

"Pathos is the deepest note": Professor Alex Nemerov lectures on art history

Jean Garnett, Oct 18 2009

St. Andrew's welcomed Professor Alex Nemerov of Yale University as the Payson Art History lecturer this year. Professor Nemerov teaches and writes about American visual culture from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. While completing her Masters degree at Yale this past year, history teacher Emily Pressman audited one of Nemerov's undergraduate courses and was deeply stirred by his brilliance and eloquence. The St. Andrew's community was equally spellbound on Friday night in Engelhard. Nemerov's talk, spoken with the precision and force of a poet, was an assertion of the power and purpose of art and the study of art.

Nemerov began his talk by presenting a few photographs by Lewis Hine, who worked as an investigative photographer for the National Child Labor Committee in the early twentieth century. Hine visited factories in New York City and cotton mills in the Carolinas, at times posing as an insurance agent in order to gain entrance, and photographed children at work. In one of Hine's photographs, a young girl in a cotton mill stands beside a row of bobbins that seems to stretch back into infinity. The little girl stares intently at the camera, conveying a sense of intense empathy between the photographer and the subject. It is, Nemerov observed, as though the two are connected, in the moment that the image captures, by a deep bond of pathos and understanding.

Hine's photographs portray and critique the soul-crushing conditions of such work, but they are more than exposés. Unlike many of the photographs in Jacob Riis's famous book, *How the Other Half Lives*, Hine's images don't invite us to see the people they portray as "other", as the unfortunate dwellers of a squalid world that is separate from ours. Instead, he invites us to see them as like us, to empathize with them and to wonder about who they are. Nemerov described Hine's ability to "vivify a story," and to capture with a click of his shutter "an instantaneous image of a certain moral truth." By inviting us to identify deeply with the person shown, Hine also invites us to actually feel the tragedy of their situation.

In his study of photography, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes distinguished between two facets of photography: the *studium*, the cultural and political information the image conveys, and the *punctum*, the ability of the image to emotionally touch - or "puncture" - the viewer. Nemerov argued that this "puncture" is the most sacred and important purpose of art. Asked by a student to define "art," he said, "What wounds you, what touches you, what moves you, that is what matters. Art is not meant to simply affirm you; it is not always pleasing or comforting, but moving and disturbing. It turns your world askew a little bit, rocks your foundation. In the words of Rilke, 'Art can make you feel that you must change your life.'"

While art may evoke a whole range of emotions, for Nemerov, "Pathos is the deepest note," and the one he feels most responsible for hearing, studying and communicating. "Every time I look at one of these photographs, it kills me a little bit," he said. "They are like ghost stories, like echoes, like cries of sorrow from the past." Speaking with a small group after the lecture, he said, "If you decide to be a historian, you are on the side of tragedy. People say that history is told by the winners. I'm interested in the losers, the people whose voices are not going to be heard unless, through some phantasmic process, I can let them speak through me."

Headmaster Tad Roach was, as were all who heard the talk, both moved and inspired. Speaking to Nemerov after the lecture, he told him, "What you did tonight was a gift to those of us who teach, for you embodied a dynamic and passionate appeal to the art of teaching. Your gift to our students was to model a form of

authentic and passionate scholarship that will inspire them for years to come.”

The community thanks Nemerov for his incredible lecture, Emily Pressman and John McGiff for bringing him to St. Andrew’s, and the Payson family for making possible this opportunity to hear from inspiring scholars each year.