

# Course sample

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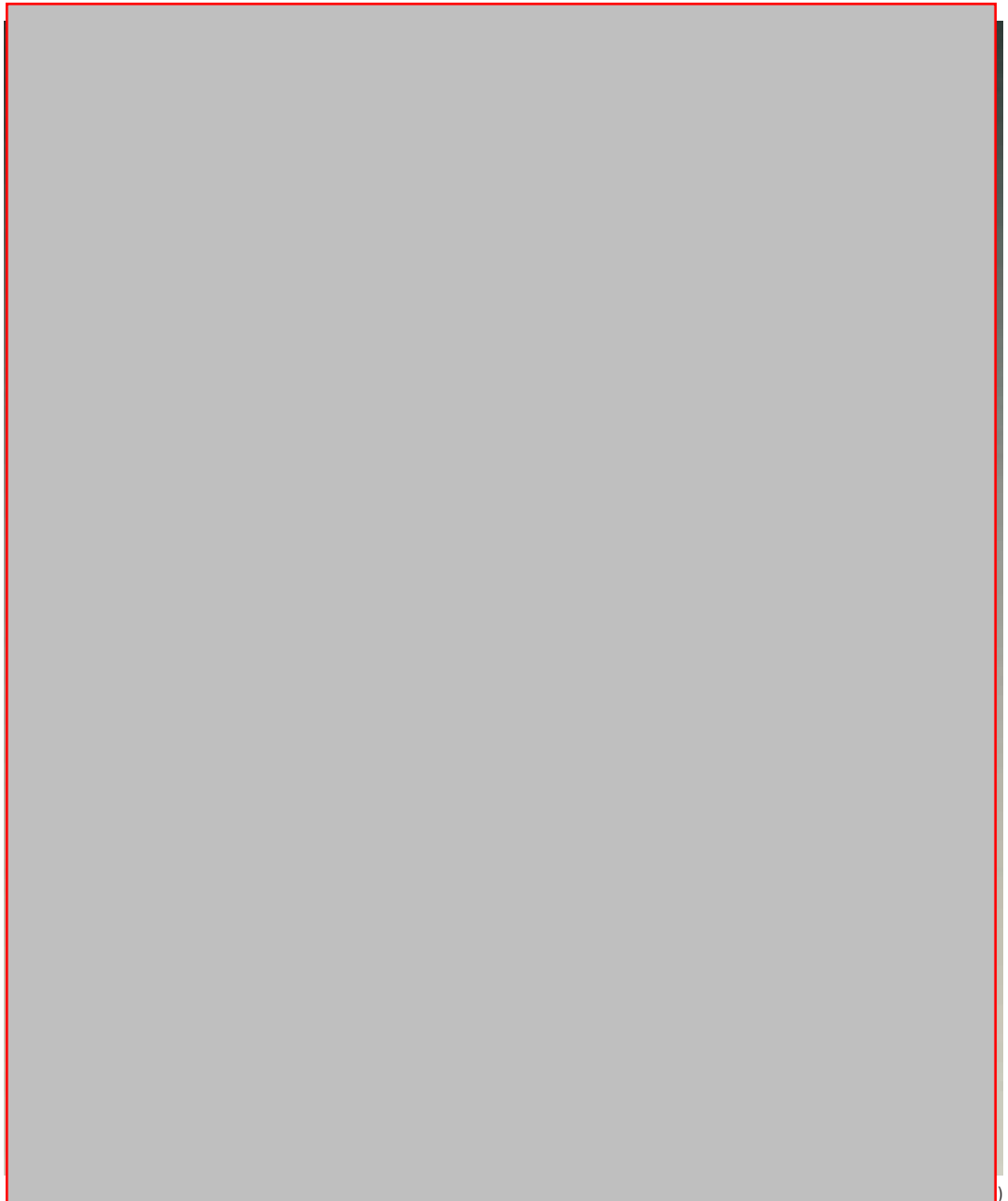
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Visual Studies 1

# Understanding Visual Culture



## Level HE4 – 40 CATS

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# Contents

Times are given here as a guideline: you may want to spend a lot more. All your research and learning log work is included in the timings.

