VISS 501: Introduction to Visual Studies: Methods and Debates

Professor Vanessa R. Schwartz
Fall 2021
University of Southern California

Wednesday, 2-5pm, CPA 254
Office Hours: By zoom appointment at vschwart@usc.edu

Seminar 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 for USC’s VSGC.

Books for Purchase:


Reading PDFs:
All readings in Dropbox, by week, unless a URL link is next to the citation in syllabus (i.e., links to eBooks or websites). Dropbox Link:
https://www.dropbox.com/sh/icophzwhfgkavqp/AAAQ5C2sQvAni6v_7bagG-9ha?dl=0
**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 is an essential component of the class. Students and the instructor are welcome to “test” out ideas and say things that they might not be sure of or even believe and for which they thus are not held permanently accountable. This is a space to test concepts and ideas as in any lab. All seminar members are welcomed to express themselves freely, including in respectful and clear disagreement with each other. Disagreement between students and/or with the instructor is considered a vital part of advancing knowledge and of academic life more generally.

**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 electronic blackboard on the class website by no later than 5 am Wednesday morning, although posts earlier are welcomed.

Class website: https://5f025c71a1b5d.site123.me/

Class Slack Channel: https://join.slack.com/share/zt-u4o9jqi-7A9K-i0MAi1MHvrdDZNTQg?skip_onboarding=1&accepted_invite_id=I02AM2N9USEStudents 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 that the instructor will organize and lead.

**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. See VSRI website and VSRI Slack channel (log in with your USC email credentials and hit launch VSRI channel):

https://dornsife.usc.edu/vsri/

https://app.slack.com/client/T013XQR1J6P/C0143PV737E

**Final Project:** Please listen to at least five podcasts from the BBC Series, “A History of the World in 100 Objects” (http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00nrtd2/episodes/downloads?page=4). In addition, please screen multiple episodes of Kenneth Clark’s *Civilization* and Raoul Peck’s *Exterminate All the Brutes* on HBO Max. (see Review in NYT here: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/06/arts/television/review-exterminate-all-the-brutes.html?mc=aud_dev&ad-keywords=auddevgate&gclid=Cj0KCQiwxd5SHBhdAR1sAG6zhiIVtCiCzz9HNxa6SvDpFqgAonPL7I_gwnnVMAg0pFK2SH5iEDQGK28aAgIrEALw_wcB&gclsrc=aw.ds)
The final exercise in this class is to make a visual lesson about an image, an object, an exhibition, or about looking or seeing. Your final project is to “visualize” a lesson about your object through PowerPoint, Prezi, Keynote or an alternative means. THIS IS TO BE UPLOADED to the class website by November 29 and watched by class on December 1.

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. Students are asked to reflect on 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 identity. In other words, how and why is this an object that relates to a field that might be called “visual studies” and how is your approach different from how you might have treated this in your home discipline, or is it different at all? Due December 12 at 11 am via email or link to the instructor.

In preparation for this, please also read:

Grading:
Weekly Posts: 25%
Seminar Discussion: 25%
Final presentation and paper: 40%
Contribution to activities: 10%

Schedule of Readings, Seminars, and VSRI Events

Part I: Definitions and Contextualization

Week 1: August 25: Setting the Stage
- Screen: I Am Not Your Negro (2016) and Summer of Soul (2021)

USC-LACMA History of Photography Seminar
Sunday, August 29
10-11:30am, LACMA Resnick Pavilion
Acting Out: Cabinet Cards and the Making of Modern Photography, 1870-1900
Britt Salveson and Thomas W. Laqueur, Helen Fawcett Professor of History Emeritus, UC Berkeley
Tuesday, August 31
5-6:30pm PST, Zoom
Discussion
Week 2: September 1: What is a Field of Study? A Discipline? A Method?

- Von Falkenhausen, *Beyond the Mirror: Seeing in Art History and Visual Culture Studies*

Images out of Time Launch
Thursday, September 2
12:30-2pm PST, Zoom
Panel discussion of *A Palimpsest of the Africa Museum*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whhIAn5Pw-o

VSGC Graduate Student Research Presentations and Lunch
Wednesday, September 8
12:30-2PM, DML 240

Week 3: September 8: Art, Art History and Visual Culture

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPumIXye5Qs (Gombrich Interview)
  https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/02/john-berger-obituary
Screen:

Week 4: September 15: Visual Studies Now!
Guest: Rob Gordon-Fogelson, Newly Defended PhD


Part Two: Key Questions

• Michael Allan, “Picturing Other Languages: Reflections on Photography and Philology” College English 82, no. 1 (September 2019), 96-114.
• Earthrise: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/opinion/earthrise-moon-space-nasa.html

Week 6: September 29: What is Sight? Other Senses? REMOTE
Read:

VSGC Student Research Presentations and Lunch
Wednesday, October 6
12:30-2pm
SOS 250

Week 7: October 6: Truth and the Image:
CV and Grant Writing Workshop
Saturday October 9
10:00am to 4:30pm SOS 250
[Strongly Recommended for EVERY Student. First year and second year: morning CV-writing. Second and third and above: full day.]

Week 8: October 13: What Is the Object of Study? Fashion
Guest: Professor Nancy Troy, Stanford University
Read:

Images Out of Time Seminar
Tuesday, October 19
12:30-2pm PST
*The Tyranny of Morphology and the Presence of Things*
Hybrid event: DML 240 and Zoom

Week 9: October 20: Devotion and Things

Week 10: October 27: Do Certain “Moments” Matter More: The fin-de-siècle
Guest: Rhonda Garelick, Dean, School of Art and Design, Parsons

Optional:

USC-LACMA History of Photography Seminar
Wednesday, October 27
6:30-8pm PST, location TBD
Loie Fuller Between Photography and Film
Rhonda Garelick, Dean, School of Art and Design, Parsons

Part III. Applications

VSGC Student Research Presentations and Lunch
Wednesday, November 3
12:30-2pm, SOS 250

Week 11: November 3: Circulation and Empire
Guest: Daniela Bleichmar, Professor of Art History and History, USC
Read:
• Daniela Bleichmar, Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment (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=LkkIDFy8ifQ: with English Subtitles)

Week 12: November 10: Picturing Race and Power
Guest: Matthew-Fox Amato, Asst. Professor, History, University of Idaho
Read:
• 3) Matthew Fox-Amato, "Civil War Iconoclasm" (article in progress)

Week 13: November 17: What do Photographs DO?
Guest: Catherine Clark, Associate Professor, History and Global Languages and Cultures, MIT
Read:


**Week 14: Reschedule: November 21-23: Pictures and Time**

Seminar and dinner at Vanessa’s: Sunday, November 21, 2:30-7pm preferred

**Pictures and Time**

Read:

- Schwartz essay in progress on Time-Life Books

Screen:

- Bill Morrison, *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (2016) (available on Amazon Prime)

**Week 15: December 1: Presentations: Remote**

Upload presentations by 29th Class-time is the Discussion of each presentation

10-15 page paper due electronically by December 12 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
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.