

# HISTORY OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION

AUTUMN 2006

**ART 240 COURSE SYLLABUS**  
**TUESDAY & THURSDAY 12:30-1:50am in CFA 144**  
**Office: CFA 226A**  
**Office hours by appointment**  
**Tel. 716.645.6878 ext. 1373**  
**Email: ks46@buffalo.edu**



“There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there  
is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.”  
—Marshall McLuhan

## **CATALOG DESCRIPTION:**

This lecture-based course will combine chronological and conceptual approaches to the rich and evolving history of visual communication. By thinking critically about the relationships between the histories of art and design, relative political and cultural conditions, and technological developments, students will articulate an understanding of the presence of the history of visual communication in contemporary life and raise informed questions about their own contributions to the future of the field.

## **OBJECTIVES:**

- To develop awareness and further your knowledge of design history through visual examination as well as topical discussions.
- To develop your resources and vocabulary while applying your knowledge to a larger cultural network of communication and aesthetic discourse.
- To develop insight into theoretical questions facing contemporary producers of visual culture and to articulate your own ideas with clarity, rigor, and imagination.

## **TOPICS:**

- What is Visual Communication? And why this question matters.
- Prologue to Graphic Design: Invention of Writing; Egypt; Asia; Alphabets; Medieval Manuscripts.
- Graphic Renaissance: Printing in Europe; German Illustrated Book; Renaissance Graphic Design; Typography Genius.
- Reform and Revolution: Arts and Crafts; Art Nouveau; Futurism; Dada; Construction; Montage; De Stijl; Dutch Modernism; Bauhaus; and New Typography.
- Consumption and Mass Culture: Popular Modernism; Corporate Modernism; Pop; Post-Modernism; Advertising; and Designer as Producer.

## **GRADES AND REQUIREMENTS:**

Final grades are the sum of the following combination: a. Class Work (40%) b. Mid-Term (30%) c. Final Project (30%). UB uses a lettered grading policy, A - F, including + and - grades. An incomplete grade may only be given to students who have fulfilled the attendance requirement for the course and completed all but one of the assignments.

a) Class Work: Presence, active inquiry and informed participation in class discussion are essential. Students are required to complete all assigned projects, readings and exercises. There will be a few pop

quizzes, projects, and research assignments. All written assignments must be in MLA format. There will also be several optional extra credit assignments.

Students are required to attend each and every class. If an emergency arises, please notify me by telephone or e-mail before class. Three unexcused absences will be permitted for the entire semester. Roll will be taken five minutes into the session and all persons arriving thereafter will be marked absent. Absence from class does not excuse you from any assignment or material. A fourth absence will result in the reduction of your final grade by a full letter grade. A fifth absence will result in the reduction of your final grade by two full letter grades. A sixth will result in a failing grade for the course.

Assignments not submitted on time will receive a grade of "0." Late submissions will not be accepted unless arrangements are made with me prior to the due date. No re-submissions will be considered.

b) Mid-Term: The exam will consist of images that have been shown in class, quotations from assigned readings, and essay questions. Any image that appears on the exam will have been shown in class and is reproduced in Hollis' *Graphic Design: A Concise History* or Meggs' *A History of Graphic Design*. All quotations are from assigned readings.

c) Final Project: Each student must write a 1,000-word essay on a critical issue in visual communication OR prepare a 1-page handout and lead a seminar discussion.

**REQUIRED TEXT:** Available at Talking Leaves Books (3158 Main Street) tel. 716.837.8554.  
Bierut, Michael, and Jessica Helfand, Steven Heller, Rick Poynor, eds. *Looking Closer Three: Classic Writings on Graphic Design*. New York, NY: Allworth Press, 1999.  
Hollis, Richard *Graphic Design: A Concise History*. New York, NY. Thames and Hudson, 2001.

