Department of Media, Culture, and Communication
MCC-UE 1403
Postcolonial Visual Culture

Course Description

Studying visual culture focuses on the emergence of vision as a special domain of activity, and tells us “what it is to see, and what there is to see.” That is, the study of visual culture clarifies how seeing is not a self-evident biological action, but also a cultural process that we can criticize and compare.

Since vision in modernity became a crucial means of social and political regulation, vision also came to express and reflect social hierarchies, e.g., between those who were considered visually exemplary, and others, and between seers and seen. The experience of formerly colonized populations, both within and without the west, hence became an important resource for transcending the limits of hitherto prevailing visual culture.

Studies in postcolonial visual culture pose a more specific set of questions, e.g.,
* what is the relationship between the visible and the invisible?
* under what conditions does the boundary between the visible and the invisible shift?
* what are the different degrees of visibility that apply to different classes of objects and persons?
* how do new forms of technological communication alter the relationship of different forms of sense perception, one to the other, e.g., seeing vis-a-vis hearing and touching etc.
* what new forms of visual culture arise when oppositional cultures remix dominant discourses, e.g., as with the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street?

Required Books


These are available at the NYU Bookstore on Broadway. Other readings will also be made available in article form.

Course Details
The course will require active participation, based on close reading of texts, presentations in class, response papers written on key readings, and a final exam. At the end of the course, students should be able to conduct sensible debates on core concerns of visual culture in relation to media studies.

Course evaluation will be based on class attendance (10%), class presentations (15%), responses to readings via Blackboard (20%), and a final research project (55%).

Course Readings will include:
Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.
Frantz Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled,” and “This is the Voice of Algeria,” in *A Dying Colonialism*. Tr. Haakon Chevalier, New York: Grove Press, 1965.

*White on Black: Images of African and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*
Class Projects:

Divided by historical period. Dominant, subaltern, intermediate. Relationship between the seen and the unseen. Techniques of observation, of visibility, in a given context. Sound culture vis-à-vis visuality. 

POV: The Object’s Agency

As objects move around the world they produce their own histories, memories, scars; they leave traces in their wake. Choose an object—one of the ones discussed in the readings or another you are familiar with—and take seriously the idea that it is an active participant in this narrative. How does that change the historical/political/legal implications for that object?

A key aim of this class will be to inquire into the differences between visual cultures of

i) the pre-Cold War era, when the world was divided into “civilized” and “colonized”

ii) the Cold War era, when the world was divided into “free” and “totalitarian”

iii) 2001-2011, the time of “the Axis of Evil” when “Islamo-fascist” governments replaced Communism as the threat facing the “free world;”

and

iv) the contemporary moment when for example, revolutionary Arab political movements have provided inspiration for politics in the West as in the Occupy Wall Street movement across the U.S.

This class proposes to examine these and related issues through the lens of postcolonial visual culture.

More specific questions can be posed in light of the opening paragraph:

1. How were older modes of perceiving the west vis-à-vis its others successively altered – if they were altered - in the wake of the cinema, television and the internet? 
2. Are new media technologies repeating old stereotypes, or are they modifying them, and if so, how?
3. What reflections can we notice of the war on terror, from documentary and feature films (both in the US and elsewhere), to news shows such as Colbert Report and the Daily Show, to Occupy Wall Street (which acknowledges the “revolutionary Arab Spring” as its inspiration) and beyond?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Wall_Street

http://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html
The Wire
The Western
Youtube
Ads as a global phenomenon
Jazz Singer; the other within US visual culture
Steven Colbert and Jon Stewart; The other politics guy; Oprah Winfrey;
Mulholland Drive and the Latino within; Chinatown
Web design
Matrix; science fiction