

# Visual Studies: A Critical Toolbox

Spring 2012

## 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.

## Instructor: Timothy Quigley

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## Requirements for Credit Students

There will be

- weekly readings and discussion posts [40% of the course grade],
- several short descriptive and critical analyses [20% of the course grade], and
- a final critical essay [40% of the course grade].

What follows are **additional details** on the process and assignments. Please read carefully and let me know if you have questions.

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**Participation and Discussion Posts** — The basic requirement for participation is to engage in close reading and analysis of the assigned texts, and to actively participate in our collaborative, online seminar discussions. Each Sunday I'll post an introduction to the material for the week. I'll also post discussion questions no later than noon each Monday.

To be a fully engaged and active participant, you should expect to post 2-4 responses each week in the discussion forum, at least 1 addressing the initial discussion question(s) that I raise, and at least 1 response to another student. Your postings should be short, thoughtful, and to the point. The aim in this part of the course is to sustain a lively exchange that helps all of us think through the issues and texts as we would if we were meeting face to face.

You should complete your reading of the assigned material by Sunday each week. Class discussion will begin on Monday and continue throughout the week. If you are unable to participate for any reason, please contact me by email. Remember that class participation counts as 40% of your grade. In an on-line course, if you are not participating in the discussion, you're not present in class. The success of the course as whole depends on our collective engagement and effort.

**Exploratory Writing** — You are required to write 2-3 short and focused "response papers", each approximately 1 or 2 pages (single-spaced). Students will post these writings to their personal wiki pages where they will be visible to the entire class. Topics will be posted and due dates announced on the website. These focused writings count as 20% of your final grade.

**Final Essay** — You are also required to write a longer, more extended critical essay at the end of the semester. The essay will be 7-8 pages (double-spaced). A full description of the assignment and due date will be posted on the course website. This essay counts as 40% of your grade. Late papers will be marked down one letter grade per week late. No papers will be accepted after the last day of class without specific arrangements made in advance with me.

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.

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.

## Required Texts

- Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Picador, 1977
- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
- Course Packet

## Weekly Schedule of Topics and Readings

### Week 1: Introduction to Visual Studies

Timothy Quigley, Course Introduction [PDF]

### Week 2: Visuality and Active Seeing: Why is visual perception not like photography?

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

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

### Week 3: Interpretation and Meaning

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* [3-82]



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## **Week 4: Image and Object**

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* [85-180]

## **Week 5: Domesticating Images**

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

## **Week 6: Domesticating Images**

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

## **Week 7: Another Way of Telling**

John Berger, "Appearances" [PDF]

## **Week 8: Spring Study Break**

## **Week 9: Intention, Interpretation, and Institution in Contemporary Art**

Julian Stallabrass, "Museum Photography and Museum Prose"

## **Week 10: Between Analog and Digital**

Laura Mulvey, "A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai): From After to Before the Photograph" [PDF]

## **Week 11: Issues in Recent Cinema**

A. W. Eaton, "Almodovar's Immoralism" [PDF]

## **Week 12: Topic to be determined**

TBA based on student interests

## **Week 13: Topic to be determined**

TBA based on student interests

## **Week 14: Final Project**

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### **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. Take a sympathetic, but critical approach to your reading. 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.
2. Take notes and look up unfamiliar words.
3. 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?
4. 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.