**LAB FEE:** \$30

**ADDITIONAL TEXTS:** Inspiring introductions to visual communication that will last a lifetime.  
Adorno, Theodore *The Culture Industry*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2001.  
Berger, John *Ways of Seeing*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1977.  
Crow, David *Visible Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*. New York, NY: Ava, 2003.  
Drucker, Johanna *The Alphabetic Labyrinth*. New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1995.  
— *The Visible Word*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.  
Flusser, Vilém *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*. London: Reaktion Books, 1999.  
Havelock, Eric A. *The Muse Learns to Write*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986.  
Heller, Steve *Design Literacy: Understanding Graphic Design*. New York, NY: Allworth Press, 2004.  
Kristeva, Julia *Language the Unknown*. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1989.  
Lupton, Ellen and J. Abbott Miller *Design Writing Research*. New York, NY: Kiosk, 1996.  
Martin, Henri-Jean *The History and Power of Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.  
McGann, Jerome *Black Riders*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.  
McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore *The Medium is the Massage*. Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2005.  
Morris, William *The Ideal Book*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.  
Ong, Walter, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.  
Shepard, Leslie *The History of Street Literature*. London: David and Charles, 1973.  
Wolfe, Tom *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. New York, NY: Bantam, 1999.

#### **ONLINE RESOURCES:**

AddAll: The best place to find used, rare and new books. [www.addall.com](http://www.addall.com)  
Albright-Knox: Museum of Contemporary art in Buffalo. <http://www.albrightknox.org/>  
American Printing History Association: Printing in America, then and now. [www.printinghistory.org](http://www.printinghistory.org)  
Buffalo Book Arts: Typographic activities in your neighborhood. [bflobookarts.blogspot.com](http://bflobookarts.blogspot.com)  
Democracy Now: Daily radio and podcast news program. [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org)  
Hallwalls: Interdisciplinary Arts Center in Buffalo. [www.hallwalls.org](http://www.hallwalls.org)  
Roycroft: The Arts and Crafts Movement in East Aurora. [www.roycroft.org](http://www.roycroft.org)  
Visual Studies: Need I say more? <http://visualstudies.buffalo.edu>

## HISTORY OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION SCHEDULE/FALL 2006

**Week 1:** (Tu 8.29/Th 8.31)

**INTRODUCTION:** What is Visual Communication?

### **Prologue to Visual Communication**

The earliest marks made by human hands are over 200,000 years old. The alphabet (in one form or another) has only been in continuous use for about 3,000 years, and printing from moveable type is only 450 years old—about the same age as Columbus' America. Although we will spend the majority of the semester studying works from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, students should remember that this is only a potsherd of the history of visual communication. Topics include: The Invention of Writing; Graphic Communication in Ancient Egypt and Asia; Alphabets; and Medieval Manuscripts.

Readings:

Philip Meggs, "The Prologue to Graphic Design," (handout)

The Cave of Chauvet-Pont-D'Arc: [www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/chaudet/en/index.html](http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/chaudet/en/index.html)

Virtual Lascaux: [www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/fr/index.html](http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/fr/index.html)

Johanna Drucker and Jerome McGann, "Images as the Text: Pictographs and Pictographic Logic,"  
<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/%7Eejm2f/old/pictograph.html>

Media History Project: [www.mediahistory.umn.edu/index2.html](http://www.mediahistory.umn.edu/index2.html)

**Week 2:** (Tu 9.5/Th 9.7)

### **Graphic Renaissance**

The principles of relief printing have remained relatively stable since their inception. The invention of typography is indisputably one of the most important advances in civilization following the invention of writing. In 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe the conditions were ripe to begin producing books, and the proliferation of literacy led directly to profound revelations in the arts and sciences, as well as political and religious revolutions. Topics include: Printing Comes to Europe; the German Illustrated Book; Renaissance Graphic Design; and an Epoch of Typographic Genius.

Readings:

Philip Meggs, "A Graphic Renaissance," (handout).

Dead Media Project: <http://student.vfs.com/~deadmedia/>

- Letterpress demonstration.

### **Unit 1: REFORM AND REVOLUTION:**

The first unit focuses on the modern movements in art and design that continue to shape the aesthetic and philosophical basis of visual communication today, beginning with the reform movements of the nineteenth century and culminating with the radical avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 20s.

