Vancouver Island University
Department of Media Studies

Course Code: MEDI 303
Course Title: Documenting Culture
Course Start Date: Spring 2016

Course Outline: Ravindra N. Mohabeer, PhD
Tues/Thurs 11:30 to 12:30 or by appointment
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Description:

> This is a course that explores 'how to see culture.' It is a project-inquiry focused course in which we will consider the role of the visual in society, develop tools to explore the visual world in various forms, and create photos and other visual artifacts to study social themes, issues and ideas. This is not a task to be taken lightly as it commands great sensitivity to how you construct the world visually and respect for your colleagues and the people who may end up in your images.
>
> This is not a photography class but a class that examines society visually. We will situate this class in the local context in which it is delivered, taking the Vancouver Island Region and the city of Nanaimo as a 'living lab' in which we can see culture, and we will explore opportunities to see more critically, thoughtful of ethics, and of our differing positions of power.
>
> Over the last century visual culture has grown in its importance in societies the world over. We often take for granted the visual, forgetting that everything from letter font to advertising billboard is a part of our everyday lives. Within an increasingly networked world, we must be mindful of the flow of visual materials both from within and outside of our everyday material lives – considering the visual experiences that come to us from away and how they are understood in the context of where we live. Together, each of these visual elements contributes to the ways in which we experience the world and are implicated in all facets of our lives. Today, with the growing ubiquity of image capture devices, such as cell phone cameras and cheap video technology, opportunities to participate in creating visual artifacts is at an all time high.
>
> As thoughtful scholars, this course will allow us to explore the world in which we live visually, and will offer an opportunity for you to closely consider the visual materials you make.

Learning Outcomes:

The goals of the course are to develop skills for making sense of the visual world, to become thoughtful producers of visual materials, and to consider the past, present and future by developing a critical stance from which to see culture.

Students completing this course shall be able to:

- understand the construct(s) of "visual culture";
- identify processes of producing and analyzing visual cultural artifacts;
- understand empirical, narrative, reflexive and phenomenological methods for studying and creating visual materials;
- create and evaluate (academic) photos and/or other visual material;
- develop skills in creating effective visual documents and presentations;
- explore links between visual aspects of culture and identity, space, power and society, consumer culture, semiotics, and visual communication.

Student Evaluation:

    1. Selfie & Selfie without self plus analysis: 10%
    2. Project Proposal: 15%
    3. Short Photo-essay: 15%
    4. Photo-Circles: 30%
    5. Final Project: 30%

Institutional Grade Scale:

The percentage equivalents for letter grades in this course are:

A+	90-100%	B+	76-79%	C+	64-67%	D	50-54%
A	85-89%	B	72-75%	C	60-63%	F	0-49%
A-	80-84%	B-	68-71%	C-	55-59%		

Textbooks and Materials:

Most materials will be linked directly to the course online website.

Access to a digital camera and the ability to print images is needed. You will keep a digital and a physical record of images captured for this class – some will be left permanently with the instructor and may or may not appear in a public show at the conclusion of the class (to be negotiated).

Schedule of Topics:

Week 1
Discussion: What is culture and why study it visually; an overview and our approach.

ACTIVITY: Tri-council ethics tutorial – you MUST hand in the certificate of completion prior to doing any of the larger projects. https://tcps2core.ca/welcome

Photo Circle Groups: Establish a recurring group of up to 5 members – these people will stick with you for the semester *but it's not a group project, more of a discussion group. Today, as with every week, you will go out and look for a particular topic. Today's topic is **'culture.'**

Week 2
Studying the visual world in the era of everyday documentation; of what, for what; with what effect? What is the impact of focusing on the person and not the context? What gets put into the frame, how, why and what gets left out?

READINGS:
Fawn Review (2013) VICTORIAN SELFIES- SELF PORTRAITS THROUGHOUT THE AGES

James Hamblin, Selfies at Funerals, The Atlantic, October 29, 2013

Selfies at Funerals (Tumblr page)

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett & Holly Baxter, Smug Shots and Selfies: The rise of Internet self-obsession, The Guardian, Friday 6 December 2013 11.45 GMT

Derek Conrad Murray (2015) Notes to self: the visual culture of selfies in the age of social media, Consumption Markets & Culture, 18:6, 490-516

ACTIVITY: Take a selfie - really, a selfie, just like you would normally do using whatever you would normally use to do it. Think about what you did, why, what it represents. Look at the breadth and depth of the shot. Consider the presence of context.

