

# CRITICAL VISUAL THEORY

## COURSE INFORMATION

COURSE NUMBER: Com 598  
TIME: Wed. 4:30-7:15  
PLACE: Stauffer A13  
PROFESSOR: Eric Margolis  
OFFICE HOURS: Wednesday 2:00- 4:00, and by appointment  
OFFICE: Stauffer 432  
VOICE: NO PHONE  
E-MAIL: emmargolis@gmail.com

## REQUIRED TEXTS

- Jay, M. (1994). *Downcast Eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.  
<http://www.amazon.com/Downcast-Eyes-Denigration-Twentieth-Century-Centennial/dp/0520088859>
- Sontag, S. (2003). *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York, Picador.  
<http://www.amazon.com/Regarding-Pain-Others-Susan-Sontag/dp/0312422199>
- Riggs, R. (2011) *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*  
[http://www.amazon.com/Miss-Peregrines-Home-Peculiar-Children/dp/1594746036/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1387900353&sr=1-3&keywords=ransom+riggs](http://www.amazon.com/Miss-Peregrines-Home-Peculiar-Children/dp/1594746036/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1387900353&sr=1-3&keywords=ransom+riggs)



The ethical content of photographs is fragile. With the possible exception of photographs of those horrors, like the Nazi camps, that have gained the status of ethical reference points, most photographs do not keep their emotional charge. A photograph of 1900 that was affecting then because of its subject would, today, be more likely to move us because it is a photograph taken in 1900. The particular qualities

### Course Statement:

The Greeks would make pilgrimages to foreign states to learn about their religion and politics — their way of life — these pilgrimages were called “THEORIA.” In keeping with the ancient Greeks, we are going to study the *theory* (Greek: “Theoria” -- to bear witness to) of the Visual, to make a pilgrimage to a foreign land.



In the U.S. we tend to say things like “seeing is believing” and I’m from Missouri; show me”. Recently political discussions have even revolved around whether an event was captured on video, as if without a visual record the event did not take place. But there is a vast critical literature that questions the truth and meaning of visual evidence. This multi-disciplinary graduate seminar interrogates a wide range of literature considering the visual, dating back at least to Descartes; we will also examine some of the instruments that function as adjuncts to vision, for example cameras. We will similarly examine images and critiques of the increasingly visual culture of today’s world. The first reading, Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes*, while a dauntingly large book, is actually an accessible introduction to critiques of vision and the visual. Jay’s main focus is French philosophers, but he will introduce many of the important concepts which be the main emphasis of the seminar. We will also examine theorists from the German Critical (Frankfurt) School and their intellectual descendants.

In the examination of images we will consider two main “paradigms”: **positivist** and **hermeneutic** approaches used to identify relationships and context, explore inherent relationships, and to interpret evidence and aesthetic structure as a basis for understanding information embedded within the visual. The positivist, (or actually post-positivist) approach focuses on evidence provided by the geometry of vision, and images. It can include experimental techniques, for instance eye-tracking, that examine how organisms see. Post-positivism also provides a conceptual framework of how to identify and evaluate information embedded within images including photographs and moving pictures through such hypothetico-deductive methods as content analysis. In the case of photographs and art works, post-positivist evidence will include physical and chemical data allowing images to be dated quite precisely.

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"Knowledge of photography is just as important as that of the alphabet. The illiterate of the future will be a person ignorant of the use of the camera as well as the pen." -- Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.

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The hermeneutic approach similarly uses several theoretical techniques with the goal of understanding and interpreting the visual in its larger social context. Approaches which we will study in depth include semiotics, iconography, and iconology. These have been and continue to be used in the study of

art-works, photographs, film and video.

An even more fascinating and interesting technique is "re-photography" which involves collecting photographs taken at some time in the past and making a second image at the present time to reveal how things have (or have not) changed. We will examine some of the work of Mark Klett who teaches art at ASU and was a groundbreaking developer of the use of rephotography in landscape; we will also look at the work of Jon Rieger who has used repeat photography to study social worlds. Roderick Coover is going to be visiting and will discuss the use of new media.

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**“Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame.” — G.K. Chesterton**

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## The studying of visual data produced by cultures:

The mainstream of the social sciences and humanities are remarkable in the way that they have privileged the written word over all else. Not only the founding fathers, but generally everyone who has come after spends almost all their professional time engaged in word play.

