



ARTH101: Visual Culture

Credits: 3, Section: 172

1. Instructor Information

Instructor Contact Information

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2. Course Description

“Looking,” noted the American painter, educator, and cartoonist Ad Reinhardt, “isn’t as simple as it looks.” What we bring to how we look shapes what we see, and what we are given to see has the power to shape how we look. In the study of visual culture we train ourselves to think critically and historically about the power of looking, seeing, and being seen. The way we see the world is deeply rooted in personal experience and knowledge, and so we must both reflectively embrace the unique quality of our individual perspectives *and* critically examine the complex array of forces that shape our visual encounters with the wider world. In this class we will study the past and present of visual culture and apply its lessons to develop strategies enabling us to better navigate our own visual environments and perceptual horizons. “There is,” the great American critic bell hooks reminds us, “power in looking.”

Developed amid the Covid-19 pandemic, and so from a position of both screen-weariness and limited access to the customary institutional spaces of artistic encounter, this course has been designed to foreground those visual practices and encounters that unfold in and around the off-screen spaces of our daily routines; in our homes, neighborhoods, communities, and nearby travels. Course content and assignments will invite students to explore their immediate and local surroundings and to directly and constructively apply the lessons of the course to imaginative and mindful encounters within their own day-to-day visual experience.

Course Work and Time Commitment

As a 100-level, three-credit online course, it is expected that you will dedicate on average 5-6 hours each week to completing required course materials and assignments. I have opted to forego exams in this course. Rather than cramming for one or two high-stakes exams, I ask that you distribute your time and energy in a more sustained practice of reading, looking, thinking, creating, and writing.

Groups

The foster a culture of student cohesion, dialogue, and debate, the enrollment of this high-enrollment course has been randomly divided into 9 groups of 8-10 students each. These groups will remain fixed throughout the semester, with the hope that members of each group will come to work well together and come to know each other's voices and perspectives. These groups will inhabit a common Perusall annotation space (details follow); they will share their "Sightings" assignments to a common discussion board; and they will collaborate on a common "Another Look" assignment.

Course Navigation

This course will run entirely online, via UD Canvas.

Canvas: UD's online learning management system, Canvas, will be used for all course activities and communication. All assignments, grades, etc. will be posted on the Canvas course site unless otherwise noted. Information on how to use Canvas is available through the [Canvas Student Guide](#).

3. Learning Outcomes

1. Students will recognize how particular visual practices and technologies shape understandings of our environment and the environment itself.
2. Students will identify how and to what ends specific objects, sites, and practices structure visual experience.
3. Students will attain introductory knowledge of major thinkers and concepts in the visual humanities.
4. Students will develop and communicate original, informed, and constructive critical analyses of visual culture, in words and pictures.

4. Learning Resources

Required Learning Materials

A Note on the Readings

All students are responsible for all required readings, every week.

"History is not the past," observed the great American activist Grace Lee Boggs, "it is the stories we tell about the past." In this course we will make sure to keep that important truth in focus. This is a reading-intensive online course that will emphasize active and critical looking, reading, discussion, and writing. All students will be responsible for carefully reading all required assigned texts. Weekly reading loads will not exceed 30 (often richly illustrated) pages.

The assigned texts for this course are works of innovative historical scholarship or criticism. You are expected to engage with these texts carefully, critically, and in their entirety. These latter readings are often highly imaginative and can be somewhat challenging: they are not always intended to be read quickly or easily. Rather, they are conceived by their authors as invitations to new ways of understanding and thinking about visual culture. The measure of success in this course will not be perfect, authoritative comprehension of these readings but rather sincere and thoughtful engagement with and across them.

One of the key ways that we'll work together in this asynchronous class is by reading and thinking together about these writings in the space of an app called Perusall, which allows us to collectively

annotate the readings with comments and questions as we read through them. More about that below and in the Modules.

