences – is a key to understanding the manifestations of the traumas its emigrant subjects have lived through.

At this point you may be asking yourself if this isn't a bit ... *much* for first year students. My answer – years into teaching this – is emphatically *no*. The students find themselves caught up in the unfolding and revealing of the latent complexities in seemingly unimportant details (I tell them they should think of themselves as detectives) as they develop a dawning awareness of the insidious damage caused by the horrors of the previous century.

I like teaching first year students because they're usually not sure yet what to expect (or what's expected of them) from the university. I like teaching them the importance of thinking in unexpected and complex ways. I encourage them to develop the practice of pushing to demand more of themselves and the materials they engage with. Hopefully this capacity will continue to grow not just through their college careers but beyond. If I can help begin to instill some sense of the importance of thinking – critically, ambiguously, indeed "obliquely and tangentially" – I feel I've helped to contribute something positive to their intellectual lives.

— Steve Harp

Assoc. Professor, Art, Media & Design

## From the Director

This month, we're going to do something we've never done before: throw a recognition reception for the Chicago Quarter teaching teams. Faculty, Professional Staff, and Student Mentors are invited to celebrate our program, which immerses new DePaul students into study of the city and helps prepare them to be successful students at an urban, Vincentian university. We will have refreshments and honor some of our outstanding teaching team members. I hope you can make it!

The reception will be from 3-5 p.m. on Friday, Jan. 25, in Cortelyou Commons. If you are a member of a teaching team and did not get an invitation, or have been involved in the past and would like to help us celebrate, please RSVP at this link: [RSVP](#)

### Important dates!

- Jan. 25: Chicago Quarter Reception
- Feb. 1: Focal Point Seminar proposal deadline

We're now a couple weeks into Winter Quarter and our Focal Point Seminars are off and running. If you're teaching one, just another reminder to emphasize to your students that the topic of your section is a platform for the Learning Outcomes – a way to learn seminar discussion skills, a way to learn the value of revision, a way to approach a topic from multiple perspectives. And help them see how honing these skills during their first year will benefit them throughout their academic careers.

— Doug Long