Sociologists do little more than, in the words of Bob Dylan, "Read books,

repeat quotations, draw conclusions on the wall." While it is true that quantitative types, from time to time, gather numeric data -- it is almost exclusively responses to written questionnaires -- rarely numbers generated from social behavior observed directly. We then take the verbal self-report as both true, and as primary source. Ethnographers pay more attention than most to verbal (as opposed to written) information. But here too the decided prejudice is in favor of self-report and words. Yet, every culture is composed of jillions of non-verbal images, a fact apparently more easily grasped by our sisters and brothers in anthropology who are comfortable with studying blanket designs, pottery shapes, totems, fetishes, and graven images. (Of course Anthropology's origins as a science of "pre-literate" cultures makes problematic their theories and methods)

"Of course in this you fellows see more than I could see. You see me."  
Marlowe in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness

One of the principles of Hermeneutics is that people (the audience) pick out and decode broadcasters messages in a way different from the intentions of those who encoded them. Notice how "everybody knew" how Walter Cronkite "felt" about the events of the Vietnam war. Or how everybody knows what Ted Kopple feelings about liberalism are--despite all pretenses of "fairness." "People read, hear, and see selectively. They pick out adapt and translate from what is before them, to fit in with orientations set in their minds beforehand; they 'decode' the messages of television, radio and the press by codes which will differ in some respects, and may well differ in many, from those used by the broadcasters and journalists who first "encode" the messages." Westergaard.

Here, in the early adolescence of capitalist society, we live in the most decidedly visual environment yet produced. Each one of us consumes tens of thousands, maybe millions, of images each day. Even if we don't want to see we cannot avoid it. Jean Baudrillard, the French sociologist, suggested that the image world is a

"simulacrum" a media world of copies of copies of copies where there is not and has never been an original. Everything in the symbol world refers to other symbols - a world of allusion and trope, maps referring not to territories but only to other maps, news referring to other news, photographs referring to paintings and so on in an endless a game of mirrors. Critical visual theory attempts to study visual images produced as part of culture. Art, photographs, film, video, fonts, advertisements, computer icons, landscape, architecture, machines, fashion, makeup, hair style,

facial expressions, tattoos, and so on are parts of the complex visual communication system produced by members of societies. Visual images are primary evidence of human productive activity, they are worked matter. Their use and understanding is governed by socially established symbolic codes. Visual images are constructed and may be deconstructed. They can be analyzed with techniques developed in diverse fields of literary criticism, art theory and criticism, content analysis, semiotics, deconstructionism, or the more mundane tools of ethnography. We can count them. We can ask people about them. We can study their use and the social settings in which they are produced and consumed.

### THE EXPECTED WORK LOAD

The course is a graduate seminar and each participant is expected to make a major contribution to its intellectual life. Each person will: 1) do all the reading, become familiar with the “texts” and take responsibility for helping us understand them. 2) Each student is to prepare a summary and lead a class discussion on the readings—we will work through them “round robin”. I will pass around a sign-up sheet. Feel free to be creative in making connections, using visuals, or criticizing the work. There will also be a term paper, about which more later.

Except for the 2 books, all the assigned readings are on Blackboard. In addition, I will make you all instructors so that you can make announcements and post contributions to the site collection. This web site is the product of many students over the years. It is intended as a resource not just for this class but for the Video Ethnography class which is practice oriented. Please download the class readings at your first opportunity. Feel free to avail yourselves of anything else that looks interesting under supplemental readings. Also please post any reading you discover that are appropriate.

**Email** is the best way to contact me. I check my email regularly, however, due to volume, please allow me 24 hours to respond to your messages. Likewise, I request that you check your email regularly, and make sure your box isn’t full. Many of you have better email addresses than ASU provides, but the Blackboard system will only send email to our on campus addresses. Please keep the ASU mail box below quota.



