Thinking About Seeing

Course Description: In this course we will look at the way visual communication functions within the context of contemporary society. This approach will include the formal and aesthetic aspects of works of art and visual communication as well as the socio-political and ideological aspects inherent in the act of looking. We will analyze modes of communicative gestures focusing on the way we speak (in images and otherwise) and how that language is understood. Through a close look at media images and texts from the past and present it will be the student’s goal to develop a personal and thoughtful understanding of how the various media work, and how we take part in that interaction. The function of social and historical factors will be central to this discussion.

Please see the Newclasses site for a link to my office hour appointment calendar.

Requirements

Required text

- Panofsky, Erwin, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*
- Course Packet – Available at Unique Copy Center 252 Greene St www.uniquecopycenter.com
  For the contents of the course packet see the bibliography below.
- Please refer to the Blackboard site for other links and readings.

Papers: All papers are to be handed in via File Exchange tab or the Assignments tab on the New Classes site and must be received no later than the beginning of class on the due date.

To hand in the paper (no printed papers please):

The document should be titled as follows:

Your last name_paper#.doc (e.g. smith_paper1.doc)

- The papers must be sent in Microsoft Word (you can export from pages, google docs, etc.).
- All papers are to be in standard fonts (Arial, Helvetica, Times New Roman, etc.) in standard size (10 - 12) and margins (1” – 1.25”).
- All papers are required to use at least two book sources (this means real paper books, not just the internet). All sources used should be properly footnoted.
- Assigned writing is in words and not pages. If you do not know how to use the word count feature of your word processor program, please ask. (Only the essay is included in word count, not title, name, etc.).
- Late papers will be accepted only under extreme situations. Grading will be discussed in each case.
**Plagiarism will not be tolerated under any circumstance.**

Copying more than three words without making clear the source is plagiarism. Any papers found to contain unlisted sources from the Internet or extended quotes without footnotes will be immediately failed.

From the university handbook:

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website for a full description of the academic integrity policy. www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html

Presentation:

- Each student will take part in one presentation. Students will be broken up into groups of three or four.
- The presentations should be no longer than 15 minutes, but 10 minutes is the ideal length. Every minute past 15 is a full grade down.
- The presentations should be practical, well researched and engaging.
- Students must work together (in person or virtually). You are encouraged to make the presentations original and creative.
- Visual aids are strongly encouraged and should be posted on the newclasses site.
- Tips for visual aids:
  - Quality is better than quantity: make each image say as much as possible
  - If using moving images, make sure to have a good intro and discussion afterwards and use the precise section to make your point
- Each group must hand in an outline of no less than one page
- The grade will be given at the end of the class the day of the presentation

- Students are responsible for all missed assignments and in-class work.

Grading

Reading, Attendance and Participation (10%) - this includes punctuality, in class quizzes and all assignments.
Reading notes (5%) – Students must hand in electronically notes for all readings. (i.e. via email, word doc) These need be only one page per reading. **To be handed in December 10.**
Class presentation (20%)
Paper #1 (20%)
Paper # 2 (20%)
Final Paper/ Presentation (30%)
Bibliography- Included in the course packet


Sontag, Susan Ch. 7 from Regarding the Pain of Others (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003) 104-113

LINKS:
- Critical Art Ensemble: The Electronic Disturbance, Video and Resistance: Against Documentaries http://www.critical-art.net/books/ted/
- Clement Greenberg: Modernist Painting http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html
- Vertov http://www.archive.org/details/ChelovekskinoapparatomManWithAMovieCamera
Note: All readings are in suggested order

1 – 9/9  Introduction

2 – 9/15  **Representing Space**

**Reading**
Baxandall, “The Period Eye,” from *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*
Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (Sections I-IV, pp. 27-72)

**Assignment:** Go to a museum (Frick, Met, Brooklyn Museum, Morgan Library, etc.) and find a European work of art from between 1300 and 1700. Write NO MORE THAN 50 words of general description and NO LESS THAN 200 words on a section of the work no larger than 4 inches square.

The goal is to focus on material and formal qualities as opposed to narrative or content, although the two can be used together.

