

American Studies 502

John

Ibson

Fall 2007

Office: UH

419

Graduate Seminar on Visual Culture

Office hours: Tuesday &

Thursday evenings, 7:00-9:45

Thursday, 2:30-

4:30

Humanities 121

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"The camera is an instrument
that teaches people to see
without a camera."
--Dorothea Lange

Required Reading:

Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (2007)

Bonnie Brennan and Hanno Hardt, *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photography* (1999)

John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (2006)

Patricia Vetell-Becker, *Shooting from the Hip: Photography, Masculinity, and Postwar America* (2005)

Seminar Requirements:

Welcome to American Studies 502. In this seminar we will consider the dimension of culture that is linked to human sight. We will examine the various ways in which a society's culture--its system of beliefs, symbols, and values--acts upon the way that the society's members literally see the world around them, and the way in which those ways of seeing the world then act back upon the culture. The process is not a static one, but takes place in a historical context of shifting values and technological innovation. We will consider various pertinent theories as well as various sorts of cultural products.

We will all read the four books listed above, in the order specified on the Outline to follow. Each week for which reading is assigned, you must come to class with an essay of no more than one page in which you respond to that week's reading. Your essay should above all be teacherly--that is, it should attempt to stimulate thought and conversation among the members of the seminar. You should bring a copy of your essay for every member of the seminar. Each week, I will ask a certain number

of you to read your essays aloud to the class, and we will then talk about what we've heard.

I expect you to attend every class meeting. If you cannot attend a session, please advise me of the reason for your absence, either in-person or in an email, preferably beforehand.

In addition to reading and briefly writing about the four books, you must prepare a research paper of around 25 pages which is in some way a study of visual culture. Your primary evidence for this paper must be some form of visual representation: still photographs; motion pictures; television; paintings; or advertisements that rely primarily on a text that must be seen, not heard. I will discuss this project much more with you in class, and I invite you to see me in my office frequently this semester about your work. No later than **Thursday, September 27**, you must have submitted a **written project proposal** to me in which you describe the work you plan to do, specify the sources that you know then you will consult, and give the work a tentative title. Note on the Outline that we will devote time at the end of the semester to a discussion of your projects. The final version of your paper is due no later than our last class meeting, Thursday of Finals Week, **December 13**.

Grading:

One half of your grade in the class will be based on your research paper (the paper itself, your proposal for it, and your presentation about it to the seminar), the other half on your participation in the seminar--your one-page papers and your involvement in our discussions. I use the university's plus/minus grading system.

I will give an A to superior work, work that exceeds my minimum expectations for the paper or for your class participation. A grade of B, in graduate studies, is for average work, work that meets but does not exceed minimum requirements. Since graduate students must maintain a GPA of 3.0 for all work toward an M.A. degree, I consider a C to be a failing grade for a graduate student, and I will in most instances give no grade below that. In the unlikely event that someone's work is so problematic that I consider it to be drastically below my minimum expectations, I would give a grade of D or F, as I consider appropriate.

Academic dishonesty is an extremely serious matter: either the presentation of assigned written work actually done by someone else as if it were one's own work, or else the preparation of assigned written work for a classmate. Penalty for such deceit will range, depending on my judgment of the severity of the offense, from a failing grade on a particular assignment to failure in the course. Academic dishonesty is disturbing enough among 18-year-olds, but is especially alarming among graduate students who are aspiring professionals.

COURSE OUTLINE

8/23 Introduction to the Seminar

SEEING AS CULTURAL ACTIVITY: THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO VISUAL CULTURE

8/30 Sturken & Cartwright, Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2.

9/6 Sturken & Cartwright, Chapters 3 & 4.

9/13 Sturken & Cartwright, Chapters 5, 6, & 7.

9/20 Sturken & Cartwright, Chapters 8 & 9.

PICTURING EVERYDAY LIFE: PICTURE-TAKING AS A CULTURAL ACT

9/27 The Vernacular Photograph in Cultural Studies (No reading)

*****Research Project Proposals Due*****

SEEING HISTORY: VISUAL MATERIAL AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

10/4 Brennen and Hardt, Introduction, Chapters 1-5.

10/11 Brennen and Hardt, Chapters 6-10.

PHOTOGRAPHY GROWS UP: THE 1930S AS A PIVOTAL ERA

10/18 Raeburn, Chapters 1-7.

10/25 Raeburn, Chapters 8-14, Afterword.

GENDERED IMAGERY: THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

11/1 Vetell-Becker, Introduction, Chapters 1-3.

11/8 Vetell-Becker, Chapters 4 & 5.

PRESENTATIONS OF STUDENT RESEARCH

11/15 Presentations of Student Research

Fall Recess

11/29 Presentations of Student Research

12/6 Presentations of Student Research

12/13 Presentations of Student Research

******Submission of Research Papers******