

Other Ways of Seeing

Centre for the Study of Theory & Criticism/FIMS

Winter 2022

The title of the course is inspired, in part, by John Berger's (1972) *Ways of Seeing*, a project that took shape both as a book and a television series. Turning away from conventional art criticism, Berger joined a generation of thinkers, artists, and activists who interrogated our conventional understandings of seeing and knowing. This group opened up big questions about the gendered, racialized, and sexualized dimensions of the gaze, the connection between the history of images and capital (how traditional painting is a celebration of private property and modern advertising its continuation), and the performative dimensions of representation. What is ultimately at stake in these investigations is a new understanding of human relationality.

This course tracks this trajectory, treating our various ways of seeing as relational ontology characterized by exposure, dependence, regard, and vulnerability of an incarnated self for whom the other's attention is necessary. Or as D.W. Winnicott might phrase it, this course seeks to link apperception with perception by postulating a historical process (both in the individual and the social bond) which depends on being seen: "When I look I am seen, so I exist. I can now afford to look and see. I now look creatively and what I apperceive I also perceive. In fact I take care not to see what is not there to be seen (unless I am tired)." Here the classical formation of the subject is displaced by an understanding of the self as radically dependent on the other's gaze.

Tentative list of readings:

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (BBC 1972. 4 episodes)

John Berger, *Bento's Sketchbook*

Mary Elliott (curator), *The 1619 project*:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/19/magazine/history-slavery-smithsonian.html>

bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

Jacques Lacan, "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis" & "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Ecrits*

Kent Monkman, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*

Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*

Céline Sciamma (dir.), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*

Tentative list of Assignments

1. Questions: 250 words each

A good question possesses, inspires, perplexes, and thrills the mind and heart. On four separate weeks, prepare a question based on the assigned reading for that week. Provide context for your question, signaling how your thinking about the question evolved. Your questions should be straightforward, jargon-free, and open-ended. Anchor your question in the text. This might mean parsing a particular passage in a Talmudic fashion, i.e. actively wrestling with the text, seeking the meaning and truth of the words. This approach to reading aims at critique, which privileges the ability to question freely and without inhibition. Or you might wish to find links between our authors. There is no need, however, to rely on outside materials for this assignment.

2. Keyword: 750-1000 words

This is a modified version of the standard seminar presentation. At least once during the semester, you are required to present your thoughts about one of the assigned reading. The presentation must focus on a keyword or key passage from one of the week's assigned readings. The idea of this task is to work closely with the text, unfolding and reflecting upon the significance of the keyword (or key passage) that you have chosen. You might wish to choose a term that you believe to be the crux of the author's argument. Or you might choose to focus on something more obscure in order to speculate on the significance of the outlying idea. Depending on your choice, you may wish to use the term as a way to try to paraphrase or summarize the author's argument. Or you may wish to deconstruct the logic at work in the passage. You may wish to link your discussion of the keyword to other readings from our course, but there is no requirement to rely on outside materials for this assignment. End your discussion with two-three questions for discussion with your colleagues. Bring enough copies of your work for each student in the class.

3. Final paper proposal: 250-500 words

Choosing a topic takes time. Good essays almost always begin with good questions. Spend time thinking about the kinds of questions that animate your reading and writing. Use a question as the basis for your proposal and as the basis for the final essay. The proposal should include your research question and its context, the thinkers with whom you will be in dialogue, a description of the texts that you will engage with in your investigation of your question, and the lens you plan to use in your analysis. On the last week of class, we will workshop the proposals, so bring one copy for each person in the class.

4. Final Essay: 3000-4000 words

The ubiquitous term paper: this should be an original and exciting piece of writing that makes direct use of class materials. You should deeply engage with one or more of the authors from the syllabus. While it is not required, you may also use our course materials as inspiration for original research. I am keen to read essays that are: conceptually fresh and show some adventure in the craft of writing. A sense of the intellectual stakes of your argument and/or the larger context of your topic is important. A musical quality in the prose is most welcome.