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
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 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 (real paper books). 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, please ask. (Only the essay is included in word count, not title, name, etc.). Late papers will be accepted only under extreme situations. Grading to 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.

http://gallatin.nyu.edu/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/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 via ASSIGNMENTS on the Newclasses site as a word doc or PDF. These need be only one page per reading.
To be handed in December 6.
Class presentation (20%)
Paper #1 (20%)
Paper # 2 (20%)
Final Paper/ Presentation (30%)
BIBLIOGRAPHY- Included in the course packet

Benjamin, Walter “The Work of Art In the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”, from The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media (Belknap Press, 2008)
Brecht, Bertolt “The Modern Theater is Epic Theater,” from Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic, (Hill and Wang, 1977)
Debord, Guy Society of the Spectacle, (Black and Red, 2000)
Gablik, Suzi “Individualism: Art for Art’s Sake, or Art for Society’s sake?” from Has Modernism failed? (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995)
Sontag, Susan “Against interpretation,” from Against Interpretation and Other Essays(New York: Farrar, Picador, 1966)
Sontag, Susan Ch. 7 from Regarding the Pain of Others (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003)
Warhol, Andy In his own words, from Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings, Kristine Stiles andPeter Selz, Eds. (University of California Press,  1996)

LINKS:
- 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 – 9/6 Introduction

2 – 9/13 Rhetoric of the Image

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

Further Reading:
Barthes, “Myth today,” from Mythologies
Hall, ed.: Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices

Presentation topics (choose one):
Stuart Hall and representation
Barthes “Myth today,” from Mythologies

3 – 9/20 What is Modernism?

Reading
Baudelaire: The Painter of Modern Life (Sections I-IV)
Gablik, CH. 2 from Has Modernism failed?
The Futurist Manifesto
Greenberg, Avant-Garde and Kitsch
(Blackboard) Wikipedia entry “Avant-Garde”

Presentation topics (choose one)
Neo Classicism versus Romanticism
The Salon and the Academy
The poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud

Further Reading
Greenberg, Modernist Painting
James Elkins, Master narratives and their Discontents (also relevant to postmodernism)

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.

4 – 9/27 Field trip to Chelsea galleries  PAPER 1 DUE SEPTEMBER 27
5 – 10/4  **Photography: The objectivity of the image**

**Reading:**
Baudelaire: The modern public and photography  
Sontag: In Plato’s cave from *On Photography*  
Sontag: Ch. 7 from *Regarding the pain of others*  
Badger: *Keep It Simple Stupid, Just Make A Good Picture*  
Schless: *The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Head*

**Further Reading:**
Barthes, *Camera Lucida*  
Benjamin, Little History of Photography

**Presentation topics (choose one):**
David Levi Strauss, “Photography and Propaganda” and “The Documentary Debate” from *Between The Eyes*  
Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

6 – 10/11  **Mechanical Reproduction “The Man With the Camera”**

**Reading**
Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*  
*Suggested:*  
John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Chapter 1

**Further reading**
Adorno, On the Fetish-character in music and the Regression of Listening  
Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*  
Mirzoeff, 'That’s All Folks': Contemporary Art and Popular Culture from *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, Ed. Amelia Jones

**Presentation topics (choose one):**
Triumph of the Will (film)  
Dziga Vertov and the Man With the Movie Camera  
Other essays by Benjamin (these must be approved first)  
Adorno and the culture industry

7 – 10/18  **McLuhan and The Present**

**Reading**
McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*  
McLuhan, *The Playboy Interview* (Link)

**Further Reading:**
McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*  
Steiner, On Reading Marshall McLuhan (1963), from *Language and Silence*

**Presentation topics (choose one):**
Nixon Kennedy TV Debate of 1960  
The Civil Rights movement on TV News  
The Vietnam War and protests on TV
8 – 10/25  Field trip to Galleries or Museums (TBD)  Paper 2 Due October 25

9 – 11/1  1962, and Then everything changed (or Why Warhol?)

Reading:
Danto, “High Art, Low Art and the Spirit of History”
Danto “The Abstract Expressionist Coca-Cola Bottle,” from Beyond the Brillo Box (University Warhol Writings
Oldenburg I Am For An Art

Presentation topic: (choose one):
Alan Kaprow and the Happenings
The Collaboration between Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Robert Rauschenberg
Black Mountain College: its influences, teachers and students

Assignment:
A one-page proposal for your final paper. This should be a well considered and solid idea that reflects what has most excited and interested you from the semester. Ideally, it will have a relationship to your concentration.
For projects, this should be specific and explain how it fits into the context of this class. For example, if you choose to do a video, you should explain estimated run time, production style, etc.

10 – 11/8  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 topics (choose one or two):
The Situationalists International
La jetee (Chris Marker) and Breathless (Godard)
The international student movements
Liberation movements world wide, from Africa

11 – 11/15  Staging the modern and post modern

Reading:
Artaud, Theater of Cruelty
Brecht, The Modern Theater is Epic Theater”
Ranciere, The Emancipation of the Spectator

Presentation topic (choose one):
Performance art (this should be very specific. Must be approved)
The Living Theater and other avant-garde theater
Examples of Brechtian, Artaudian and Ranciere style performance
Contemporary art and performance (Must be approved)

12 – 11/22  Field trip Or review class
13 – 11/29  **CASE STUDY: Black Lives Matter**

**Reading:**
Teju Cole “The Superhero Photographs of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” from the NY Times
Teju Cole “A True Picture of Black Skin,” from the NY Times
Hank Willis Thomas “Us is Them: How Visual Culture Reveals that All Lives Matter--But Some Matter More than Others,” from Creative Time Reports
bell hooks “Representing Whiteness,”

**Presentation topics (choose one):**
The Civil Rights movement, a history in photos
What is #BlackLivesMatter and what does it or they stand for?
A brief historical overview of race and photography

14 – 12/6  **LAST CLASS**
PRESENTATIONS/FINAL PAPERS
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 SEPTEMBER 22
“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).

Paper #2 Due October 25
“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

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.