



Steven Church

The Annotated Blue Guide

Assignment Guidelines:

Using Michael Martone's The Blue Guide to Indiana¹ as our model, we will be working together to create a Blue Guide to Fresno and the Central Valley. This means we will discuss how Martone's book is written and for your mid-term project, you will be imitating the form and style of the book.² Each member of the class will be required to contribute at least 3 entries to the project (approx. 750 words each), one of which must be "true" or "factual" (sort of like two lies and a truth³).

The goal with the "true" one is to find a subject that someone could actually visit or look up, that could (at least in part) be "objectively verified," but this doesn't mean it can't have some slippage

¹ Previously to reading Martone's book we read Reality Hunger: a Manifesto by David Shields and John D'Agata's collection of essays, Halls of Fame; and we'd talked quite a bit about the collage form, the first person "eye" as opposed to "I," "smuggling" reality into our work, and the idea of "wonder." Wonder can be a noun, a place, a thing, but it is also a state of mind and of being in the world that is connected to curiosity, humility, and openness.

² In class we spent a great deal of time talking about what makes something sound factual or authoritative and, thereby, believable; and we discussed how the best satire and parody puts the reader in a state of uncertainty or "not-knowing," at least for a while, and that this tension is often what drives the piece. The challenge, we discussed, was to both create and sustain this authentic tension, this kind of liminal space, as long as possible. Particularly with a subject such as Fresno, which is pretty easy to make fun of sarcastically and cynically, we talked about the challenge of creating "wonder" or "uncertainty" and sustaining the ironic tension without releasing the reader from the obligation to engage with the text on its own terms. We also talked about how Martone is able to "ape" a nonfiction form and style (the guide book) for fictional purposes, or he "smuggles" this bit of "reality" into his fiction.

³ One of my favorite "ice breaker" activities for the first night of any class, is the classic, "two truths and a lie," where the students are limited to 3 sentences for each item and the goal is to make each one convincing and believable. Students are then asked to read their "two truths and a lie" and the class then votes on which one they think is the lie. In addition to learning interesting things about your classmates, the activity also leads into good discussion about what creates authority and believability in writing.

between fact and fiction.⁴ Once completed the project will be “published” either in print (if we can figure out how to afford it) or online, and then shared with the public.⁵

Tips:

Think about how you can use this assignment to essay or explore something unique about this place.⁶ Remember it doesn’t have to be fantastical or bizarre on the surface, but many apparently mundane subjects have fantastical or bizarre backstories. Think about the art of parody and satire as practiced by Martone, as well as his use of the absurd and the mundane. Pay attention as well to his use of specialized language.

⁴ Basically I’m asking the students here to come up with “two lies and a truth” about Fresno and the Central Valley. Not surprisingly, some of the most absurd and unbelievable entries were also the “true” ones (i.e. the Fresno County Landfill National Historic Site).

⁵ We ended up creating a Wordpress site www.theexistentialvan.wordpress.com where we posted the entries, staggering them out a bit over time for maximum exposure. The name of the site comes from a statement I made in class about wanting to teach a class that meets every week in a van that I drive around Fresno.

⁶ As I said before, Fresno is an easy place to make fun of; so the challenge here for the students was to change their lens, to see the place with wonder and curiosity, and to pay attention to the small moments of meaning, even transcendence, that surround them every day. Part of the assignment is to encourage students to be in tune to the sublime and ineffable, rather than the easy meanings we are spoon-fed.