3 – 9/22  **Rhetoric of the Image**

**Reading**
Sayre: Ch. 3 “Using visual information” from, *Writing About Art*
Sontag: Against interpretation
Barthes: *The Rhetoric of the Image*

**Further Reading:**
Barthes, “Myth today,” from *Mythologies*

4 – 9/29  **Photography: The objectivity of the image**

**Reading**
Baudelaire: *The modern public and photography*
Sontag: *In Plato’s cave* from “On Photography” Ch. 7 from “Regarding the pain of others”
Siegfried Kracauer “Photography,” from *Theory of Film*

**Further Reading:**
Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

5 – 10/6  **Field trip to Galleries/Museums (TBA)**

10/13  **NO CLASS – OCTOBER 13**

6 – 10/20  **Politics and Art: Propaganda?**

**Reading**
Levi Strauss, David “Photography and Propaganda” and “The Documentary Debate”
Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s*

**Presentation topic:**
One or both: *Triumph of the Will* (Movie), Leni Riefenstahl
*Birth of a Nation* (Movie), DW Griffith
It is not necessary to watch ALL of both, but enough to give a clear presentation on them.

**Presentation topic:**
The Bauhaus as Modernist Laboratory
_A brief intro and explanation of how it worked, what it was_

**What is Modernism?**
**Reading:**
_Baudelaire: The Painter of Modern Life_ (Sections I-IV)
_Gablik, CH. 2 from “Has Modernism failed?”_
The Futurist Manifesto (Blackboard)
Wikipedia entry “Avant-Garde”
_Greenberg, Avant-Garde and Kitsch_

_Further Reading_
_Greenberg, Modernist Painting_
_James Elkins, Master narratives and their Discontents (also relevant to postmodernism)_

**Mechanical Reproduction “The man with the Camera”**
**Reading:**
_Suggested: John Berger, Ways of seeing, Chapter 1_
_Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility_

_Further reading_
_Adorno, On the Fetish-character in music and the Regression of Listening_
_Kracauer, The Mass Ornament_

**Presentation topic:**
_The Man With The Movie Camera_ (Movie) Dziga Vertov and _Modern Times_ (Movie) Charlie Chaplin
_How do these movies relate to Benjamin’s ideas? How do they demonstrate the Modern vision?_

**Field trip to museums or galleries (TBA)**

**Paper 2 Due November 10**

**McLuhan and The Present**
**Reading:**
_McLuhan, The Medium is the Message_
_McLuhan, The Playboy Interview (Link)_

_Further Reading:_
_McLuhan, The Medium is the Massage_

**Presentation topic:**
The Illuminated manuscript versus Gutenberg’s movable type press
_How were the two manuscripts/books made? What were the big differences?_

**Post Modernism (part 1)**
**Reading:**
_Jameson, Post Modernism and Consumer Society_
_Debord, Society of the Spectacle (1- 34, 180-192)_

_Further Reading:_
_Jonathan Crary, Techniques of the Observer_

**Presentation topic:**
The French New Wave (cinema)
_What it is, who, characteristics._
_Godard, Truffaut, Varda, Marker, etc._

**Post Modernism (part 2)**
**Reading:**
_Rancière, The Emancipation of the Spectator_

**Presentation topic:**
MTV editing, _Moonlighting_ and the Fourth Wall; the introduction of the 24
Baudrillard  
*The Implosion of Meaning in the Media*
*Absolute Advertising, Ground-Zero Advertising*

Further Reading:
Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*
Artaud, “Theater of Cruelty”
Brecht, “The modern theater is epic theater”

**PROPOSAL For Final Paper (or project)**  
DUE December 1  
One-page proposal should include:
• One paragraph description with the central theme and question of your paper
• Image, artists, etc. you plan to look at
• Books and other sources

13 – 12/8  
To Be Decided!  
Presentation topic:

**READING NOTES DUE DECEMBER 10**  
Final Papers Due 12/14 at 3pm  

14 – 12/15  
Final Papers Due  
December 15 at 3pm  
End of Class Party!  

Presentations of PROJECTS for those who choose not to do a final paper, or of the research for papers, if you so choose.
Notes on the Papers

USE VISUAL EVIDENCE: if you don’t see it, don’t say. Avoid speculation. The artist may have hated her father, but she may also like tennis. These are speculative guesses that do not inform our looking.

