Program: CET Vietnam: Development Studies
Course Title: Visualizing Southeast Asia
Course Code: VS290
Total Hours: 45
Recommended Credits: 3
Suggested Cross Listings: Asian Studies; Visual Studies and Communication; Anthropology, Sociology, Environmental and/or Gender Studies, where appropriate.
Language of Instruction: English
Prerequisites/Requirements: none

Course Description

This course introduces theoretical and practical issues surrounding visual studies, documentary photography/video and media, with a focus on Vietnam and Asia. We will read key texts in media and visual theory, and confront these texts with our own practical fieldwork, street photography, and visual and ethnographic encounters in Vietnamese cities and rural areas. In collaboration with other workshop participants, professional photographers and faculty, students will complete a documentary photographic essay or documentary video as part of a portfolio that analyzes their visual and theoretical work, objectives and outcomes. We reflect on the media representations that pervade contemporary images of Asia and attempt to answer questions such as: How are media images of the Vietnam War, of violent conflict, refugee experiences or poverty, refracted in everyday life in Vietnamese streets and homes today? How do we make sense of experiencing and conducting research in Vietnamese society today, 40 years after the end of the war?

This course provides students the opportunity to focus on and document their specific interests and experiences. In addition to the relevance to visual studies majors, examples of the connection between this course and other majors can include:

- documenting daily lives of families, market women, workers, street children or street sellers (anthropology or sociology majors)
- visual documentation of ritual and festival activities (anthropology, religious studies and history majors)
- visual analyses of museum displays and activities (history and museum studies students)
- tourism sites and tourism industry development (marketing, business majors)
- emerging new media and arts environments (communication and art majors)
- impacts of urban planning, and demolition and new architecture (urban studies, architecture) environmental impacts and challenges of rapid economic growth (environmental studies majors)

We help all students to visually document their proposed research topics, and develop portfolios specifically connected to their majors, research interests, internships and daily experiences in Vietnam.
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Objectives
During this course, students will gain the following:

- An overall introduction to visual studies and media studies, as well as questions of power and representation of war, political conflict, and everyday life in rural and urban Asia in media images.
- A practical, fieldwork and workshop-based introduction to documentary photography/video methodologies in contemporary Southeast Asia and Asia, supplemented by a sustained engagement with theories of visual representation and documentation.
- An understanding of the aftermath of violent conflict and key development challenges in Vietnam and Southeast Asia today, and how these are represented and narrated visually in Western and Asian media.

Course Requirements
Active participation is essential in this course. Students will create a visual archive (photography, video, documentary) and a portfolio that presents and analyzes their visual work. They are required to attend each class, conduct street photography projects, and participate in all seminar discussions and workshops. Students must read all required materials before coming to class and be ready to discuss topics and their own photography/video work in detail with other students, workshop participants and faculty.

Readings average around 30-40 pages per class session and are focused on visual and media theory.

Students are required to complete bi-weekly street photography projects and be ready to discuss these in correlation with the week’s readings.

Students submit a final visual documentary project, either street/ethnographic photography or video, as part of a portfolio that discusses their objectives. Visual work, topics, and approaches are discussed in advance with faculty and professional photographers who run the visual workshops. Portfolios describe the student’s approaches and methodological challenges when conducting the visual work and research.

Evaluation
The course grade is determined as follows:

- Field photography/visual projects: 30%
- Participation (seminars and workshops): 30%
- Visual portfolio and presentation: 40%

Primary Texts
A course packet of readings in hard copy and e-versions will be available.

Readings will be selected from the following sources (given here as examples):


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Supplementary Texts
Additional essays, documentary films and excerpts of feature films, such as:
- “When the Tenth Month Comes,” directed by Dang Nhat Minh (1985).
- “How to Behave (A Story of Kindness),” by Tran Van Thuy (documentary, 1985).
- “Cyclo,” directed by Tran Anh Hung (Sony Films, 1995).

Outline of Course Content
Note: Students cover approximately one topic every two weeks plus one week for each workshop.

**Topic 1: Arresting Images (A Very Quick Introduction to Visual Studies)**
- How do visual images work, and what are their connections to reality, history and memory?
- What are the impacts of omnipresent image worlds on individual and collective experience, social and political life, and media representations?
- What is mass media? What are the relationships between images, text and the “real world” in traditional media and in new, online media?
- Do images desensitize toward violence and the pain of others?

**Topic 2: “Vietnam” and Media Wars**
- Why was “Vietnam” the first “televised war”? What does this mean exactly?
- Does a war become “real” once there are photographs of it and they appear in the media?
- Do images determine and shape which catastrophes and violent conflicts we pay attention to, and how we interpret them?
- Why are photographic and video images so intimately tied to “propaganda”?

**Topic 3: Rural Nostalgia**
- Why do many Vietnamese and Southeast Asian photographers privilege “beautiful images” of pastoral rural landscapes?
- What are some of the visual “codes” of Vietnamese representations of war, people and landscapes in Vietnam? How do these differ from those in US or European media?

**Workshop 1: Street Photography (with Quinn Mattingly, professional photographer)**
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Quinn lives and works in Vietnam. He has been staff photographer at several English language magazines in Vietnam, such as The Word and Oi. His photographs have been featured in The New York Times, National Geographic, Le Monde, etc.

http://quinnmattingly.photoshelter.com/#/index

He will lead a workshop on the ethics and practice of street photography in Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City, based on photographic work by the seminar participants.

**Topic 4: Representing Everyday Life**
- Why is street photography seen as a key for “real encounters”? Are its images and representations more “genuine” and “truer” than in other forms of photography or cinema?
- How can street photography contribute to field research and ethnography, and help document livelihoods, social change and inequality?

**Topic 5: Visual Stereotypes of “Mysterious Asia”**
- What are some of the basic clichés and representations of Asia?
- Where do these visual clichés and stereotypes originate from?
- Why are they still so popular in media and popular culture, and how are they evolving?

**Workshop 2: Twenty Four Hours in the City (with Nicolas Cornet, professional photographer)**
Nicolas Cornet has over 25 years of experience as a professional photographer. He first visited Vietnam in 1987, and has published several books, including *Vietnam: A Sense of Place* (Thames & Hudson, 2009).

http://ilovemycity.vn/fr/#winners
http://ilovemycity.vn/fr/#authors

He will lead a workshop and field project of documentation of “24 hours in Ho Chi Minh City” and its surroundings. Students will explore less familiar images and places, and document the quirky, the invisible and the unknown in this emerging metropolis.

**Topic 6: Visual Documentary and Emergent Southeast Asia?**
- What are some of the impacts of rapid social change on Asian livelihoods, rural and urban landscapes?
- How can these processes – rapid urbanization, demolition, environmental issues, growing inequalities, educational and health care challenges – be documented visually?
- What are some of the new images and representations of emerging Southeast Asia in media, and especially in new Asian online platforms, new documentary photography and cinema?