

CMST 7969 Visual Culture Seminar

Visual culture refers to practices of looking between viewers and images, screens, graphic interfaces, social scenarios, physical or media environments, and other viewers. These looking relations bear the weight of particular image archives, memories, aesthetic traditions, social histories, and performance repertoires. In the moment, practices of looking are highly contextual. A complex web of mediating factors may come to bear on a given visual event including but not limited to: visual technologies, cultural ideologies, discursive formations, institutional constraints, economic relationships, patterns of circulation, conventions of embodiment, and perceptual limits. To make matters more difficult, the visual cannot be separated from other sensual experiences any more than it can be said that particular media are exclusively visual. Given this set of variables, we will explore how subjectivity, meaning, value, power, fear, desire, care, and confusion emerge out of and function across particular visual events. Over the course of the semester, students can expect to learn about the intellectual formation of visual culture as an object of study and to read a mix of “classics” and promising new work in the field of visual studies. In the process, we will cover current intellectual debates, major methodological approaches, and key theoretical concepts, as well as consider visual studies’ influence on communication scholarship.

CMST 7945 Performance and Culture Seminar
“Culture enunciates itself in performance.” -Elin Diamond

Perhaps this is why performance—as ritual, play, process, and intercultural encounter—has long been a privileged object of study for anthropologists. Performance is both a practice and a site where cultural norms as values are maintained, reproduced, and challenged. The politics of performance emerges out of the contingencies and possibilities that arise when and where a particular performance comes up against the cultural conventions framing our interpretations of that event. In that “risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing and a thing done...we have access to cultural meanings and critique” (Diamond 5).

Throughout the semester, we’ll be concerned with issues related to two main themes: (1) the politics of performance, and (2) the problematic of cultural studies. The politics of performance refers to the interventionist and utopian possibilities of performance to rework the as-is into what if. Performance provides a means for contesting and re-imagining the conditions of possibility under which we live, love, and labor. In this respect, performance holds promise for those concerned with the politics of intellectual work—a problematic articulated most forcefully by Cultural Studies practitioners. According to Lawrence Grossberg, “Cultural Studies is concerned with the role of cultural practices in the construction of the contexts of human life as milieus of power” (257). Consequently, it uses theory to “enable people to act more strategically in ways that change their context for the better” (261).

As a field that specializes in the way people act, performance studies is uniquely poised to offer theoretical insights and methodological tools useful to people wishing to “change their context for the better.” In this seminar, we will concentrate initially on performance as a subject of cultural research by reviewing the major approaches and sample case studies and by exploring methodological questions and analytical techniques. Later in the semester, we’ll also explore the problems and possibilities of performance itself as a method of cultural invention, critique, and research.

CMST 4169 Visual Rhetoric

This course explores practices of looking in contemporary culture and analyzes images in terms of their relationship to power and desire. We will consider case studies from twentieth and twenty-first century American politics and culture in which images changed social reality, shaped political attitudes or influenced cultural drift. We will be attentive to what it means to live in a visual culture, or how the cumulative effect of exposure to particular types of images (commercial or journalistic, for instance) and looks (interpersonal and mediated) influences identity and cultural belonging. And we will study what might be called visual democracy or the extent to which democratic citizens rely on images for political participation in the electronic public sphere. Over the course of the semester, we will work with examples from various media including photography, film, television, the Internet, and PDA’s. We will consider images made by photojournalists, activists, visual artists, and professionals working in advertising and the popular culture industries. In class, we will practice using a variety of methodologies including formal analysis, theories of spectatorship, semiotics, rhetorical criticism, ideological criticism, and contextual analysis. The main objective of this course is to build a vocabulary that will enable us to do two things: 1) describe the unique process by which images communicate and 2) practice critical study of images and looking relations.

CMST 4142 Performance and Politics: The Art of Protest

Successful protest requires novel forms of attention getting, speaking to multiple audiences at once, learning to manipulate and exploit the mass media, and seizing moments of opportunity. This course adopts the lens of cultural performance through which to analyze acts of political protest. We will examine political protest as a form of creative labor resulting in dramatic action. This means that we will spend most of our time considering the ways in which unauthorized groups take up prominent positions in public space; interrupt the mundane routines of everyday life and media events; exploit the available means for decorating public space with artful political messages; stage and choreograph embodied dissent; and cultivate repeated acts of public display through the mass media.

CMST 3900 Forms of Memory

This course explores the relationship between images and memory. Photographic, film, video, and digital images are documents of the past. They help us to remember what we might otherwise forget. Images are never neutral memory aids they also actively shape our understanding of the past and may produce forgetting even as they prompt us to remember. In this course, we will explore the work of picturing the past as a political matter. We will learn to discuss the rhetoric of images and how images persuade us to remember certain aspects of experience and forget others. We will begin by studying family photographs and proceed to iconic political and cultural images. We will approach memory, whether familial or cultural, as an arena of contest, conflict, disagreement and potentially reconciliation. We will learn to draw distinctions between different forms of memory (individual, collective, official and vernacular), explore the relationship between memory and imagination, and consider an array of forms of forgetting (accidental, traumatic, organized and strategic).

CMST 3041 Performance in Everyday Life

The view of life as theater is an ancient and enduring metaphor for human reality. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the perspective of life as theater and in performance-centered approaches to communication, daily life and culture. This course explores the relations between performance and everyday life in a variety of social, cultural, and historical contexts. We will examine the performative elements in "ordinary" speech and behavior, in aspects of selfhood, identity, and personality, and in a variety of communication contexts. We will also look at such everyday performance genres as conversations and personal narratives, folklore and oral traditions, festivals and celebrations, ceremonies and rituals, media events and politics.

HNRS 2013 Surveillance and Culture

Surveillance has emerged as an important object of study for communication scholars in recent years. This course explores research by theorists and historians interested in the cultural, political, social, and economic factors that influence the development and use of surveillance technologies and, in turn, how the development and use of particular technologies shape the character of "surveillance societies." In addition to reading scholarly histories and analyses of surveillance cultures, we will screen clips from relevant films and explore work by visual artists and activists, who challenge our assumptions about and acceptance of emergent communication technologies.