

Visual Communication

COURSE OVERVIEW

Visual culture is not just part of our everyday lives it is our everyday lives. This course introduces students to the practices, technologies and knowledges through which visual imagery is constructed. It aims to provide students with the tools for analysing and communicating with various kinds of visual images and objects. These may include brands, logos, informational graphics, photographs, advertisements, promos, paintings, cartoons, comics, emoji, films, maps, architecture and architectural diagrams. The course begins with the physiology of seeing and the way our brains process visual images. We then move on to examine the different theories of visual communication (gestalt, constructivist, ecological, semiotics and cognitive theory) and principles of visual composition. We also consider how important seeing is for truth and knowledge and why and how we get pleasure from seeing. The second half of the course looks at different 'regimes' of the image: painting and photography, film and television, comics, digital images and advertising. Overall, the course encourages students to interrogate their culturally specific visual competencies and refine their skills in visual literacy while addressing issues of visual textuality and composition, identity, ethnicity, nation, class, gender and communicative inter-relationships more generally.

Course goals:

- Gain an understanding of the physiological and cognitive aspects of seeing.
- Learn theories scholars have developed to explain visual communication.
- Learn to analyse and critique visual messages.
- Develop skills in producing visual messages.

LECTURE PROGRAMME

Visual Communication

Lesson 1

What we see: Elements of visual communication

Overview of the course and looks at the physiology of seeing, visual literacy, and new technologies of seeing. How do our brains process visual messages? Why do we remember certain images? Images have little use if our mind's don't use them. One reason we so often forget our dreams is that the mental images are not translated into words. This is why we are going to need a lot of words to think about visual communication. Visual imagery is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges, and therefore we are also going to need a critical approach when discussing it.

Reading: Scott McCloud, 'The Vocabulary of Comics', *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), Chapter 2 pp. 24-59.

Lesson 2

How we see: Sensory theories of visual communication

Is what you see what you get? Sensory theories of visual communication are concerned with how and what the brain notices or fails to see from visual cues of colour, form and depth. Sensory theories aim to explain how raw data from nerves is transmitted to our brains. There are three main sensory theories: gestalt theory, constructivist theory and ecological theory.

Reading: Paul Martin Lester, 'Visual Theories,' *Visual Communication: Images with Messages* (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2006), Chapter 3 pp. 42-71.

Lesson 3

How we see: Perceptual theories of communication

Interestingly, the word theory comes from the ancient Greek word *teorin* (to see). Perceptual theories look at how meanings are formed after visual stimuli are received and processed. The two main theories are: semiotics (the study of the science of signs) and cognitive theory (which argues that mental activities such as memory, projection, expectation affect our visual perception).

Reading: Gillian Rose, 'Semiology,' *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching Visual Materials* (London: SAGE, 2016, 4TH EDITION), Chap 6 pp. 106-146.

Lesson 4

Why we see: Image or Imagination

What do we mean by normal vision? How important is 'seeing' for truth and knowledge? How scientific can vision be? Can we train ourselves to see 'scientifically' and be Sherlock Holmes instead of Dr Watson? Do we 'see' in our dreams? How has digitisation changed how we see, make, store and transmit images? What is the difference between 'real', 'represented' and 'imaginary' images?

Reading: Tony Schirato and Jen Webb, 'Normalising Vision,' *Understanding the Visual* (London: SAGE, 2007), Chapter 6, pp. 131-149.

Lesson 5

Why we see: Visual pleasure

Why and how do we get pleasure from seeing? How is sexual difference visual? Is all seeing voyeuristic? Is there an *autoerotic* element to the 'selfies' we take of ourselves? Psychoanalysis offers a set of tools for interpreting visual materials. Sigmund Freud cited *scopophilia* (pleasure in looking) as one of the basic drives, and argued we desire what we 'gaze' at. While Jacques Lacan, who followed and developed Freud's theories, argued that identity emerged at what he called 'the mirror stage', the point at which a small child can recognise itself as an individual.

Reading: Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 14-26. (Written in 1973 and published in 1975 in *Screen*).

Lesson 6

Why we see what we see: Principles of composition

What does an image actually show? How does the image organise its space? How does it organise us, its viewer? What visual cues are we offered? Compositional interpretation claims to look at images for what they are, rather than what they do or how they are used. It looks very carefully at the form and experiencing of images by breaking down their composition into a number of components, for example, colour, spatial organisation, light.

Reading: Paul Martin Lester, 'Visual Cues,' *Visual Communication: Images with Messages* (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2006), Chapter 2 pp. 14-41.

Lesson 7

Still images: Painting and photography

A stilled image, one that freezes time forever in a powerfully arresting moment, will always have the capacity to capture our attention, and the stilled moment will always be a vital component of

visual communication because there is no way to escape its underlying power. So how do paintings and photographs capture our gaze and affect us? The spatial organisation of a painting is not innocent. It depends on conventions, has effects and it produces a specific relation between image and spectator. For example, perspective which dominated Western painting for centuries provides a means of representing three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface.

