VISS 501  Introduction to Visual Studies: Methods and Debates

Vanessa R. Schwartz, University of Southern California

Wednesday, 2-5pm, Taper 308
Office Hours: Wednesday, 5-6, Taper Hall 336
and by appointment at vschwart@usc.edu

Course Description:

Over the last two decades, Visual Studies has gained wide currency as a field of research and teaching in universities both in the United States and abroad. Scholars from disciplines as diverse as art history, American studies, literature, anthropology, film and media studies, psychology, history, and gender studies have focused attention on both the cultural specificity of vision and on the ever-widening array of images and objects available for viewing.

This course will provide a critical introduction to the history, methods, and central debates within the field. How have scholars and critics taken up — or in some cases dismissed — the study of visual culture and to what ends? What are the limits and possibilities of the interdisciplinary models on offer? We will explore these questions through a sustained engagement with selected texts that are rich in methodological orientation and that address such subjects as definitions of the image, the experience of seeing, the science of vision, constructions of visuality, and the experience and creation of visual objects.

This course is one of two required courses as part of the USC’s Visual Studies Graduate Certificate (VSGC).

Readings and Seminar Participation:

Readings are extensive. Our primary task as individuals is to read with care. As a group, our goal is to engage in a discussion that helps illuminate the readings. Seminar participation will be considered an essential component of the class. All readings will be posted on a shared Dropbox folder, which can be found here: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/lnc9njbcc4zu01dsyyggq/h?rlkey=9k6jsvi7efk1k4oyt2aytaibn&dl=0. There may also be books you would like to purchase.

Expectations and Requirements: Students are expected to complete all required reading prior to seminar meetings and to discuss the texts and critical issues at hand during each session. Each student must also post a “response” to the week’s readings on the class
website by no later than 5 am Wednesday morning, although posts earlier are welcomed. Students are also expected to read each other’s responses before class and thus we may need to adjust the deadline for submission based on the needs of the group. A response can be a critical summary of the readings, a series of questions, complaints, rants. The idea behind them is to ask each student to take some time to reflect on the week’s readings and to share those thoughts with the class before we meet as a starting point for discussion which I will organize and lead.

The link to the class website can be found here: https://64cbff910c283.site123.me

**Special Events and Lectures:**

As part of this seminar, you are expected to attend at least three special events sponsored by the VSRI, but it is preferable that you attend them all. For Zoom events, please RSVP with vsri@usc.edu to receive the link. All special events are listed below:

- **Wednesday, August 30:** VSGC Welcome Back Event, 5:00-6:30 PM, Fisher Gallery Courtyard.
- **Friday, September 8:** “Dioramas, life-casts, and the lives of sensitive images: When was this? And did it ever happen?” Noémie Etienne, professor of cultural heritage and art history at the University of Vienna, 12:00-1:30 PM, Zoom event.
- **Saturday, September 9:** Exhibition tour of Alfredo Boulton: Looking at Venezuela (1928-1978), with Idurre Alonso, Curator of Latin American Collections, Getty Research Institute, 10:00 AM, Getty Research Institute. **[Limited capacity event]**
- **Wednesday, September 13:** “Bousbir, Casablanca’s Colonial Red-Light District,” Jean-François Staszak, Professor of Geography and the Environment, University of Geneva, Switzerland, 12:30-2:00 PM, SOS 250.
- **Saturday, September 23:** VSGC Grant-Writing Workshop, 10:00-4:30 PM, SOS 250. **[Strongly Recommended for EVERY Student. First year and second year: morning CV-writing. Second and third and above: full day.]**
- **Tuesday, September 26:** VSGC Student Research Presentations, 12:30 PM SOS 250.
- **Thursday, October 12:** “Nos Images: Intersecting Colonial and African Photography in Postwar Belgian Congo,” Sandrine Colard, Assistant Professor of African Art History, Rutgers University, Newark, 12:30-2:00 PM, Zoom event.
- **Wednesday, October 18:** VSGC Student Research Presentations, 12:30-2 PM SOS 250.
- **Thursday, October 26:** “Lenin’s Shadow in Hanoi and Other Responses to Monuments by Contemporary Vietnamese Artists in the Age of Decoloniality,” Nora A. Taylor, Alsdorf Professor of South and Southeast Asian Art History, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 12:30 PM SOS 250.
Final Project:

The final exercise in this class is to make a visual lesson about an image or exhibition about looking or seeing. Your final project is to “visualize” a lesson through PowerPoint, Prezi, Keynote, or an alternative means. Students are asked to reflect upon the specific issue of the production of the image and producers, what images do, questions of looking, circulation, truth, evidence, and knowledge construction relating to vision, visuality, images, seeing, and spectacle. In addition, you are to write a 10–12-page paper, “Visualizing Knowledge,” which reflects on the methods and approaches you used in making your lesson that may or may not have emerged from taking the class. The paper will consider the different “theories and methods” and definitions of Visual Studies encountered in the class and transmitted through your visual presentation of your lesson. In other words, how and why is this an object that relates to a field that might be called “Visual Studies” that is different from how you might have treated this in your home discipline, or is it different at all?