Also:

Take the Tri-Council research ethics tutorial ... you MUST have a completed certificate presented to the professor in order to undertake any further projects and to complete the requirements of this course - this is NOT for credit. https://tcps2core.ca/welcome

Photo Circle Topic: 'environment' or **'context'**

Week 3
Overview: Imagining, doing and teaching visual work.
READING: Project 50: Anatomy of a photo essay by Genaro Molina, November 18, 2010
http://framework.latimes.com/2010/11/18/project-50-anatomy-of-a-photo-essay/
http://www.donaschwartz.com/images.html

Douglas Harper, 2012 Teaching visual sociology – link to the book online: focus on the methods chapters and read at least one or two chapters

Margaret Olin (2002) Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's "Mistaken" Identification Author(s): Representations, No. 80 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 99-118 (link to PDF)

Video: //www.youtube.com/v/mYBNRUStZsg?hl=en

ACTIVITY: Explore family photo albums, Instagram feeds, cell phone/computer image libraries. Consider the tactility, 'weight' and value of moments. Consider the reason for documentation.
Photo Circle Topic: 'forgotten'

Week 4
Documentary: photography and photojournalism to document culture.
Is there a difference between using visual objects as data (for research) and using them as 'art' or as commentary to witness and report on the state of the world? What is this difference? How can it be held purposefully rather than accidentally in place as a filter of our actions as scholars? How has 'seeing' come to be 'believing'? Can we consider a culture of the eye? What do we not see?

READING: Barbara Davidson: Forgotten Shots
http://www.digitalphotopro.com/profiles/barbara-davidson-forgotten-shots.html
http://framework.latimes.com/2011/09/27/newspapers-win-news-and-documentary-emmy-awards/

http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/canadian-photographer-wins-pulitzer-1.1057877

Lauren Cruikshank. (2010) "Synaestheory: Fleshing Out a Coalition of Senses." *M/C Journal* 13.6
http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/310

Video: 'Shooting Indians' by Ali Kazimi
ACTIVITY: Take a look at some news photographs – the kind that demonstrate a narrative dimension. Consider the story and the correspondence with the image. Recreate a 'news' photograph. Consider the power of your vision to create a sense of the world.
Photo Circle Topic: 'invisible' and/or **'the work of seeing'**
DUE: Photo analysis: 'Selfie' without self picture.   10%

Week 5

Watching the news: When we consider the visuality of media we must consider the constructed nature of seeing. How do we see and what is the importance of the visual to culture? The idea that seeing is 'socially constructed' is important to the documentation of culture. Much the same as news is a constructed/received view of the world, all images are, too, constructed.

READING

Terence Wright (2004) Collateral coverage: Media images of Afghan refugees, 2001, Visual Studies, 19:1, 97-112 (Link to PDF)

David Campbell (2009) CONSTRUCTED VISIBILITY: PHOTOGRAPHING THE CATASTROPHE OF GAZA
https://www.david-campbell.org/wp-content/documents/Constructed_Visibility.pdf

Nicholas Mirzoeff (2006) On Visuality. Journal of Visual Culture. Vol 5(1): 53–79 (link to PDF)

Photo Circle Topic: 'power' and/or **'visual'**

Week 6

Telling stories with pictures and words: digital storytelling, slideshows, presentations, internal and external sharing, museums and displays.
READING:
5 Photo Essay Tips by Christina N Dickson
http://digital-photography-school.com/5-photo-essay-tips

Abigail Durrant , David Frohlich , Abigail Sellen & David Uzzell (2011) The secret life of teens: online versus offline photographic displays at home, Visual Studies, 26:2 (Link to PDF)

Michelle Hunting and Dr. Denise Conroy. The Visual Component: Use of Images to Enhance Multimodal Research.
http://anzmac.org/conference/2011/Papers%20by%20Presenting%20Author/Hunting,%20Michelle%20Paper%20137.pdf

Visit:
Go to an online museum and consider different types of display. What is the visual story at play? (http://www.educatorstechnology.com/2014/01/20-wonderful-online-museums-and-sites.html)

The Center for Digital Storytelling (http://www.storycenter.org/stories/)

