

# ***Visual Culture and Literacy***

University of Southern California  
Visual Culture and Literacy, Art 150, Spring 2003  
Instructor: Sergio Muñoz-Sarmiento  
T/Th: 9:30-10:50, 12:30-1:50  
Office Hours: 11am – 12; 2-3pm (T/Th) by appointment  
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## **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

Over the next fifteen weeks, we will study the sophisticated language of visual signs and their relationship to and construction of culture. We will discover that there is no such thing as an innocent sign. Thus, we will learn numerous ways in which to “read”, “interpret”, “decode” and “translate” the many complex visual, verbal and written “languages” within our social sphere. In order to entertain this huge task, we must partake of reading material that will facilitate the dismantling, and thus comprehension, of these signs. This deconstructive process will be done through the experience of static and non-static forms of representation—primarily film/video and visual art. Much of the reading material will be theoretical, but I have also chosen some immediate, raw and “marginal” reading material as well.

The main premise of this course is to destabilize your preconceived way of thinking. To question how visual culture affects the way you have thought, think, and will think. To raise difficult and at times controversial questions and issues that will seem frustrating at times but rewarding nonetheless.

Finally, I have noticed that a main concern of many students of this course is what “to do” with this material: how to apply it and what agency or leverage we have in relation to our socio/politico/cultural fabric. Thus, I have decided to add a “practical” component to this course. We will read, think, discuss, and ACT. Being literate is not only learning how to read and write, but perhaps more importantly learning how our understanding of culture can help us to participate, antagonize, critique, negate, and/or subvert those spaces that we find problematic.

In order to facilitate the merging of theory and practice, we will first learn about our relationship to vision and culture, and the move on to a provisional understanding of the historical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Futurism to post-studio to new-genre art and film.

## **CLASS STRUCTURE:**

This class is structured heavily on class discussion; it is crucial that you do the readings so as to be prepared to discuss them in class. This class will also take the form of field trips, lectures, readings, videos, slides, and potentially a guest speaker or two. As always, the logic of the syllabus falls prey to chance and improvisation, thus, *we might sidetrack where deemed necessary*.

There will be two (2) books and one class reader you will need to purchase. You will be expected to have read and reviewed ALL material by the assigned date, to attend ALL

class meetings, and to contribute regularly, constructively, and actively to class discussions and critiques.

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\*\*\*\*NOTE: As always, if any class material, be it written, visual, verbal, or any material hereby not listed, is found by any student to be offensive, you have the option to not partake in the class discussion and/or leave the classroom. The student will then need to see the instructor for make-up material.

PLAGIARISM: Includes the failure to cite sources through footnotes in research papers or any written material handed-in in this class. If you write ANYTHING that essentially copies another previously written paper, article, essay, or brief written by someone else, and you FAIL to give this other person(s) credit, it will result in you receiving an automatic "F" (failing) grade for the course!

CLASS ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY! YOU ARE PERMITTED TWO (2) ABSENCES, ANY ABSENCE OVER THIS WILL AUTOMATICALLY REDUCE YOUR GRADE BY A FULL GRADE POINT. I.e, Three absences will lower an A to a A-, or A- to B+.

**Required books and reader:**

1. Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works- edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham & Douglas Kellner
2. An Introductory Guide to post-structuralism and postmodernism- Madan Sarup
3. Class Reader. (Available at University Graphics/Magic Machine. Located in the University Village at: 3309 South Hoover. 213.744.1511) Ask for Visual Culture, Art 150 Reader.

**Your final grade will depend on:**

1. Quizzes 30% (you will be given between 8-10 quizzes, your lowest score will be dropped. NO MAKE-UP QUIZZES WILL BE GIVEN)
2. Artist/Film-maker description list: 20% total (see below for explanation)
3. Class group project/Manifesto: 50% (this will be your class final exam)
4. Class participation: points will be given, but not taken away, for constructive class participation

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**1. WEEK OF JANUARY 13<sup>TH</sup>:**

What is Visual Culture and why the heck do I need theory?  
Introduction to Human vs. Subject

**2. WEEK OF JANUARY 20<sup>TH</sup>:**

Representation: (La Jetee, Chris Marker)

**3. WEEK OF JANUARY 27<sup>TH</sup>:**

Interpretation

**4. WEEK OF FEBRUARY 3<sup>RD</sup>:**

Ideology

Lecture: What is Modernism?