**Total time 400 hours**  
Approximate time in hours page

## Introduction

Course overview, course outcomes, health and safety 5

## Part one: Introducing visual studies 60

Project 1: Modernist art: the critic speaks 11

Project 2: Fetishising the object of your eye 13

Project 3: Base and superstructure 15

Project 4: Ideology and interpellation 17

Project 5: Art as commodity 19

Project 6: Photography: the new reality 20

Project 7: The Flanneur 21

**Assignment 1: The interaction of media 22**

## Part two: Ways of seeing 50

Project 8: The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction 24

Project 9: Barbarous taste 26

Project 10: The society of the spectacle 28

Project 11: The thorny subject of taste 30

**Assignment 2: The displaced image 31**

## Part three: Of signs and symbols 70

Project 12: Rhetoric of the image 35

Project 13: Mini-project on structuralist analysis 36

Project 14: Myth is a type of speech 37

Project 15: Author? What author? 39

Project 16: Deconstruction 40

**Assignment 3: Decoding advertisements 41**

<b>Part four: Looking and subjectivity</b>	<b>120</b>
Project 17: Freud, Oedipus and castration	45
Project 18: The mirror phase	48
Project 19: Looking, observation or surveillance?	49
Project 20: Gendering the gaze	50
Project 21: Images of woman	51
Project 22: Two fried eggs and a kebab	52
Project 23: Black	53
Project 24: White	55
<b>Assignment 4: Visualising the 'other'</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Part five: The concept of reality</b>	<b>100</b>
Project 25: Illusion only is sacred, truth profane	59
Project 26: Ecclesiastes misquoted	60
Project 27: Being and its semblance	61
Project 28: Lacan's prose is notoriously remote	62
Project 29: Buffy the Freudian	63
<b>Assignment 5: I'm a visual studies student; get me out of here</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Epilogue</b>	<b>65</b>
Appendix: references	66
Appendix: reading list	67

# Introduction

## Course overview

This course is primarily suitable for students engaged in a course of study in any of the creative visual arts, particularly those intending to complete a degree of Bachelor of Arts. However it is equally suitable as a stand alone course by anyone interested in the workings of our visual culture.

The course explores the core theories that underpin a contemporary understanding of visual culture; particularly it looks at the ideas in Structuralism, Post-structuralism and Postmodernism. At this first level the view is broad rather than deep to provide an introduction to the discipline and to act as a basis for further study.

Though this is necessarily a theoretical course, the intention is that the students should apply the theories as the means to gain their understanding.

It is suitable for students following courses in History of Art or anyone simply wanting an introduction to visual culture.

It is a prerequisite for this course that you have ready access to the internet. Students are also required to keep a learning log in the form of an online blog.

## Course outcomes

Upon completion of this course you should be able to:

- understand the range of the core themes found in the writings of Barthes, Benjamin, Foucault and Lacan as well as the development of those themes by a number of contemporary writers. (Berger, Sontag, Debord, Baudrillard etc.)
- understand how you can utilise a number of these themes to explore the workings of the visual in today's society
- have the confidence to explore further

## Health and safety

Much of your time studying this course may well be spent in front of the computer. Remember to make sure that the viewing and seating conditions are not only comfortable but also conform to best practice advice and take a break at regular and frequent intervals. Advice can be found on the Health and Safety Executive's website as well as elsewhere on the web.



Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2 Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968)

# Visual Studies

## Part one: Introducing visual studies



Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O) Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)

Visual Studies is something of a new subject area having its origins in the more theoretical side of Art History and taking up the tendency of Art history to ally itself to the methods and theories of Sociology, Philosophy and Literary Criticism.

Between the 1950s and 1990s the universities, particularly the 'red brick' universities and Polytechnics (later to become the first wave of New Universities under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher) inaugurated courses whose basis was a small group of texts centring on the work of Richard Hoggart *The Uses of Literacy*, Stuart Hall *Cultural studies: two Paradigms* and Raymond Williams *Culture and Society*. As the discipline developed it borrowed from many peripheral disciplines including anthropology, film studies, women's studies and philosophy.

In the 1990s and particularly in the United States, a somewhat less Marxist and more emphatically visual discipline emerged from an increasing movement in other subjects that relied more on the work of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes and might be seen as being rather more narrow in scope than its British counterpart. This became known as Visual Culture, perhaps from Michael Baxandall's 1972 work *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*.<sup>i</sup>

Visual Studies is a later development out of these two, being seen by many as having potentially multidisciplinary possibilities<sup>iii</sup>.

*"to denote new theoretical approaches in art history; some want to expand the professional territory of art studies to include artefacts from all historical periods and cultures; others emphasise the process of seeing across epochs; while still others think of the category of the visual as emphasising non-traditional media – the visual cultures of not only television and digital media, but also of the institutional discourses of science, medicine and law."*<sup>iv</sup>

This course, though entitled Visual Studies tacks backwards and forwards through these paradigms, sometimes seeming to be more allied to one than the other but at all times it is intended to take the visual as its point of aim.

This first section may seem somewhat removed from the visual in parts but we need to be aware that the theoretical basis on which we build our understanding of the visual often does not directly refer to a particular sense but awareness and understanding is dependent on the accumulated insights of a whole panoply of disciplines. Our job is to apply those insights to the visual.

## The '-isms': modernism, structuralism, post-structuralism and postmodernism

Definitions of these terms is next to impossible in any meaningful way and comprehensive explanation fills a vast library of erudite writings so anything said here is, of necessity inadequate beyond the scope of this course and will need to be supplemented by further reading if you want to gain a full understanding.

However for our purposes some sort of overview of what these terms mean, at least in the field of the visual, is needed and will be built on as the course progresses.

### Modernism

Modernism is best seen as a term for the many political, philosophical, and critical theories and movements that lead the way in the first half of the 20th Century. In the visual arts for example, there is no one movement that can be termed 'Modernism' but movements like Cubism, Dada, De Stijl and Surrealism are Modernist and the Bauhaus school of art in 1920s and 30s Germany is seen by many as the embodiment of the Modern movement.