Reading: Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Visual Interpretation,' in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, N. Bryson, M.A. Holly and K. Moxey (eds) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 61-73.
Vilém Flusser, 'The Image' 'The Technical Image' 'The Apparatus', *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), pp. 8-32.

Lesson 8

Moving images: Film and television

Film and television convey motion through an illusory phenomenon of human perception called stroboscopic or apparent motion. The phenomenon results in our perceiving multiple, rapidly moving but separate still image frames as movement. Today's films show us 24 still images every single second. Television, on the other hand, is created by electron beams that are constantly changing and the complete television frame is created as the electron beams scan two fields of alternating lines that interlace in a constant, repeated pattern on the screen. A moving image shocks, illuminates and entertains, but it is fleeting and quickly replaced by another image. So how do film and television attract and hold our attention?

Reading: John Ellis, 'Preliminaries,' *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1-20.

Richard Dienst, 'The Outbreak of Television,' *Still Life in Real Time: Theory After Television* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 3-35.

Lesson 9

Narrative images: Comics

Why is this simple medium so powerful? Reading comics is not as simple as we might think. In addition to the various conventions and reading protocols we need to master, there is a complicated interplay between reading and looking; the visual elements of the comic strip and the "linguistic ones"; the pictorial nature of the "linguistic" component; the co-presence of images organised on the page and the sequence of images in the narrative. Comic strips have their own aesthetic, they are not a hybrid form somewhere between literature and art. In this session we explore the complex set of visual issues that the medium sets in play.

Reading: Colin Beineke, 'On Comicity', *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society*, 1(2), Summer 2017, pp. 226-253.

Lesson 10

Selling the Visual: Advertising, brands and logos

The form and location of advertisements used to be straightforward: newspapers, magazines, television. But how have new kinds of advertising on the internet changed that picture? What counts as an advert is not as obvious as it once was: there are banner ads on webpages, ads that no longer appeal to audiences of mass media but are designed to appeal to target audiences (Google can find you...), product placement, celebrities as 'product ambassadors', and Facebook ad campaigns. Brand adverts are now not aimed at selling anything specific, but instead work to give a brand a certain set of values or emotional associations. The pervasiveness of brands can make deciding what is an advert and what is not difficult.

Reading: Tony Schirato and Jen Webb, 'Selling the Visual,' *Understanding the Visual* (London: SAGE, 2007), Chapter 7, pp. 151-168.

Lesson 11

Digital images:

Images have always moved, not only in film or television. Recently that movement has intensified, images now circulate across social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram), and that mobility is more and more central to our understanding of contemporary visual culture. The vast numbers of images on online platforms is often cited as evidence that our lives are saturated with images. Part of that 'saturation' is due to the fact that we now use, store, exchange, copy, add tags to these images in a digital format and no longer in analogue form. What (digital) methods we will develop, and are developing, to analyse digital images, and whether those digital methods will be able to address questions of cultural meaning at this point remains an open question.

Reading: Gillian Rose, 'Digital Methods: Digital Images, Digitally Analysed,' *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching Visual Materials* (London: SAGE, 2016, 4TH EDITION), Chap 11 pp. 288-306.

Lesson 12

A society of the spectacle

The Romans had chariot races and we have rugby matches but the notion that we are 'a society of the spectacle', as conceived by Guy Debord in his influential book *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), is not concerned with merely looking at images as games, but with the idea that the visual now radically determines and controls our lives. Debord argues that the function of the media-as-spectacle is to bring about our individuation and isolation, to manage our attention and simulate the illusion that we have choices. 'Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation,' are the opening words of Debord's book, and they are still very relevant today if we ask the question why did so many people who witnessed the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11 say that 'it was just like a movie'?

Jacques Rancière, 'The Intolerable Image', *The Emancipated Spectator*, translated by Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2009), pp. 83-105.

ASSESSMENT /ASSIGNMENTS

There are four assessment components for this course.

1. Multiple-choice Test - covering aspects of the first six lessons of the course

40 multiple choice questions that review the content of Weeks 1-6. You will have 24 hours to complete this test on-line.

Percentage of total mark for the course: 20%.

2. Group Presentation

15-minute group presentations will be delivered during Lessons 5-12.

Percentage of total mark for the course: 15%.

Topics to be decided and negotiated.

All members of each group will be expected to contribute to the final presentation and deliver a segment of it. A collective grade and mark will be assigned.

3. Multiple-choice Test - covering aspects of the final six lessons of the course

40 multiple choice questions that review the content of Lessons 7-12. You will have 24 hours to complete this test on-line.

Percentage of total mark for the course: 20%.

4. Visual Analysis Project

Length: around 2000 words, including visual components.

Percentage of total mark for the course: 45%