Resources: In preparation for this exercise, please listen to at least two podcasts a week from the BBC Series, “A History of the World in 100 Objects”: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00nrtd2/episodes/downloads

Screen:

Read:
Examples of past visual lessons can be found here:

1. Olivia Armandroff, Picturing a Star, Fall 2021: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w8tUNBJeVf9CyEjjD7DwZUHg3soqa3JE/view?usp=share_link
3. Christopher Persaud, Robert Mapplethorpe, Fall 2021: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VMPkDlVS_n4cbA7YIEPCVaUntalt3EhL/view?usp=share_link
4. Audrey Storm, Windows XP background, Fall 2021: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nTmthJjtccG6v8k18AMi5PoliXHc7yJV/view?usp=share_link

Grading:

Weekly Posts: 20%
Seminar participation: 30%
Visual Lesson: 20%
Final paper: 30%

Schedule of Readings, Seminars, and VSRI Events:

Part I: Definitions

Week 1: August 23
What is a Field of Study? A Discipline? A Method?

OPTIONAL:


**Week 2: August 30**

**What is an Image? What Can It Do?**


**Week 3: September 6**

**Identity and Culture**

Part II: Structuring Concepts

Week 4: September 13

Global Space
Guest: Jean-François Staszak, Professor of Geography and the Environment, University of Geneva, Switzerland


Week 5: September 20

Vision
Guest: Patrick Ellis (via Zoom)

- (For overview) Martin Jay, chapters 2, 3, 4, 5 in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009).

Week 6: September 25

Belief: Two Kinds *(9/27 rescheduled to Monday, 9/25 due travel. Class will be hosted at Prof. Schwartz's house from 5-8 with dinner).*

Land as Theme Park,” in Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006):


Week 7: October 4
Time/ Temporality
Marcus Verhagen, Senior Lecturer at the Sotheby's Institute of Art (by Zoom)


Week 8: October 11
Technology/Medium/Format/Canon/Environment?

- Lawrence Alloway, “Art and the Communications Network,” Canadian Art, no.100 (January 1966).

Week 9: October 18
Cultural Exchange/Circulation/Translation

- Daniela Bleichmar, Visible Empire (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Especially Intro, Ch.1, Ch.3, and Conclusion.
- Screen: Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, Les Statues Meurent Aussi (1953): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzxX5SYU31c (with English Subtitles)
**Part III: Revisiting the Exploding/Expanding Disciplines; Or Has Visual Studies Simply Won?**

**Week 10: October 25**

**Photography: A Medium for Every Field**


**Week 11: November 1**

**Expanded Art History: Fashion**

Guests: Nancy Troy, Professor Emerita, Stanford University and Ann Tartsinis, ABD, Stanford University.


**Week 12: November 8**

**History and Visual Culture**


**Week 13: November 15**

**Expanding Film Studies**

*Guest: Brian R. Jacobson, Professor of Visual Culture, California Institute of Technology.*


**Screen:**


• *Shellarama* (Richard Cawston, Shell, 1965, 16min): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sT16JijC4_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sT16JijC4_Y)


• Total running time w/o *Sierra Madre* = 86 minutes (212 minutes with *Sierra Madre*)

**Week 14: November 29**

**Presentations**

10–15-page paper due electronically by December 10 at 9am.

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**Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

**Academic Conduct:**

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](http://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in
SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems:

Student Health Counseling Services - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call suicidepreventionlifeline.org
Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) | Title IX - (213) 740-5086 equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu
Information about how to get help or help a survivor of harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following protected characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations.

Bias Assessment Response and Support - (213) 740-2421 studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support
Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions for appropriate investigation and response.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776 dsp.usc.edu
Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.
**USC Support and Advocacy** - (213) 821-4710
studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa
Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

**Diversity at USC** - (213) 740-2101
diversity.usc.edu
Information on events, programs and training, the Provost’s Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

**USC Emergency** - **UPC**: (213) 740-4321, **HSC**: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call
dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu
Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

**USC Department of Public Safety** - **UPC**: (213) 740-6000, **HSC**: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call
dps.usc.edu
Non-emergency assistance or information.