**Week 3:** (Tu 9.12/Th 9.14)

### **The Critical Object: Arts and Crafts to Art Nouveau**

The industrial revolution triggered passionate critiques of the commodity system. Karl Marx developed the theory of "commodity fetishism," arguing that in a capitalist culture, an object's function or use value is eclipsed by its economic value. The Arts and Crafts movement applied the socialist critiques of factory production to objects, architecture, interiors, and typography. William Morris and others embraced hand techniques and the honest use of materials and processes as a way to demystify objects of daily use. The Arts and Crafts movement was followed by the more aesthetically innovative movements of Art Nouveau and Jugendstil.

Readings:

Beatrice Warde, "The Crystal Goblet," 1932, in *Looking Closer III*.

William Morris, "The Ideal Book," 1884, in *Looking Closer III*.

Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, p 1-36.

- Visit the Poetry Collection.

**Week 4:** (No Classes Tu 9.19/Th 9.21)

**Materialist Typography: Futurism and Dada**

Futurism and Dada were avant-garde movements that emerged in the 1910s. Although both began as literary movements, they had a profound impact on the visual arts. F. T. Marinetti and Tristan Tzara created poetry that challenged the conventions of literary presentation by mixing styles and sizes of type and by composing letters along conflicting axes. Futurism and Dada celebrated the materiality of text, recognizing typography as a sign system with its own meanings and effects.

Readings:

F.T. Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax," 1913 and Fortunato Depero, "Outline of the Art of Advertising Manifesto," 1929, in *Looking Closer III*.

Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, p 37-43.

- Visit the Poetry Collection.
- Listen to the poets at Ubu.com.

**Weeks 5 and 6:** (Tu 9.26/Th 9.28) and (Tu 10.3/Th 10.5)

**The Technological Eye: Constructivism and Montage**

Constructivism built a bridge from the disruptive experiments of Futurism and Dada to an accessible public language. After the Russian Revolution, artists in the young Soviet Union sought to bring art into everyday life, creating posters, books, propaganda stands, theatre design, textiles, furniture, and other objects of communication and daily use. Fascinated by new technologies of representation, they mobilized the camera and the printing press as instruments of visual interpretation.

Readings:

Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Program of the First Working Group of Constructivists," 1921; El Lissitzky, "Topography of Typography," 1923; and El Lissitzky, "Our Book," 1926, in *Looking Closer III*.

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1936.

<http://bid.berkeley.edu/bidclass/readings/benjamin.html>

Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, p 44-67.

- Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*, 1929.

**Week 7:** (Tu 10.10/Th 10.12)

**Transcendental Grids: De Stijl and Dutch Modernism**

The de Stijl movement was spearheaded in the Netherlands by Theo van Doesburg, a Dutch painter, poet, and designer. Banding together with Piet Mondrian, Vilmos Huszar, Gerrit Reitveld, and other artists, he promoted a purified visual language consisting of perpendicular elements and primary colors. While immersed in this transcendental search, van Doesburg eagerly tapped the international network of the avant-garde, crossing wires with Dada and Constructivism. This lecture traces the origins and development of modernism in the Netherlands, ending with a look at recent Dutch design.

Readings:

Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, p 68-75 and 174-178.

**Week 8:** (Tu 10.17/Th 10.19)

**The Language of Vision: The Bauhaus and the New Typography**

The Bauhaus was founded in Germany in 1919 as a progressive school of art and design. The school sought to build alliances among art, craft, and industry. Expressionist experiments dominated the early phase of the Bauhaus, while the later years were associated with functionalism and rationalism. Bauhaus graphic designers embraced Constructivist theories of design, participating in what came to be known as the "New Typography," which assimilated avant-garde aesthetics into a critical commercial practice and helped consolidate the profession of graphic design.

Readings:

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "Typophoto," 1927; Herbert Bayer, "Towards a Universal Type," 1935; and Walter Dexel, "What is New Typography?" in *Looking Closer III*.

Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, p 52-67.

- Guest Lecturer: Elizabeth Otto.

### **Week 9: Midterm Exam (Tu 10.24/Th 10.26)**

#### **UNIT 2: CONSUMPTION AND MASS CULTURE**

The second unit of the course moves from European modernism to the American context. The following lectures consider how modernism interacted with American consumer culture, and show how contradictions in modernist theory and practice resulted in the dilemmas of post-modernism.

