

CET Syllabus of Record

Program: CET Photography at FAMU

Course Title: Imagery, Ambiguity, and Culture

Course Code: PR/PHTO 330

Total Hours: 45

Recommended Credits: 3

Primary Discipline / Suggested Cross Listings: Photography / Studio Art

Language of Instruction: English

Prerequisites/Requirements: Previous experience in photography is required

Description

The invention of photography is—according to Vilém Flusser, one of the most challenging philosophers of the second half of the 20th century—a decisive and historical turning point, as much so as the invention of linear writing in the 2nd millennium BC. As the first of modern mechanical media, photography became ubiquitous, but after the more than 160 years of its existence, it is perhaps more enigmatic now than it seemed to be at the time of its invention, when it was praised as a perfect, simple, transparent, easily understandable medium through which reality could be represented.

This course explores how photography, by drawing the routes of modern imagery, has helped to shape modern culture, as well as how it blurred history. These questions of ambiguity, which have risen to the surface of vast theoretical discussions in recent time thanks to digital manipulations, have surrounded photography since its discovery, although they were not so obvious even for theorists, art historians and philosophers. Simply: photography—and even more so film and video, the other modern mechanical media which arose after photography—has never been an absolutely accurate (exact, correct, true, veracious) record of reality, despite its complicated and time-consuming ways of manipulation.

The course discusses the discrepancy in storytelling between “mirroring” reality and “creating” the reality which is to be represented. Students also explore the problems of the global flow of images in the postmodern era.

Finally, returning to Vilém Flusser, students examine how modern mechanical media can be understood as symbols of freedom, symbols of revolt against contemporary society’s apparatuses, which robotize our beings.

Objectives

Students are introduced to the basics of visual theory through theoretical readings and discussion. Students learn how to evaluate and decode images and explore the ways photographs and photographers transmit/manipulate meanings. They learn about different photographic techniques, and apply the critical and theoretical skills learned in class to their own photography. Students also achieve a foundation in the history of photography, from its inception to its reverberations today.

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Course Requirements

Students are expected to come to class prepared, with the assigned reading completed and ready to participate in class discussion. Readings average 40 pages per session. Five times throughout the term, students are required to submit brief papers reacting to the readings. The papers should engage thoughtfully with the material and raise questions for class discussion.

Students complete two research projects over the course of the term. Students choose the theme for these projects in consultation with the instructor, and present their findings in the form of class presentations (either PowerPoint, Keynote or any similar presentation forms are welcome). The midterm project presentation should be 5 to 10 minutes long, and the final project presentation should be 15 to 20 minutes long. Each presentation should have an accompanying paper with sources and themes outlined in concise text (3 to 5 pages for the midterm project and 5 to 7 for the final project).

Students are expected to abide by CET's Attendance Policy.

Methods of Evaluation

The final grade is determined as follows:

- Weekly responses of readings 20%
- Midterm paper and presentation 30%
- Final paper and presentation 50%

Readings

Barthes, Roland: "Rhetoric of the Image," 1964 in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*. Transl. Richard Howard; Publisher: U of California Press; ISBN: ISBN 0809080753, Issued: 1985; pp. 21–40

Flusser Vilém: *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Publisher: Reaktion Books; ISBN: 1-86189-076-1; Issued: 2000.

Mitchell, W.J.T.: *Iconology – Image, Text, Ideology*, Publisher: The University of Chicago Press; ISBN: 0-226-53229-1; Issued: 1987.

Rothstein, Arthur: "Suggestions for a Documentary Photographic Study of the Small Town in America." In: *Documentary Photography*. Publisher: Focal Press, 1986 pp. 163 – 168.

Mitchell, W.J.T.: *The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies in Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*; Publisher: The University of Chicago Press; ISBN: 9780226532323; Issued 1994; pp. 281–328.

Sturken, Marita and Cartwright, Lisa: *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press; ISBN: 13: 978-0195314403; Issued: 2001, pp. 11–44.

Šmok, Ján: *Design of the Photographic and the Cinematographic Image*, Publisher: AMU Prague; ISBN: 80-85883-71-6; Issued: 2001.

Outline of Course Content

Note: Students cover approximately 1 topic every week.