USE TEXTUAL EVIDENCE: does the author imply the idea you are suggesting or does he say it? If so, where? Very often your point will be made more clearly with a quote.

You need not use specific language from the texts, but may if it helps (you are even encouraged to do so). For example, you do not have to use the specifics of the three messages for the Barthes paper, or discuss aura in the Benjamin paper. In both cases, you may do so if it helps clarify, deepen and substantiate your essay.

Paper #1 Due OCTOBER 6

“How does meaning come to the image? Where does meaning end?
And if it ends, what is there beyond?”

–Roland Barthes, Rhetoric of the Image

Choose an image to which you respond to strongly (hate/love/etc.). This may be an art historical image, a contemporary pop culture image or anything in between. Use the tools seen in Barthes’ essay to look for a meaning in the image that is not immediately apparent. The other texts we have thus far encountered should also figure in the essay.

The central goals of the essay are:

- To make a clear reading of the image with a view to ideology, style and context
- To substantiate and contextualize the reading you suggest.
- To offer a larger context for the image (through historical and critical sources).
- To lead the viewer through the image in an engaging and informed manner.

This paper should be no less than 1200 words and no more than 2000 words. You must use at least TWO book sources (Real books. Made of paper).
"The way in which human perception is organized-the medium in which it occurs-is conditioned not only by nature but by history."

- Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, Section IV*

Look at two manifestations of Visual Communication (art, graphic design, video games, etc.): one from after 1950 and one from before 1820. Discuss the ideas in Benjamin’s essay in relation to the works chosen: how does mechanical reproduction change the meaning of the works? How would Gablik understand one as Modern and the other as not? If applicable, take into account Sontag and Levi-Strauss’ discussion of photography and propaganda.

**This paper should be no less than 1200 words and no more than 2000 words.**

You must use at least TWO book sources (Real books. Made of paper).

---

**Final Paper or Project**

The final grade of the semester will be either a final paper or a final project.

**Final Paper**

“And if to the fashion plate representing each age he were to add the philosophic thought with which that age was most preoccupied or concerned—the thought being inevitably suggested by the fashion plate—he would see what a profound harmony controls all the components of history…”

- Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, Section I*

The goal of the final paper is to apply the tools of the semester to a work of visual culture filtered through a number of the texts and discussions from the class. Ideally, this will intersect with your personal interests and concentration. It should also reflect the idea that works reflect a way of thinking, as Baudelaire suggests in the quote above, and maybe, as Barthes suggests, an ideology. (etc., etc.)

One suggestion is to begin with an image that excites, troubles or intrigues you and a quote from a text we have read that seemed particularly interesting to you. Then methodically unpack the image.

The goals of the paper are:
- To demonstrate a personal language to address the context, ideology and formal discussion of what you see (i.e. to be Thinking About Seeing!).
- To utilize the tools and experience specific to YOU (aka your area of concentration) along with the tools and texts seen throughout this semester.
- To offer a nuanced insight into the mechanics of meaning materially (formally), contextually, politically and historically.

**This paper should be no less than 2000 words and no more than 3000 words.**

You must use at least THREE book sources (Real books. Made of paper).
Final Project The final project is only for those students who have a specific idea and capacity to produce it on their own. The projects MUST be self-initiated. While I will work with the students on any technical advice and assistance I can give, the nature of the work here is the responsibility of the student. If you don’t have ideas, we can talk to see what is possible.

The Final Project must:
- Be directly related to the topics and themes of the class.
- Include a minimum one page description or statement articulating those connections and ideas behind the project, with a list of sources.
- Represent the initiative and work of the student. Collaboration is permitted, but it must be clear that the student is, in essence, the Director of any collaboration, not a co-collaborator. If two students in the class work together this can be discussed.
- Be a product of at minimum the same amount of time that might be spent on the paper. In my experience these projects have always taken longer than a paper (but that is usually a good thing).

Grading of the final Project: The final project will be graded on the seriousness of its execution and the clarity of its statement. Hours spent do not add in any way to the quality of the grade. In the past final projects have taken the form of graphic novellas, videos, installations, radio projects, interactive websites, etc. You are encouraged to challenge the classes (and my) expectations of what form the project can take.