Actaeon

## CLASS SCHEDULE

week 1 01/15/14	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>INTRODUCTION: CRITICAL VISUAL METHODS</b></p> <p>Handouts: Syllabus.</p> <p>1) Introductions and trade phone numbers and E-Mail addresses.</p> <p>2) Read and discuss the syllabus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Images in Struggle</i></li></ul>
week 2 01/22/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Jay, M. (1994). <i>Downcast Eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought</i> pp. 1-147</li></ul>
week 3 01/29/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Wiseman's Titicut Follies</i></li><li>• Jay, M. (1994). <i>Downcast Eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought</i> pp. 149-262</li></ul>
week 4 02/10/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Jay, M. (1994). <i>Downcast Eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought</i> pp. 263-380</li></ul>
week 5 02/19/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Blind Spots: Thoughts for Visual Sociology Upon Reading Martin Jay's <i>Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought</i> <a href="http://margolis.faculty.asu.edu/review.html">http://margolis.faculty.asu.edu/review.html</a></li></ul>

<p>week 6 02/26/14</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Rod Coover From Verite to Virtual</b></li> <li>• Jay, M. (1994). <i>Downcast Eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought</i> pp. 381-end</li> <li>• Rossler, Martha, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)" <i>3 Works</i> Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981 pp. 59-86.</li> <li>• Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "'Who is speaking thus? Some questions about documentary photography. Pp. 169-183 from <i>Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices</i>. (University of Minnesota Press, Mineapolis 1991)</li> </ul>
<p>week 7 03/05/14</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Margolis, E. And Jeremy Rowe. <i>Disclosing Historical Photographs. Handbook of Visual Research Methods</i>. E. Margolis and L. Pauwels. London, Sage (2011).</li> <li>• Margolis, E. and Jeremy Rowe. (2002). "Manufacturing Assimilation: Photographs of Indian schools in Arizona."</li> </ul>
<p>week 8 03/12/14</p>	<p><b>SPRING BREAK</b></p>
<p>week 9 03/19/14</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jon Rieger, "Photographing Social Change" <i>Visual Sociology</i> 11 (1) 1996 pp. 5-49.</li> <li>• "Repeat Photography in Landscape Research" (Mark Klett)</li> <li>• Rephotography: visit Mark Klett's "Third View Project"</li> <li>• Goodwin, C. (2002). <i>Professional Vision. Qualitative Research Methods</i>. D. Weinberg.</li> </ul>

<p>week 10 3/26/14</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Margolis, Eric: Race Gender Ads</li> <li>• Marion Müller Iconography and Iconology as a Analytical Approach <i>Handbook of Visual Research Methods</i>. E. Margolis and L. Pauwels. London, Sage (2011).</li> <li>• Winfried Nöth Visual Semiotics: Key features and an Application to Picture Ads <i>Handbook of Visual Research Methods</i>. E. Margolis and L. Pauwels. London, Sage (2011).</li> <li>• James Chapman “Researching film and history: sources, methods, approaches” <i>Handbook of Visual Research Methods</i>. E. Margolis and L. Pauwels. London, Sage (2011).</li> <li>• Dorfman, A. and A. Mettelart (1975). How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic. Hungary, I.G. Editions</li> </ul>
<p>week 11 04/02/14</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sekula, A. (1990). The Body and the Archive. <i>The Contest of Meaning</i>. R. Bolton. Cambridge, MIT Press.</li> <li>• Tagg, John (1988) “Evidence, truth and order: Photographic records and the growth of the state” and “A means of surveillance: The photograph as Evidence in Law” pp. 60-102 from <i>The Burden of Representation: Essays on photographs and histories</i> (University of Massachusetts Press).</li> <li>• Computers That See You and Keep Watch Over You</li> <li>• <a href="http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/02/science/02see.html? r=1&amp;hp">http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/02/science/02see.html? r=1&amp;hp</a></li> <li>• Baudrillard, Jean "The Precession of the Simulacra"</li> </ul>
<p>•week 12 •04/09/14</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sontag, S. (2003). <i>Regarding the Pain of Others</i></li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•week 13</li> <li>•04/16/14</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Morris, E. (2007) Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg? (3 parts)</li> <li>• BTW: Morris has a whole bunch of interesting articles from his NYT Blog “Zoom”. See his folder on the Blackboard page or search on the Times web site.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>week 14</li> <li>04/23/14</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daniel Collins Participatory Geographic Information Systems (PGIS) in visual research. <i>Handbook of Visual Research Methods</i>. E. Margolis and L. Pauwels. London, Sage (2011).</li> <li>• Innisfree McKinnon Expanding cartographic practices in the social sciences <i>Handbook of Visual Research Methods</i>. E. Margolis and L. Pauwels. London, Sage (2011).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>week 15</li> <li>04/30/14</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Baudrillard, Jean "The Precession of the Simulacra"</li> <li>• Chandler: Notes on the Gaze</li> <li>• Désirée Navab Re-Picturing Photography: A Language in the Making</li> <li>• Is the Gaze Male?</li> </ul>