**5. WEEK OF FEBRUARY 10<sup>TH</sup>:**

Culture; “culture as culture”

**6. WEEK OF FEBRUARY 17<sup>TH</sup>:**

Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses; “class”; why didn’t Louie move to Frankfurt?

**7. WEEK OF FEBRUARY 24<sup>TH</sup>:**

Masses and Consumerism

\*I (and my RA) will meet with groups to discuss ideas, problems, etc.

**8. WEEK OF MARCH 3<sup>RD</sup>:**

The Attack of the Avant-Garde: Towards Futurism and Dada

**Artist/Film-maker list due**

**9. WEEK OF MARCH 10<sup>TH</sup>:**

The urination on Modernism: Marcel Duchamp (The Bride, the Bachelor, the thief, and his urinal)

**10. WEEK OF MARCH 17<sup>TH</sup>:**

SPRING BREAK

**11. WEEK OF MARCH 24<sup>TH</sup>:**

Surrealism; Situationist International: The turn of the post-modern, or the post-modern’s turn. “El Topo”, Alexandro Jodorovsky.

\*Schedule presentation dates for Class Projects

**12 WEEK OF MARCH 31<sup>ST</sup>:**

Art, Pornography, Law and Society (Oleanna)

What the heck is the Neo avant-garde?

**13. WEEK OF APRIL 7<sup>TH</sup>:**

Conceptual Art, New Genre, and post-Studio: Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, Mary Kelly, Adrian Piper, Gordon Matta-Clark, Sol Lewitt

**14. WEEK OF APRIL 14<sup>TH</sup>:**

Art After Philosophy and After: Back Where Art Belongs!(?)

**15. WEEK OF APRIL 21<sup>ST</sup>:**

Class projects

**16. WEEK OF APRIL 28<sup>TH</sup>:**

Class projects

***Information on Grading for Visual Culture and Literacy, Spring 2003***

You will be given a letter-grade at the end of the semester. Since the quizzes, artist list, and final project will be graded on a 100-point scale, I have given you a breakdown and equation of the numerical to letter grade relationship. As mentioned in the syllabus, class participation may earn you some extra points. You can only GAIN from participation, not lose points!

A	95-100	Excellent quality
A-	90-94	Better than good, not quite excellent
B+	87-89	Very good quality
B	83-86	Good quality
B-	80-82	Better than fair, almost good
C+	77-79	
C	73-76	Fair quality, meets minimum requirements
C-	70-72	
D	60-69	Work of minimum passing quality
F	0-59	Fail

For example, if you are given a 10-question quiz, each quiz question will be worth 10 points. Getting one question wrong will be a 90, or an “A-” in letter grade. Quizzes may be administered on either Tuesdays or Thursdays. Remember that you are responsible for the quiz material, which will cover what you have not been quizzed on, lecture material, and the reading material that is due up to that date. You are responsible for all readings, even if I have NOT covered them in class!

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Your artist/film-maker list will be graded on:

Defining and giving short bio on all art movements and artists on list. You will also need to give me a bibliography page referencing your sources. You may NOT use web sites for this information.

Handing in the minimum requirement will earn you a “C”. Missing any one of these two requirements will earn you a “D”. Failure to hand in anything will earn you an “F”.

An “A” or “B” grade will be given to those papers of excellent and good quality respectively.

ABSOLUTELY NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED.

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Group Project requirements and guidelines will be handed out shortly. You will be divided into 5 groups of eight. I will select the mixture of the groups. You will present the final projects during the last two weeks of class.