

VISUAL COMMUNICATION



Syrian Man and Missile, “[When War Becomes a Part of Life](#)”
© Photograph Mohamad Abazeed/AFP

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This class explores the theoretical, social, and ethical dynamics of visual communication, through photography, imagery, film, and social media. The class is organized into four sections: the rhetorical responsibilities of seeing/sensing; the politics of remembrance; commodification, circulation, and reception; and governance and resistance. Most prominently, this class situates the visual as a site of contestation over race and ethnicity, sexuality, gender, disability, and Western imperialism. Students are asked to creatively re-visualize how visual culture can contribute to social change. “Visual Communication” trains students to engage in close reading of visual media, and students learn to produce a visual product of their own that gathers and analyzes a diffuse yet repetitive form across visual sites.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Analyze the intersections of communication, the visual, and difference
- Cultivate a capacity for close reading, with emphasis on humility, self-reflection, and descriptiveness
- Understand and re-visualize the role visual communication can play in social change
- Produce a video “supercut” of a rhetorical form and an accompanying rhetorical analysis

CLASS INFORMATION

[Date, Time, Location]

FILMS IN CLASS

- *Psycho* (1960)
- *Westworld* (1973)
- *Saving Private Ryan* (1998)
- *Get Out* (2017)

MEDIA USED

Video Production Software (iMovie)

REQUIRED READINGS

- *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture*, Lester Olsen, Cara A. Finnegan, Diane S. Hope
- Articles and Book Chapter pdf’s posted online

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Marnie Ritchie
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OFFICE HOURS

[Office Hours and Location]

I am also available to meet with you by appointment.



ASSIGNMENTS

DIGITAL ANNOTATIONS

100 points total

As part of this course, you will be expected to contribute to public annotations twice per reading through our online course page with two takeaways from the reading. This will be done at the start of each class and will be open notes. For this, we use a software called hypothes.is (you will not be required to download anything). For reading each week, we will build communal layers of knowledge and questions in preparation for class. These comments will feature heavily in our discussions. Your contributions should be substantial (in other words, if you post a .gif or image, you need to have some sort of text that explains its relevance).

CLOSE READINGS

100 points each / 300 points total

The class features three close readings of antinomies in visual culture. The close reading should be guided by an ethics of provisionality and contingency, reminiscent of Eugenie Brinkema's reading of the "tear" in *Psycho* (which we will read and discuss in class). Each close reading should be two-pages double-spaced. The close readings should strive to be evocative and descriptive.

1. **Banal/Exceptional** - For this close reading, students choose a visual artifact they feel expresses the tension between everydayness and exceptionalism. The aim is to draw out contrast. To do so, students will apply the concept of the "punctum" from the Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. Students ideally should consider what strikes them about the image, or pierces them, in contrast to what blends into the background as everyday.
2. **Presence/Absence** - There are numerous visual projects that remove subjects from images, like Michael Somoroff's "[Absence of Subjects](#)" and Pavel Maria Smejkal's *FATESCAPES*. Using one of these series, this assignment tasks students with engaging a close reading of relations of presence and absence in/through photography. In this reading, students consider how remembrance can be triggered not through the subject of an image, but through a scene, an emplacement that exceeds that human figure. This close reading should consider how presence and absence are constantly negotiated in images and public memory.
3. **Reality/Unreality** - The class will watch *Westworld* (1973) together. For this close reading, students engage in a close reading of relations of reality and unreality in/through film. Incorporating Megan Foley's article "'Prove You're Human'" about how we negotiate automation with bots, our ahuman and human relations, students consider how film media bridges what we perceive to be real and unreal. Through this reading, students question how we determine what is authentic and inauthentic in times of hyper-commodification.



ASSIGNMENTS (CONTINUED)

FINAL ASSIGNMENT: SUPERCUTS

600 points total

This assignment will be staggered, and students will learn step-by-step. The final project is comprised of three parts: Proposal (100 points), Peer Review (100 points), and a final video product (400 points).

For this assignment, students will create a video called a “supercut.” A supercut is a video that splices together images and clips that have a repetitive form. [As Mashable explains](#), the supercut is a video montage that evolved from Youtube culture. The aim of the assignment is to learn how to mine visual culture to find these forms and patterns in our visual communication. Consider the following examples: Scully saying the word “science” in *X-Files*, images of ruin from drone strikes, someone’s face melting, a woman blasting an alien with a gun, character reloading guns in movies, robots revealing themselves as robots to humans, glamorous women descending the stairs, people taking a sip of milk, visual shots of fruit bowls.

Supercuts have an odd enjoyment about them, by repeating something, by creating synthesis. Supercuts are fascinating because they show the sociocultural significance of something we might take for granted; we get so used to repetitive forms in our media, we rarely stop to consider how they circulate across sites. The assignments will be assessed on the basis of two stages: initial synthesis in the video and subsequent analysis. Students will have the chance to review each other’s work before turning in the final supercut. Supercuts will be posted to a class Youtube page, and students will then comment on one another’s products.



GRADING

Grades are determined based on the number of points earned out of a maximum of 1,000 points. This course does not award plus and minus grades. Final grades are calculated as follows:

A	900-1,000
B	800-899
C	700-799
D	600-699
F	0-599



COURSE POLICIES

READINGS

Readings should be completed on the day they are listed on the course schedule. As we will discuss in class, the goal of the readings should be to read generously: consider the movements, arguments, and context. You are expected to contribute collective annotations online on each class.

DISCUSSION OF GRADED ASSIGNMENTS

I encourage you to discuss your work with me well in advance of due dates. Any grade appeals must occur no sooner than 24 hours after but no later than one week after receiving the evaluation.

