

VISS 501 Introduction to Visual Studies: Methods and Debates
Fall 2025

Vanessa R. Schwartz, University of Southern California

Wednesday, 2-5pm, Taper Hall 308, 4 units
Office Hours: Taper Hall 336
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 visibility, 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/4t4sozlasdwcvbmytnaot/ANgNZafNBkwyYVa9Ljd3n7s?rlkey=zc58o8tu3u7osawn2ra93dyva&st=aoyphu49&dl=0>

There may also be books you will need to purchase.

Expectations and Requirements: Students are expected to complete all required readings 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 is 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://688d176f1463e.site123.me>

Special Events and Lectures:

As part of this seminar, you are expected to attend the events sponsored by the VSRI. For Zoom events, please RSVP with vsri@usc.edu to receive the link. All events are listed below:

- **September 3**, 12:45-2pm, SOS 250: VSGC Back to School Lunch
- **September 3**, 5pm, TBD: Book Talk: *Writing Borderless Histories of Art: Human Exceptionalism and the Climate Crisis* with author Claire Farago, Professor Emerita, Art and Art History, University of Colorado Boulder (sponsored by the USC Levan Institute for the Humanities)
- **September 13**, 10:30am-12:30pm, Getty Center: USC-LACMA History of Photography Seminar: Exhibition Tour: *Queer Lens: A History of Photography* with co-curator Ryan Linkof
- **October 8**, 12:30-2pm, DML 240: Book Talk: *Mary Cassatt between Paris and New York: The Making of a Transatlantic Legacy* with author Ruth Iskin, Professor Emerita, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
- **October 18**, 10am-4:30pm, SOS 250: VSGC CV and Grant Writing Workshop
- **October 22**, 12:30-2pm, SOS 250: Looking for Louis Delgrès: Caribbean History and the Epistemologies of Collage with Robert Decker, Postdoctoral Scholar, USC Department of French and Italian
- **October 29**, 12:30-2pm, DML 240: Book Talk: *A Flood of Pictures: The Formation of a Picture Culture in the United States* with author Michael Leja, James and Nan Wagner Farquhar Professor Emeritus of History of Art, University of Pennsylvania
- **November 19**, 12-2pm, DML 240: Book Talk: *The Cinema of Extractions: Film Materials and Their Forms* with author Brian R. Jacobson, Professor of Visual Culture, Caltech (co-sponsored with the Theory Today working group)

Final Project:

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, visibility, images, seeing, and spectacle. In addition, you are also 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 the field of “Visual Studies” that is different from how you might have treated this in your home discipline? 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:

- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Episode 1 1972.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pDE4VX_9Kk&list=PLn6KyJ4PmZsPhigNqPlWGEoCgBHJbhib3

Read:

- W.J.T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (August 2002): 165-181.

Examples of past visual lessons can be found here:

1. Rose Bishop, The Hollywood Sign, Fall 2021:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/18NC_Q2ogOEVxbGhL6spdNgk5R76JWwDj/view?usp=share_link
2. Audrey Storm, Windows XP background, Fall 2021:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nTmthJiTccG6v8k18AMi5PolIxHc7yJV/view?usp=share_link

Grading:

Weekly Posts: 35%

Seminar participation: 15%

Visual Lesson: 20%

Final paper : 30%

Culture of Discussion and Debate:

First, why we are here.

Toni Morrison, 250th Convocation, Princeton University, 1996:

“The wisdom of the dead and the energy of the living merge to become a tradition that informs the present and shapes the future. There are few places, very few places left, other than great universities, where ... both the wisdom of the dead coupled with the doubt of the living are vigorously encouraged, welcomed, become the very stuff of education, the pulse of teaching, the engine of research, the consequence of learning. No faculty member worth the profession has ever taken for granted as fixed truth or fiat all he or she has learned. The nature of our profession is to doubt, to expand, to enhance, to review, to interrogate. But no faculty member is able to question in a vacuum or is fired to innovate, to create because she or he is interested in erasing the inheritance, the authority of her discipline.

No student is expected to be content with the acquisition of data, of information. It is demanded of her to move beyond the stasis of what is known to what is knowable; toward more and other knowledge, knowledge that might one day contribute to the wisdom of the past.

