

Visual Culture

Digital Images, Virtual Reality, Videogames and their Cultural Roots

SYLLABUS

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Aim of the Module

The course aims at exploring some of the most recent and relevant theoretical frameworks within the field of visual culture studies and image theory. It will give the students the chance to know a set of methodologies that in contemporary society seem crucial in order to undertake any activity of image critique. After a general introduction, focused on the analysis of some specific key concepts for visual studies (lessons 1-4), the course will more deeply scrutinize how photography, cinema and video-games can be analyzed through the theoretical frameworks outlined.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the module the students will:

- Have a general understanding of some of the most relevant and interesting theories in the field of visual culture studies.
- Strengthen and problematize previous knowledges acquired in the field of aesthetic, media and film studies, history of visual arts, games studies.
- Develop a new attitude towards contemporary images, focused on their political value.

Teaching Methodologies

Collective brainstorming; seminar lessons intended to collectively engage with the topics presented; vision and collective comment of audiovisual material; collective or independent reading of short texts.

Assignments

The final mark of the exam will be defined as follow:

- 50%: written test on the first part of the course (lecture 1-4). The test will be focused on the methodological and theoretical frameworks outlined in the first part of the module. For the mandatory readings and movie screens for this paper, please see the relevant section above. The date of the paper will be **June 28th** (during the last lecture).
- 50%: short essay (3-4 pages max.) in which every student will analyze a chosen audiovisual text (photography, exhibition, film, tv series, video-game, graphic novel etc.) using the frameworks pointed out during the course. The essay must be sent to the e-mail address giuseppe.previtali@unibg.it no later than **July 4th**.

Detailed outline of the lectures

Lesson 1 – June 17th (h. 10-13)

Introduction to visual culture studies. What does it mean to critically look at an image? Brainstorming and discussion. Keywords for visual culture studies: the image.

Lesson 2 – June 17th (h. 14-17)

Genealogies of visual culture studies. Keywords for visual culture studies: the medium. The connections between images (theories of montage) and media (intermediality, transmediality, multimediality).

Lesson 3 – June 19th (h. 10-13)

Keywords for visual culture studies: the gaze. Philosophical theories of gaze and perception. Gender, race and power as categories involved within the gaze. Do the images look at us?

Lesson 4 – June 19th (h. 14-17)

Keyword for visual culture studies: the apparatus. What is the difference between device and apparatus? In which way our devices shape our relationship with the world and help constructing the way in which we conceptualize it?

Lesson 5 – June 21st (h. 10-13)

Classic theories of photography. The problem of indexicality and the evidential quality of the photographic image, the relationship with death.

Lesson 6 – June 24th (h. 10-13)

Contemporary photography and digital culture. Photography, war and trauma: the cases of 9/11 and Abu Ghraib's archive. Photography as a counter-hegemonic practice.

Lesson 7 – June 24th (h. 14-17)

Theories of cinema beyond postmodernism: from the digital turn to the image as a form of life.

Lesson 8 – June 26th (h. 10-13)

Theorizing contemporary cinema: relocation, big data and algorithms.

Lesson 9 – June 26th (h. 14-17)

Short history of video-games from 1950's to the contemporary age. Video-games in the contemporary mediascape: contaminations with cinema; aesthetical and theoretical aspects.

Lesson 10 – June 28th (h. 10-13)

Final remarks on Video-games.

Written Paper (In the second part of the lesson).

Readings

Every text will be made available in .pdf format. The readings marked with (*) are mandatory for the written test.

1. J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London 2004, pp. 12-14. (*)
2. N. Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look. A Counter History of Visuality*, Duke University Press, Durham - London 2011, pp. XIII-XV and 1. (*)
3. W. J. T. Mitchell, *There Is no Visual Media*, in *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 4 no. 2, 2005, pp. 257-266. (*)
4. L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in L. Brady, M. Cohen (eds.) *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, New York, Oxford University Press 1999, pp. 833-844. (*)
5. G. Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, pp. 1-24. (*)

6. R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1981, pp. 4-7, 9-10, 25-27, 42-43, 85-89, 94-99.
7. S. F. Anderson, *Technologies of Vision. The War Between Data and Images*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2017, pp. 7-21, 125-139.
8. B. Perron, M. J. P. Wolf, *Game Theory Reader 2*, Routledge, New York - London 2009, pp. 45-64.

Film List

The students will be requested to know specific passages from the following movies and videos that will be screened during classes. The movies/videos marked with (*) are mandatory for the written test.

1. *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) (*)
2. *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) (*)
3. *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1983) (*)
4. *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) (*)
5. *How Not to Be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (Hito Steyerl, 2013)
6. *Hardcore Henry* (Ilya Naishuller, 2015)
7. *Cam* (Daniel Goldhaber, 2018)
8. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (David Slade, 2018)