

Visual and Cultural Studies: A Critical Toolbox

Spring 2009

Course Description

Everyday life in contemporary society is characterized by a constant flow of images. On billboards, TVs, subways, and buses; in magazines, newspapers, emails, and airport terminals; the fast-paced production of images has revolutionized the way we **communicate** with and **influence** one another. At the same time, a well-established tradition of **looking** at objects and images in museums, galleries, and movie theaters encourages us to slow down the pace of life and to reflect on the meaning and value of images. Occasionally we may even find ourselves gazing at photographs, paintings, buildings, or other people for the simple pleasure of seeing. But rarely do we stand back from our visual experience and ask how this visual culture works and how it affects the way we think and interact with one another.



This course is an introduction to the interdisciplinary field of visual studies. The approach is both theoretical and practical. We look at the various attempts of writers, artists, scientists, and philosophers to describe, question, and explain the nature

of the image, human imagination, and visual experience. How is our perception of the world around us related to our thoughts and ideas about that world? Is seeing shaped by concepts and language or is it independent of them? How do we understand and make use of the things we see? What tools do we have for interpreting and talking about visual objects and experience? How can our study of the arts and art theory contribute to the development of those tools? And how do the various forms of visibility—our practices of looking and seeing—limit or enhance our experience, agency, and visual pleasure?

The basic theoretical concepts and principles in this course are drawn from critical art history and theory, media studies, cognitive science, and philosophy. Students develop the skills necessary to write effectively about the visual world and to think productively about the creation of images and the meanings that surround them.

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Requirements for Credit Students

There will be regular reading assignments and discussions [20%]; periodic study questions, response papers, and exercises [20%]; a midterm essay [20%], and a final essay [40%].

There are lots of new concepts and interesting problems in a course like this one. So I hope that you'll enjoy the challenge. At each stage, what you learn will help you move to a higher level of expertise.

Each of you will be evaluated on the basis of your own achievement -- you are not competing with one another for grades. If everyone gains proficiency with the material, you'll all end up with As.

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So work together, help one another as much as you can, and don't hesitate to ask me for help when you need it. I will be online for several hours every day, and checking in periodically to answer questions and offer advice.

Critical Response Papers and Exercises

I'll provide periodic questions and issues to address related to the readings and class discussions. These assignments will be posted to the website with specific due dates. Late responses will not be accepted.

Since class discussions are meant to be collaborative and thoughtful, careful preparation for discussion is essential. Responding in writing to the issues discussed in the text is the best way to formulate an understanding and to clarify and refine your own views.



Required Texts

- Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Picador, 1977
- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
- Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006.
- Course Packet

Weekly Schedule

Week 1 (Jan. 26): Introduction to Visual Studies

Timothy Quigley, Course Introduction [PDF]

Week 2 (Feb. 2): Visuality and Active Seeing: Why is visual perception not like photography?

Alva Noë, "Experience and Experiment in Art" [PDF]

Oliver Sacks, "The Mind's Eye: What the Blind See" [PDF]

Oliver Sacks, "To See and Not See" [PDF]

Week 3 (Feb. 9): Interpretation and Meaning

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (selections)

Feb. 16 — No Classes

Week 4 (Feb. 23): Image and Object

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (selections)

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* ("Part One")

Week 5 (Mar. 2): Domesticating Images

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* ("Part Two")

Week 6 (Mar. 9): Structuralism and Semiotics

Mick Underwood, "Code"; "Code and Ideology"; "Introduction to Semiotics" - "Criticism of Semiotics" [HTML]

Mar. 16 — No Classes

Week 7 (Mar. 23): Structuralism and Semiotics

Timothy Quigley, "Introduction to Semiotics" [PDF]

Roland Barthes, Excerpt from "Rhetoric of the Image" [HTML]

Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message", *Image Music Text* [PDF]

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Week 8 (Mar. 30): Psychoanalytic Concepts

Timothy Quigley, "Brief Introduction to Psychoanalytic Theory"[PDF]

Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*

Week 9 (Apr. 6): Lacan and Cinema

Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* [Film]

Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*

Week 10 (Apr. 13): Technology and the Work of Art

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [PDF]

Week 11 (Apr. 20): The Global Circulation and Appropriation of Images

Case Study: Alberto Korda's "Che" [Presentation]

Andre Gunther, "Digital Imaging Goes to War: The Abu Ghraib Photographs" [PDF]

Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" [PDF]

Week 12 (Apr. 27): Truth and the New Documentary

Linda Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary" [PDF]

Louis Masur, "How the Truth Gets Framed by the Camera" [PDF]

Week 13 (May 4): Truth and the New Documentary

Mark Singer, "Predilections" [PDF]

Timothy Quigley, "Rough Notes on the Truth Value of Images" [PDF]

Week 14 (May 11): Blurring the Boundaries and Challenging the Viewer

TBA

Week 15 (May 18): Summary

TBA

Students with Disabilities

In keeping with the University's policy of providing equal access for students with disabilities, any student with a disability who needs academic accommodations should contact the office of Student Disability Services. All conversations will be kept confidential. Students requesting any accommodations will also need to meet with Tom McDonald in the office of Student Disability Services, who will conduct an interview, and if appropriate, provide an academic accommodation notification letter. Mr. McDonald's office is 65 Fifth Avenue, Room 409. He can be reached by phone at 212 229 5472. More information through Student Services and on the University website.

Statement on Academic Honesty

It is expected that all work submitted for a grade in this course reflects the work of the student submitting it. Students are **encouraged** to discuss their work with others (inside and outside of class), and to exchange information, comments, and criticisms. But keep in mind that if you borrow an idea from someone else, you must **cite the source**, even if it is based on a conversation or correspondence.

Plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty will result in a **failing** grade for the **assignment** for the first offense. A subsequent offense will result in a failing grade for the course. All instances of academic dishonesty are reported to the Deans' office for review.

Any student who does not fully understand the standards of academic honesty should speak to me in advance of submitting coursework.

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Preparation for Class Discussions

1. Read every selection at least twice.
 - a. Read each selection once through quickly to get the main points of the text and to better appreciate how the author approaches the subject.
 - b. Read each selection a second time to examine very carefully the details and structure of the argument.
2. Be sympathetic, but critical. Often you may feel put off by an author's language, point of view, critical approach, etc. When this happens, it's always a good idea to try to see it from the author's point of view. Then, when you understand why someone would write in such a way or adopt such a view, you'll be in a better position not only to understand it but to critically evaluate it.
3. Take notes and look up unfamiliar words.
4. Read analytically by asking the following questions:
 - a. What is the central idea, thesis, objective or function of this text?
 - b. Which statements, examples, or strategies in the text support this objective? Is there anything about the text that undermines what you have identified as "the central objective"?
 - c. What are the key terms and how are they defined?
 - d. What assumptions does the text make? (These may often be unstated or hidden assumptions, so you may have to "read between the lines" to find them.)
 - e. What are some of the important implications of the position taken in the text?
5. In cases where you disagree with the text, articulate clearly **what** you disagree with and what **reasons** support your own view.

This analysis, together with your questions and responses to the readings, will form the basis of our weekly class discussions.