Tradition is not there to bedevil us. It is there for us. It is not there to arrest us; it is there to arouse us. That is the continuum; that is the reconcilability of tradition and the future.”

Guidelines and assumptions about classroom conduct: (adapted from the FIRE website):

As students, you are here to learn not just facts, but how to think critically think and reason. In many of the classrooms you’ll enter, your preconceived notions, and sometimes deeply held beliefs, will be challenged.

Maintaining academic freedom is a core value of our university. For teaching and learning to flourish, professors must be free from institutional censorship and intimidation and must be allowed to run class as they see fit in order to facilitate learning and discussion. Similar to how First Amendment protections allow us to question orthodoxy and test controversial ideas, academic freedom allows professors and students to participate in open disagreement, to question assumptions, to articulate exploratory ideas without fear of retribution.

You are invited to question your professor. Yet the professor maintains the right to determine the content of class lessons and the flow of classroom discussion. Curiosity

and a healthy amount of skepticism are key components of learning, but respecting your professors as leaders of the classroom environment is also expected. Classrooms are not public forums, such as public sidewalks or greenspaces; they are spaces where discussion is curated by your professor based on expertise and years of hard work that have put them in the position to teach at this esteemed university.

AI Policy: There is literally no place for the use of AI in the pursuit of an advanced degree in the Humanities at this time. You are expected to read the course and research materials yourself and write all assignments without the assistance of anyone else. It is conceivable that instead of using a library search engine to help with bibliographic searching, you could employ AI as a search tool.

Schedule of Readings

Seminars and VSRI Events:

Part I: Definitions

Week 1: August 27

What is a Field of Study? A Discipline? A Method?

- Horst Bredekamp, "A Neglected Tradition? Art History as *Bildwissenschaft*," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Spring 2003): 418-428.
- James Elkins, "Art History and Images That Are Not Art," *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (1995), 553-571.
- Scott Heller, "Visual Images Replace Text as Focal Point for Many Scholars" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 19, 1996.
- W. J. T. Mitchell, "Introduction," and "The Pictorial Turn," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 1-34.
- Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski, "Visual Culture's New History: Twenty-First Century Interdisciplinarity and Its Nineteenth-Century Objects," in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, eds. Schwartz and Przyblyski (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3-14.
- Screen: *Three Minutes: A Lengthening* (2021) (stream on Hulu or rent on Amazon)
- Background Reading (OPTIONAL): Susanne Von Falkenhausen, *Beyond the Mirror: Seeing in Art History and Visual Culture Studies* (Berlin: Bielefeld transcript Verlag, 2020)

Week 2: September 3

What is an Image? What Can It Do?

- W. J. T. Mitchell, "What Is an Image?" *New Literary History* 15, no. 3 (Spring 1984), 503-537.

- Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes, "What do pictures want? Interview with W. J. T. Mitchell," *Image & Narrative*, November 2006. <https://www.visual-studies.com/interviews/mitchell.html>
- [Emanuele Coccia, *Sensible Life: A Micro-Ontology of the Image* \(New York: Fordham University Press, 2016\).](#)
- [Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency* \(Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2018\), esp. 1-30; 137-192; 265-288.](#)
- Daniel Boorstin, "Introduction" and Chapter One, in *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

Events:

- **September 3**, 12:45-2pm, SOS 250: VSGC Back to School Lunch
- **September 3**, 5pm, TBD: Book Talk: *Writing Borderless Histories of Art: Human Exceptionalism and the Climate Crisis* with author Claire Farago, Professor Emerita, Art and Art History, University of Colorado Boulder (sponsored by the USC Levan Institute for the Humanities)

Week 3: September 10

Identity and Visual Culture: Theory or Practice?

- Paul Martineau and Ryan Linkof, *Queer Lens: A History of Photography* (Getty Publications, 2025)
- Richard Meyer, "At Home in Marginal Domains," *Documents* no. 18 (2000): 19-32
- Deborah Bright, "Introduction: Pictures, Perverts, and Politics," in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1-19
- Jonathan Katz, Introduction to *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, ed. Jonathan Katz and David C. Ward (Smithsonian Institution, 2010), 12-61
- Screen: Screen Buckley and Baldwin Debate: <https://aeon.co/videos/the-legendary-debate-that-laid-down-us-political-lines-on-race-justice-and-history>

Event:

- **September 13**, 10:30am-12:30pm, Getty Center: USC-LACMA History of Photography Seminar: Exhibition Tour: *Queer Lens: A History of Photography* with co-curator Ryan Linkof

Part II: Structuring Concepts

Week 4: September 17

Medium: What is a Medium?