Some things to consider as you read (and annotate):

- What can we know about the author? To whom is their argument addressed?
- When was it written? Does this matter? Why?
- What is the focus of this chapter or essay?
- What is the most important point made in this chapter or essay? Why?
- Who are the important players? Which objects matter most?
- How is the argument being advanced? What evidence is offered? How is that evidence described?
- What ideas in this text are new to you and especially interesting?
- What ideas relate to material previously covered in the course, and how?
- Where do you disagree? Why?

Modules

All course materials, including videos, films, readings, and assignments, can be found in the course [Modules](#), of which there are 12. Individual Modules must be completed in sequence, and each Module must be completed in its entirety before moving on to the next one.

5. Learning Assessment

Coursework at a Glance

Each student will be responsible for the following:

- Complete 12 sequential thematic course units, including all videos and readings
- Complete all required annotation assignments
- Complete and submit 6 "Sightings" assignments
- Complete and submit 1 group "Another Look" assignment
- Complete and submit 1 final "Looking Local" assignment

Student performance in this course will be measured by four core assessments, listed below. These are designed to ensure that students

- Remain steadily, actively, and collaboratively engaged in the assigned course materials and the concepts developed and explored therein
- Maintain a practice of forging connections across course content and with the visual world around them.
- Progressively develop and hone skills in thinking and working analytically and creatively in consort with their instructors and peers

Final Grade Breakdown

The final course grade will be calculated using the following components:

Course Component	Percentage of Total
Readings and Annotations	30
Sightings	30
Another Look	20
Looking Local	20

Readings and Annotations

As Ad Reinhardt once put it, "What you know is more important than what you see, see?" This course on visual culture centers the practice of careful, critical, and actively engaged reading, and advances from the premise that smart writing can help us better understand the work of seeing and understanding what and how we see. To that end, the course has been designed around twelve "object lessons," each pairing a single familiar site of visual interest with one or two critical and/or historical essays which invite us to reexamine that site anew.

For each unit, students will use the Perusall app to comment upon and discuss one of the assigned course readings. This assignment will be graded on the basis of the degree to which annotations reflect careful attention to the text's argument and evidence. Please be sure to insert 3-6 substantive annotations per reading, including at least one which responds productively and respectfully to a classmate's comment. Annotations are due on the unit due date. Annotations will be scored on a 3 point scale (3-excellent; 2-good; 1-no effort), weighing both quantity and quality of engagement. Aim to engage substantively with the text and with the annotations of your peers. And you can find instructions for using the app and recommendations for successful annotation [here](#). *Late annotations will not be accepted. Your two lowest scores will be dropped.*

Sightings

On 6 occasions throughout the semester, students will be asked to locate and photograph an array of nearby objects and spaces connected to topics explored in the readings. Using group discussion boards on the course Canvas site, students will submit these photographs along with brief memos describing those spaces and objects in light of insights drawn from the readings. Students are asked to activate and link concepts developed in current and prior units. Authors must be mentioned by name and references to the readings must reflect careful engagement with the text's argument and evidence. Informal but accurate citation is required. Where appropriate, please make reference to the specific location photographed. Sightings submissions will be graded on a 3 point scale (3-excellent; 2-good; 1-no effort). Note: Many of these "Sightings" assignments will require some local travel. Please plan ahead and notify your instructors in advance if you anticipate any obstacles to completing the assignment. **30%**

Another Look

What did we miss? Groups will collectively craft and submit a proposal for the course's "thirteenth unit", based on the examples offered in the preceding twelve. For this assignment students will work together to select an object or site for consideration, collectively select one or two texts for reading (include a paragraph for each explaining why), and provide two links to relevant online resources. Due 4/14. Detailed assignment instruction to follow 3/15. **20%**

Looking Local

For your final assignment, students will submit an audiovisual tour (video or slideshow) featuring five distinct sites observed in their neighborhood or community, with reference to concepts developed in the course. Four of these sites may relate to course units and may have been discussed in previous Sightings. The fifth site must develop a topic not yet explored in this class. This audiovisual tour will mobilize explicit connections to four or more of the course units as these foster fuller understanding of nearby objects and/or sites, while offering fresh insights into a topic otherwise not yet explored by the course. Due 5/20. *Detailed assignment instructions to follow 4/15.* **20%**