At the heart of Modernism is the idea of change, the experience of the urban society and the implications and critique of Capitalism. We shall look at Marxism in a later section but it must be understood right from the start that the critique of capitalism and the capitalist state by Marx, Engles and their successors is the basis upon which Modernism as a set of ideas rests.

In addition to this critique of capitalism there is the development of psychoanalysis by Freud and his successors. Again, we shall look at Freud later in more detail but his ideas, right or wrong, are fundamental to Surrealism for example, and characterise so much of Modernist thought, writing and visual art.

Essential to the Modernist agenda is the belief in the mutability of 'human nature'. Modernism was dedicated to the improvement of the human condition, the programme was to provide a better environment both physical and intellectual in which a better human being could develop. This was seen not as a utopian dream but an achievable goal and lead to many Modernists allying themselves to revolutionary movements both of the left (generally) and of the right (rarely). For this reason Modernism is often characterised as being a Bolshevik movement though Stalinist Soviet Communism was often at odds with Modernism and Modernists. This leads to the strange spectacle of Communists like György Lukács critiquing Modernism in *The Ideology of Modernism* and many Modernist Marxists such as Louis Althusser and Theodora Adorno informing anti-Stalinist Communism.

Modernism often seems to be a movement away from realism towards abstraction, but as soon as one says this one realises that the definition of realism becomes problematic. Do we mean realistic, naturalistic representation; if so where does the documentary movement in particular in film (Humphrey Jennings for example) fit in? Do we mean the portrayal of reality? Or do we mean the understanding of reality? And if Modernism is associated with Marxism and is not realist, what of Socialist Realism?

These apparent contradictions appear often and might be seen as the elements of weakness in any ideological system that lead to both its strength (in a dialectical sense) and its eventual downfall.

## Structuralism

Structuralism appears, first in literary criticism, to grow through the period of Modernism but is at its height in the middle of the century and can be said to straddle the end of Modernism proper and the beginnings of Postmodernism.

In essence Structuralism suggests that meaning is to be found in the structure of the object of study. That may be a piece of literature, a work of visual art, a society or indeed anything else.

Part three looks at Semiotics, which starts as a Structuralist discipline and we will see that Structuralist Semioticians such as the early Roland Barthes analyse everything from a sentence upwards to tease out its meaning.

## Post-structuralism and postmodernism

Post-structuralism, in response to feminism and post-colonialism, sought to take the place of meaning outside the object of study. postmodernists would seek to understand the text. Here this means anything under study, whether a literary text, an image, film etc. with reference to the culture and society, and its 'dominant ideology', in which it is being studied and in some cases at least, the ideology which formed the text in the first place. The critic Clement Greenberg, a Modernist and Structuralist, would argue that the meaning, if any, in Jackson Pollock's work is to be found in a study of that work and that work alone. A Post-structuralist would argue that the post-war climate of anti-communism, Pollock's alcoholism and the effect on Lee Krazner's artistic career all effect the way his work is seen today, not to mention the viewer's attitude to alcoholism and feminism.

# Project 1: Modernist art: the critic speaks

Read *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000* pps 773-9. Clement Greenberg's *Modernist Painting*. *Art in Theory* is not the course reader but it does contain some of the articles you are directed to read through the course and so you may find it easier to buy it rather than keep trying to get it from your local library.

The purpose of this project is as much to give you a way of reading an article for academic study purposes as it is for you to glean the information from Greenberg's article.

Make notes on your impressions of the article as a whole.

It is likely that you didn't grasp more than the gist of the article and this will certainly be true of later passages that you are asked to read; so read it again and a third time if you feel it necessary. Reading each of the passages twice should be seen as a minimum requirement and explains why so much time is allocated to each section. The language used is both specialised and often different from that used in both everyday conversation and literature. Look up unfamiliar words and words used in an unfamiliar way. The web as a good source of information but **do not read only one explanation**, you might pick the one that is wrong and the web has a lot of wrong information on it.

If you own the book you might like to underline words and passages that you think are important and even make notes in the margins. Not everyone likes to do this and, you should never do this with a borrowed book regardless of the bad manners of other borrowers.

If you do not wish to mark your book (and maybe additionally) write down words and phrases that you feel are of special importance. Also make note of any words you are unfamiliar with. You will need to look these up in a dictionary and it can be useful to put them into an internet search engine because some words have a special meaning in a particular discipline that is not fully covered in a normal dictionary but is sometimes explained in web articles. You might also find *Keywords* by Raymond Williams useful here.

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## Modernist art check and blog

Once you have read and re-read the article, reflect on the following questions and make notes in your blog:

- What is Greenberg talking about in general?
- What are his main arguments?
- Who does he mention?
- What is his opinion of them?
- Does he quote others?
- Does he make reference to other's work?

Include notes on your feelings as to whether he is convincing. Has he changed your mind or confirmed what you thought before reading the article? If his ideas are totally new to you do you tend to agree with him or not?

Later on in the course you may feel differently about the article, it may become clearer or you may have read something else that changes your mind. When and if this happens you should return to the notes you have made here and add your new thoughts.



Lavender Mist: Number 1 Jackson Pollock (1912-56)