Program: CET Vietnam: Development Studies
Course Title: Visualizing Southeast Asia
Course Code: HC/MDST 290
Total Hours: 45
Recommended Credits: 3
Primary Discipline / Suggested Cross Listings: Media Studies / Asian Studies, Communication, Anthropology, Sociology, Environmental Studies, Gender Studies
Language of Instruction: English
Prerequisites/Requirements: None

Description

This course investigates and problematizes the visual portrayals of history, culture and contemporary societies in Southeast Asia, with a focus on Vietnam. Through photography, filmography, new media, and other visual representations of the Vietnamese experience, we consider the ways that international media have propagated the legacy of the Vietnam War, perpetuated ideas of Vietnamese victimization and poverty, and constricted international perceptions of Vietnam. The course also introduces students to important visual works that have shaped domestic Vietnamese historical and cultural discussions and have contributed to a more multifaceted, nuanced “Vietnamese identity”. These visual works are supplemented by key texts on Vietnamese identity and course participants will confront and supplement these texts with their own practical fieldwork, street photography, and visual and ethnographic encounters in Vietnam.

We reflect on the media representations that pervade contemporary images of Vietnam and attempt to answer questions such as: How are media images of the Vietnam War, of violent conflict, refugee experiences, and poverty, refracted in everyday life in contemporary Vietnamese society? How does media portrayal of urban Vietnam and rural Vietnam differ with respect to warfare, and how do we make sense of experiencing and conducting research in Vietnamese society today, more than 40 years after the end of the Vietnam War?

This course provides students with the opportunity to focus on and document their specific interests and experiences relating to Vietnamese identity and culture. The program’s Traveling Seminars offer unique opportunities to learn about and document alternative perspectives on Vietnamese identity. Site visits and guest lectures during the Traveling Seminars have included:

- Learning about different communities in Vietnam, including migrant workers, displaced children, Vietnam’s LGBTQ community, artist communes, religious minorities, and senior citizens, among others.
- Opportunities for visual documentation of ritual and festival activities
- Documenting the environmental impacts of urban planning and the challenges of rapid economic growth to both rural and urban communities
- We help all students to (1) articulate their proposed research interest and subject of visual
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documentation, and (2) develop visual portfolios connected to their majors, research interests, internships and daily experiences in Vietnam.

Objectives

During this course, students gain the following:

- An appreciation for the diversity of Vietnamese cultures and identities, as represented through historical and contemporary works of visual media.
- 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 both Vietnamese and American media.
- An overall introduction to the role of visual studies and media images in answering questions of power and representation of war and political conflict in rural and urban Vietnam.
- A practical, fieldwork and workshop-based introduction to documentary photography/video methodologies.

Course Requirements

Active participation is essential in this course. Students create a Field Photography (visual archive: photography, video, documentary) for in-class presentation (5 minutes each) and a Final Project (final visual documentary project together with a write-up of maximum 1000 words about the project -- description and analysis). 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.

Methods of Evaluation

The course grade is determined as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field Photography</td>
<td>30% (in-class presentation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Project (visual portfolio)</td>
<td>40% (to be presented to the whole class at the end of the course as an exchange of knowledge)</td>
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Suggestions for Field Photography and Final Project:
Capture visual expressions / depictions of or one of the most outstanding cultural traits of Vietnamese culture in Ho Chi Minh City then present to the class. You may want to base on the topics of this course and the readings to find subjects of your interest and find the right field sites for your projects. Make sure you have some analysis rather than only description.

Primary Texts
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Supplementary Texts


Outline of Course Content

Theme 1: Southeast Asia: A Changing Region (1 week)
  - An introduction to the region: geographical, cultural, and socio-political

Theme 2: Brief introduction to visual practice in the study of Southeast Asia (1 week)
  - How do visual images work, and what are their connections to reality, history and memory?
  - What are the impacts of image worlds on individual and collective experience, social and political life?
  - Visual culture, especially through mass media, for ‘imagined communities’: How visual expressions and depictions of socio-political and cultural life play their role in tradition, national identity and modernity.

Theme 3: Visual Ethnography: Insights into the Subjects of Study (1 week)
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- Visual Ethnography and its Applications to Southeast Asian context

**Theme 4: “Vietnam” and Media Wars (1 week)**
- Vietnam War: The First Televised War
- How do we interpret images and footages about war?
- How do visual depictions of the war is associated with “propaganda”? How photographic materials determine and shape people's attention to and perspective of aspects of the war?

**Theme 5: The Abandon Field: Free Fire Zone (1 week)**

**Theme 6: Reimage Vietnam’s gender landscape amidst various perspectives (1 week)**
- What are the visual impacts from films and photography on people’s perspectives on LGBT community and the ‘problem’ of being ‘gay’ or ‘other’?

**Theme 7: Representing Everyday Life and Issues of Urban Development in Ho Chi Minh City (1 week)**
- 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?
- Visual documenting of urban developments, capture the issues of Ho Chi Minh City with your cameras.

**Theme 8: From Images and Footages on Facebook to Collective Sentiment and Activism: Aspects of Vietnam’s Civil Society (1 week)**

**Theme 9: Southeast Asian Cinema: Insights into the Societies (Thailand and Indonesia) (2 weeks)**
- How ‘Muai Thai’ cinemas illuminate Thai men’s desire to reclaim their patriotic heroism, which is needed to restore the country’s troubling image and its struggling ventures on the global stage’ and how National Identity is celebrated on screen.
- How particular aspects of Indonesian social life and the celebration of Indonesia’s contemporary Islamic identity are depicted through films -- with a focus on polygamy and how ‘women have the power to make choices about their lives’.

**Theme 11: Democracy in Burma through “Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country” (1 week)**
- Going beyond the occasional news clip from Burma, the acclaimed filmmaker, Anders Østergaard, brings us close to the video journalists who deliver the footage. Though risking torture and life in jail, courageous young citizens of Burma live the essence of journalism as they insist on keeping up the flow of news from their closed country. Armed with small handycams the Burma VJs stop at nothing to make their reportages from the streets of Rangoon. Their material is smuggled out of the country and broadcast back into Burma via satellite and offered as free usage for international
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media. The whole world has witnessed single event clips made by the VJs, but for the very first time, their individual images have been carefully put together and at once, they tell a much bigger story. The film offers a unique insight into high-risk journalism and dissidence in a police state, while at the same time providing a thorough documentation of the historical and dramatic days of September 2007, when the Buddhist monks started marching.

Theme 12: Concluding Lecture (1 week)