### **Week 10: (Tu 10.31/Th 11.2)**

#### **Graphic Design in America: From Popular Modernism to Corporate Modernism**

European modernism moved across the Atlantic in the 1930s and 40s, where it interacted with the commercial culture of the United States. Designers including Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, Ladislav Sutnar, and Will Burtin emigrated to the U.S.. American designers such as Alvin Lustig and Lester Beall were influenced by emigrés as well as by the publications and exhibitions of European art and design, while designers such as W.A. Dwiggins already had forged an American approach to modernism.

Readings:

Theodore Adorno's "The Culture Industry." (handout)

Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, p 97-111.

- Guest Lecturers: Gregg Biglieri/Eli Drabman.

### **Week 11: (Tu 11.7/Th 11.9)**

#### **Design as Sign: Pop and Post-Modernism**

Pop celebrates image over structure, communication over function, and ephemerality over permanence. Beginning in the 1950s, Herb Lubalin and the Pushpin Studio exerted a worldwide influence by using popular imagery, historical typefaces, and bold humor. Andy Warhol, who began his career as an illustrator, became notorious for appropriating commercial imagery. Pop movements also emerged in England, Italy, and Japan in the 1950s. In the 1970s, architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown began learning from Las Vegas. In the 1980s, Paula Scher and Louise Fili made popular allusions to history, while Tibor Kalman looked outside design's formal traditions in search of a more direct style.

Readings:

Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, p 112-129; 179-223.

- Guest Lecturer: Caroline Koebel.

### **Week 12: (Tu 11.14/Th 11.16)**

#### **Culture and Critique of Advertising**

Scholars and critics became increasingly interested in popular culture in the 1950s and 60s. Roland Barthes used the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure to analyze artifacts of popular culture, showing how signs feed one another in ravenous chains of appropriation to create "mythologies" of modern life. In this class meeting, we will discuss Barthes's ideas in relation to advertisements and objects from recent culture. Thematically, we will focus on the issue of race in advertising, from the 1960s to the present.

Reading:

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1957. (handout)

First Things First Manifesto. (handout)

- Negativland's *Sonic Outlaws* (see <http://negativland.com/>)
- Graftix4change: <http://graftix4change.com/index.html>

### **Week 13: (Tu 11.21/No Classes Th 11.23)**

#### **Deconstruction: Examining the Structure of Style**

This lecture will return to the avant-garde tradition and its reinterpretation in contemporary American design culture. We will look at the impact of Swiss design (from high modernism to late modern) and the graduate program at Cranbrook Academy of Art. Philosophically, we will discuss how the term "deconstruction" became part of design culture. The term was coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida in the 1960s, referring to the critique of such culturally entrenched oppositions as nature/culture,

inside/outside, and speech/writing. Deconstruction swept literary studies in the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s—the humanities program at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore was at the epicenter of this intellectual revolution. The term “deconstruction” entered design culture as a stylistic category applied to architecture, products, and graphics.

Readings:

Emil Ruder, “The Typography of Order” and Wolfgang Weingart, “How can one make Swiss Typography,” in *Looking Closer III*.

Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, “Deconstruction in Graphic Design,” (handout).

Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, p 76-82; 130-137.

- Guest Lecturer: Henry Sussman.

**Week 14:** (Tu 11.28 / Th 11.30)

### **The Designer as Producer**

We will discuss the idea of designers producing their own content—the designer becomes a filmmaker, product developer, writer, publisher. We will look back at this question historically, reviewing what we have covered during the course, and we will look at what some of today’s most interesting designers are doing.

Readings:

Michel Foucault “What is an Author?” (handout)

- Guest Lecturer: Richard Kegler.

**Week 15**

Tu 12.5

Papers Due for undergraduates who did not lead a discussion.

Th 12.7

Last Class

Charles Olson (taking a cue from Heraclitus) wrote: “What does not change is the will to change.” Updates and amendments to this syllabus will be announced in class. This course is an adaptation of Ellen Lupton’s “History of Graphic Design” at Maryland Institute College of Art.