- John Durham Peters, Introduction "In Media Res," in *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015), 1-12
- Johanna Drucker, "Art," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, eds. W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), 3-18.
- W.J.T. Mitchell, "There are no Visual Media," *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4, no. 2, (August 2005): 257-266.
- Interview with Jonathen Sterne: <https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2014/04/the-meaning-of-the-mp3-format-an-interview-with-jonathan-sterne/>
- Olivier Lugon, "Photography and Scale: Projection, Exhibition, Collection," *Art History*, 38, no. 2 (2015), 386-403.

Week 5: September 24

Vision

- Patrick Ellis, *Aeroscopes: Media of the Bird's-Eye View* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021).
- Oliver Sacks, "To See and Not See," in *An Anthropologist on Mars* (New York Vintage 1996), 108-152.
- 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: October 1 (Kol Nidre – we might try to move up earlier in the day)

Time/Temporality

- Vanessa R Schwartz, *Jet Age Aesthetic: The Glamour of Media in Motion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).
- Christopher Lasch, "Counting by Tens," *Salmagundi* 81 (Winter 1989), 51-60.
- Klaus-Peter Sick, review of Kalifa Dominique (ed.), *Les Noms d'époque. De "Restauration" à "années de plomb"*: <https://shs.cairn.info/journal-vingt-et-vingt-et-un-revue-d-histoire-2020-4-page-1?lang=en>
- Screen: Bill Morrison, *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (2016). Available on Kanopy.

Week 7: October 8

Agency

Guest Visit: Ruth Iskin, Professor Emerita, Ben-Gurion University

- Ruth Iskin, *Mary Cassatt between Paris and New York: The Making of a Transatlantic Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2025).
- Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* 25th Anniversary Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), especially chapters 1, 2, 4, 7, 11.
- Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, "Recognition and Renown: The Survival of Artistic Reputation," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 1 (July 1988): 79-109

Event

- **October 8**, 12:30-2pm, DML 240: Book Talk: *Mary Cassatt between Paris and New York: The Making of a Transatlantic Legacy* with author Ruth Iskin, Professor Emerita, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Part III: Revisiting the Exploding/Expanding Disciplines; Or Has Visual Studies Simply Won?

Week 8: October 15

Photography: A Medium for Every Field

- Michael Allan, "Picturing *Other* Languages: Reflections on Photography and Philology" *College English* 82, no. 1 (September 2019), 96-114.
- Nadya Bair, "The International Origins of "Concerned Photography": Cornell Capa in the United States, Japan, and Israel," *American Art* Vol. 36 No. 2 (Summer 2022): 74-101.
- Courtney Baker, "Emmett Till, Justice, and the Task of Recognition," in *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015): 69-93.
- Amanda Wasielewski, "Unnatural Images: On AI-Generated Photos," *Critical Inquiry* 51, no. 1 (Autumn 2024): 1-29.
- Brooke Belisle, "Critical Response I: Photography and AI: Why It Matters, Though," *Critical Inquiry* 51, no. 2 (Winter 2025): 397-404.
- Ina Blom and Matthew Fuller, "Critical Response II: Absconding from the Index," *Critical Inquiry* 51, no. 2 (Winter 2025): 405-408.
- Mark Downie, "Critical Response III: Some Field Notes," *Critical Inquiry* 51, no. 2 (Winter 2025): 409-415.
- Avery Slater, "Critical Response IV: This Photo Does Not Exist: Generativity and the AI Gaze," *Critical Inquiry* 51, no. 2 (Winter 2025): 416-422.
- Amanda Wasielewski, "Critical Response V: AI-Generated Images and Photography: The General and the Specific," *Critical Inquiry* 51, no. 2 (Winter 2025): 423-431.