ATTENDANCE

This course is heavily discussion based, so students are expected to attend each week. In order to be excused, you must provide documentation for absences.

INCLUSIVITY

The classroom is an incredibly generative space for thought and a risky place where students show up in public to openly discuss their ideas. As such, this classroom is an inclusive space. Here are a few best practices for ensuring our space is actively inclusive:

- Address one another with preferred pronouns and do not assume gender identity
- Use affirmative language rather than words with exclusionary histories
- Try to summarize what the other person is saying in class in your head before responding
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ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

University standards regulating academic integrity (e.g., cheating, plagiarism, etc.) are strictly enforced. You can read more about the policies [here](#). This course emphasizes proper citation and sourcing as ethical practices. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please do ask me.

THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITY ACT (ADA)

The ADA is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation. The University of Texas at Austin offers support services for students with documented physical or psychological disabilities. Any students with a disability should visit with the instructor after requesting reasonable accommodations through the [Service for Students with Disabilities](#).



COURSE SCHEDULE (1)

Note: The schedule is subject to change.

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments
T 01/16	Introduction to the Course	---	
RHETORICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF SEEING/SENSING			
Th 01/18	Beginnings	“Visual Rhetoric in Communication: Continuing Questions and Contemporary Issues,” Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, and Diane S. Hope	
T 01/23	Close Reading	<i>Camera Lucida</i> , Roland Barthes	
T 01/25	Close Reading (Cntd)	“A Tear That Does Not Drop, But Folds,” in <i>The Forms of the Affects</i> , Eugenie Brinkema	In-Class Viewing: <i>Psycho</i> (1960)
T 01/30	On Others	<i>On Photography</i> , Susan Sontag	
Th 02/01	On Visual Reference	Selection from <i>This is Not a Pipe</i> , Michel Foucault	
T 02/06	Banal/Exceptional	---	Assignment Due: “Banal/Exceptional” Close Reading
POLITICS OF REMEMBRANCE			
Th 02/08	Death	Selection from <i>About to Die</i> , Barbie Zelizer	
T 02/13	The Ideograph	“Representative Form and the Visual Ideograph: The Iwo Jima Image in Editorial Cartoons,” Janis L. Edwards and Carol K. Winkler	
Th 02/15	Iconography	“Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of ‘Accidental Napalm,’” Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites	

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COURSE SCHEDULE (2)

T 02/20	Silence	“Public Memorializing in Postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as Prototype,” Carole Blair, Marsha Jeppeson, Enrico Pucci, Jr.	
Th 02/22	Presence/Absence in War	“Remembering World War II: The Rhetoric and Politics of National Commemoration at the Turn of the 21st Century,” Barbara Biesecker	
T 02/25	Presence/Absence in War	---	<p>In-Class Viewing: <i>Saving Private Ryan</i> (1998)</p> <p>Assignment Due: “Presence/Absence” Close Reading</p>
COMMODIFICATION, CIRCULATION, AND RECEPTION			
Th 03/01	The Ethics of Documentation	“Ethnography in the First Person: Frederick Wiseman’s <i>Titicut Follies</i> ,” Barry Grant	
T 03/06	Mediation	“Mediating Hillary Rodham Clinton: Television News Practices and Image-Making in the Postmodern Age,” Shawn Parry-Giles	
Th 03/08	Violent Circulations	“Lynching Photography and the Visual Reproduction of White Supremacy,” Amy Wood	Assignment Due: Supercut Proposal
T 03/13-Th 03/15	No Class: Spring Break	---	
T 03/20	Circulation and Memory	“‘Put Your Stamp on History’: The USPS Commemorative Program Celebrate the Century and Postmodern Collective Memory,” Ekaterina V. Haskins	
Th 03/22	Reality/Unreality	“‘Prove You’re Human’: Fetishizing Material Embodiment and Immaterial Labor in Information Networks,” Megan Foley	In-Class Viewing: <i>Westworld</i> (1973)
T 03/27	Reality/Unreality	---	Assignment Due: “Reality/Unreality” Close Reading

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COURSE SCHEDULE (3)

GOVERNANCE AND RESISTANCE			
Th 03/29	Finding Materials	---	Workshop: Supercuts
T 04/03	The Third Eye	Selection from <i>The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle</i> , Fatimah Tobing Rony	
Th 04/05	Imperialism	“‘To Veil the Threat of Terror’: Afghan Women and the Clash of Civilizations in the Imagery of the U.S. War on Terrorism,” Dana Cloud	
T 04/10	Global Visuals	Selection from <i>Visual Global Politics</i> , Roland Bleiker	
Th 04/12	The Touch of Resistance	“‘What Lips These Lips Have Kissed’: Refiguring the Politics of Queer Public Kissing,” Charles E. Morris III and John M. Sloop	
T 04/17	Escape	“‘Let It Go Black’: Desire and the Erotic Subject in the Films of Bill Gunn,” Marlo D. David	In-Class Viewing: <i>Get Out</i> (2017)
Th 04/19	Witnessing	Selection from <i>Witnessing: Beyond Recognition</i> , Kelly Oliver	
T 04/24	Using iMovie	---	Workshop: Supercuts
Th 04/26	Syncing Sound	---	Workshop: Supercuts
T 05/01	Peer Review	---	Workshop: Peer Review
COURSE WRAP-UP			
Th 05/03	Supercut Presentations	---	
T 05/08	Supercut Presentations	---	
Th 05/10	Final Discussion	---	Supercut Presentations Due by Class: Upload to Youtube Class Page