Topic 1: Thinking about Truth of Reality

The myth of photographic truth; photography as document and subject of manipulation, Henry

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Peach Robinson versus Theodore Gericault – two principles of representation; Images of collective memory: alarming questions about milestones of history of reportage photography – Robert Capa, Joe Rosenthal – staged or snapped? Huynh Cong “Nick” Ut – problems of reading of the image; Lewis Hine and Alfred Stieglitz – two sides of interpretation of reality; society learns about photography’s ways of manipulation Witkin and Velazquez – imagery and culture. Philosophical and theoretical approaches to the problems of communication.

Topic 2: Questions of Representation

Ways of representation and the development of Western culture: Perspective, The Trompe l’oeil, Drawing machines, Silhouettes; Routes to mechanical drawing: development of the sciences and technological revolution, Romanticism and Positivism; photography as a scientific document and photography as a tool of exploring the secrets of the world; Gombrich’s standards of truth and the arrested image. Helmholtz and theory of moving eye; forensic investigation of David Hockney; the modern mechanical image and culture; development of paintings after photography.

Topic 3: “About Three Methods”

Reality as “conditio sine qua non”, reality as a springboard to the self-expression, reality of the soul; Mitchell’s idea of imagery and relation of image to text and vice versa; image and ideology; Survey of visual communication theories; Barthes’ idea of photograph as denotation with no connotation; Reading of images and visible language: Kress and van Leeuwen’s theory of visual grammar.

Topic 4: Visual Strategies for the Sake of Social Justice

Harsh reality and the truth of documentary photography – strategies of document; Farm Security Administration – the birth of the photographic essay; Stryker’s concepts of visual sociological research in a small town; Photo-league, New York School of Photography – from newspaper cover page to the visual book; Magnum Photos Agency and freedom for private documentary projects; Innocent aggressiveness of the snapshots (J.H. Lartigue and Nan Goldin).

Topic 5: From Life to Family of Man

Image and text: photographs and typography/graphic design – the two aspects of illustrated magazines and their role in development of culture standards; Alexander Graham Bell and Gilbert Grosvenor: the birth of fame – National Geographic Magazine; “Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung” and Henry Luce’ s fortunate decision: Life magazine; Magazine “Du”; Questioning the most successful ever photo exhibition – Family of Man.

Topic 6: Montage—Positive and Negative Side of One Coin

Montage and retouching; from composite photographs to digital manipulation; August Sander and “4711”; montage in Dada and Surrealism; montage as a weapon in political battle; montage as self-expression; exploring possibilities of digital manipulation; Dark side of possibilities: photography changes history – fake document and quasi document – abuse of power of montage in political propaganda.

Topic 7: Angelmatics – Mendeleev Periodic Table of Art?

From “general theory” of art toward the theory of visual communication. Principle of primary and secondary regulation, artificial emotional sources; the three spheres of the chain

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of communication: creation, distribution and adoption of a message; square of possibilities and principles of stylization and individualization.

Topic 8: Staged Photography--The Truth and Power of Imagination.

The created world as a defense against the absurdity of reality. Palimpsest and new narratives: Staged and constructed photography in framework of post-modern art creativity; species of created reality: still life, small stages, self-presentation and narrative tableaux.

Topic 9: Between Iconophobia and Iconophilia--Language of Images and Iconology of Text

Duane Michals and the art of visual book; William Blake's "visual poetry"; Image and text – back to W. J. T. Mitchell's research: Space and time; Eye and ear; Image and ideology; The other pole: aesthetics, principles, design and syntax of the visual book – visual tour through "101 Books".

Topic 10: Fleeting images – Still and Motion Pictures

Slide presentation, video installation and image in motion pictures. Video installations for the sake of the social justice; Joseph Kosuth and Joseph Beuys – the role of modern art creativity in the era after experiments of modern avant-garde; the myths of multimedia, virtual reality and cyberspace; Summing up: coincidences and differences in the aesthetics of still photography, photography in motion picture and in video installation.

Topic 11: Advertising Apparatus and Consumer Culture.

United colors, visualized vodka and manufactured desire – ways of visual persuasion and global flow of images. Advertising's pyramid – structure of the ad's objectives; hard, soft and image selling advertising; high artistic level versus high sensuality and commercial success.

Topic 12: Nonsense of the Postmodern age and Sense of Art Creativity

Rethinking of sense and role of visual imagery in postmodern age; Fourth lecture towards theory of modern mechanical media: Flusser's photographic universe and philosophy of photography as a model of human freedom in the post-industrial society dominated by apparatuses.