Event:

- **October 18**, 10am-4:30pm, SOS 250: VSGC CV and Grant Writing Workshop

Week 9: October 22

Colonial and Post-Colonial Images

Guest: Robert Decker, USC

- Work in progress (to be distributed before the session)
- Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover,

Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Springer Netherlands, 2002), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0570-8_2.

- Mark McKinney, "Redrawing French Empire in Comics: An Introduction," in *Redrawing French Empire in Comics* (Ohio State University Press, 2013), 1–34

Event:

- **October 22**, 12:30-2pm, SOS 250: Looking for Louis Delgrès: Caribbean History and the Epistemologies of Collage with Robert Decker, Postdoctoral Scholar, USC Department of French and Italian

Week 10: October 29

The Mass Image Remakes Visual Culture

Guest: Michael Leja

- Michael Leja, *A Flood of Pictures: The Formation of a Picture Culture in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2025)
- Francois Brunet, "Introduction: No Representation without Circulation" in *Circulation*, ed. Francois Brunet (Chicago: Terra Foundation for American Art, 2017): 10-39.
- Vanessa R. Schwartz, "Walter Benjamin for Historians," *The American Historical Review* 106:5 (December 2001): 1721-43.

Event:

- **October 29**, 12:30-2pm, DML 240: Book Talk: *A Flood of Pictures: The Formation of a Picture Culture in the United States* with author Michael Leja, James and Nan Wagner Farquhar Professor Emeritus of History of Art, University of Pennsylvania

Week 11: November 5

- Students need to purchase: Glenn Fleishman, *How Comics are Made: A Visual History from the Drawing Board to the Printed Page* (Andrew McMeel Publishing, 2025)
- Animation Obsessive, "We've Made a Rare Animation Artbook Free to All," 10/31/2021, <https://animationobsessive.substack.com/p/our-treat-to-you>
- Tom Gunning, "The Art of Succession: Reading, Writing, and Watching Comics," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 36-51, in Special Issue: Comics and Media (ed. Chute and Jagoda)
- Hillary Chute and Patrick Jagoda, "Special Issue: Comics and Media," Introduction, *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 1-10

Week 12: November 12:

Environmental Humanities and the Image

Guest: Kimia Shahi, Asst. Prof. of Art History, USC

- Work in progress: Kimia Shahi, "Rendering Whales" (to be distributed by November 1)
- Herman Melville, "Of Whales in paint; in Teeth; in Wood; in sheet-iron; in stone; in mountains; in stars," Ch. 57 in *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale* (1851).
- Alan Braddock, "Introduction: Implication," in *Implication: An Eco-Critical Dictionary for Art History* (2013)
- Bathsheba Demuth, "Prologue: The Migration North," and "Whale Country" in *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (W.W. Norton, 2019)

Week 13: November 19:

Expanding Film Studies

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

- Gunning, "Cinema of Attraction(s): Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant Garde," 1986, in *The Cinema of Attraction Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006) 381-388.
- Brian R. Jacobson, *The Cinema of Extractions: Film Materials and Their Forms* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2025).

Screen:

- *The Lonedale Operator* (D.W. Griffith, Biograph, 1911, 17min): <https://www.filmpreservation.org/preserved-films/screening-room/the-lonedale-operator-1911>
- *Tungsten: A Treasure of the Sierra Nevada* (Union Carbide, ca.1960s, 17min): https://archive.org/details/caineemc_000029
- *Shellarama* (Richard Cawston, Shell, 1965, 16min): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sT16JijC4_Y
- Need DVD (can rent from USC Library) or pay to stream: *Sunshine Molly* (Lois Weber, 1915, 36min): <https://www.kinolorber.com/product/pioneers-first-women-filmmakers-dvd-1>; and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (John Huston, Warner Bros.-First National, 1926, 126min)
- Total running time w/o *Sierra Madre* = 86 minutes (212 minutes with *Sierra Madre*)

Event:

- **November 19**, 12-2pm, DML 240: Book Talk: *The Cinema of Extractions: Film Materials and Their Forms* with author Brian R. Jacobson, Professor of Visual Culture, Caltech (co-sponsored with the Theory Today working group)

Week 14: December 3

Presentations

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

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. 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/ssu

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.