ACTIVITY: Overview of presentation software and ways of presenting visually.
Photo Circle Topic: 'sharing'

Week 7
Exploring visual memory: memorials, self-promotion, scrapbooks, historical signs & images of other everyday objects

READING:
Lauren Reichart Smith & Jimmy Sanderson (2015) I'm Going to Instagram It! An Analysis of Athlete Self-Presentation on Instagram, Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 59:2, 342-358

Richard Chalfen (2002) Snapshots "r" us: the evidentiary problematic of home media, Visual Studies, 17:2, 141-149

Bragg, Sara and Buckingham, David (2008). 'Scrapbooks' as a resource in media research with young people. In: Thomson, Pat ed. Doing Visual Research with Children and Young People. UK: Routledge, pp. 114–131
http://oro.open.ac.uk/15339/2/Visual_Research_chapter_30-5-07.pdf
VISIT: http://invisiblepictures.wordpress.com/tag/visual-sociology/
http://www.visualsociology.org

ACTIVITY: Scrapbooking with made and 'borrowed' visual material – try to involve images you've made and others that you think are relevant that come from other sources.
Photo Circle Topic: 'ordinary/everyday'
DUE: Project Proposal   15%

Week 8
How to see information: Data, charts and posters

READINGS:
Lev Manovich (2011) What is visualisation?, Visual Studies, 26:1, 36-49 (link to PDF)

Anthony McCosker & Rowan Wilken (2014) Rethinking 'big data' as visual knowledge: the sublime and the diagrammatic in data visualisation, Visual Studies, 29:2 (link to PDF)

ACTIVITY: Find different data sources and consider how they can be described visually. How can the visual be created as a metaphor? What can be learned from visual metaphors about how seeing is constructed and about how data can be seen?
Photo Circle Topic: 'display'
DUE: Short Photo Essay   15%

Week 9
Institutional vision: Advertising displays and logos

READINGS:
John Grady (2007) Advertising images as social indicators: depictions of blacks in LIFE magazine, 1936–2000, Visual Studies, 22:3, 211-239 (link to PDF)

Douglas Harper & Patrizia Faccioli (2000) "Small, silly insults," mutual seduction and misogyny the interpretation of Italian advertising signs, Visual Sociology, 15:1, 23-49 (link to PDF)

VISIT:
What are some examples of effective visual advertisements for current products?
https://www.quora.com/What-are-some-examples-of-effective-visual-advertisements-for-current-products

The Gender Ads Project: http://www.genderads.com (it's poorly organized, but go down below the large image once you press the menu buttons)
ACTIVITY: Create a poster or advertising bill for this class – try to encourage people to take it, to consider the construct of documenting culture, to be intrigued by the visual. Consider how you use visual metaphors and how those metaphors construct a particular vision of the world.
Photo Circle Topic: 'race' and/or **'gender'**

Week 10
Seeing people: Participatory video & visual evaluation : How to guide people to use the power of their own observations as a catalyst of consciousness and a basis for action.

READINGS:
Emma Yates & Julia Clarke (XXXX). Picturing Sure Start: A visual approach to local evaluation (http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/support/methods/documents/37.pdf)

Sarah Pink (2007) Walking with video, Visual Studies, 22:3, 240-252 (link to PDF)

Marjorie Faulstich Orellana (1999) Space and place in an Urban Landscape: Learning from children's views of their social worlds, Visual Sociology, 14:1 (link to PDF)

VISIT: Claire Martin Photography: http://www.clairemartinphotography.com/photo-essays/the-misfits/downtown-east-side/CM_DowntownEastSide_01/

Hope in Shadows Homelessness Awareness Campaign: http://www.hopeinshadows.com
ACTIVITY: Work with someone else to help capture images or evidence of something that is important to them. Work on composition (what's in the frame, how it's depicted, etc.) and narrative structures. Learn about how and what they see by asking them to tell you about the photos, as objects, but also as depictions of subjects/events.
Photo Circle Topic: 'community' and/or **'other' (inside/outside)**

Week 11
Seeing people: Photo elicitation -
Mapping Memories Project:
http://mappingmemories.ca/sites/default/files/Chapter1_smaller.pdf

VISIT:
http://TheHubCityProject.com (a former student from this class)

ACTIVITY: After visiting the Mapping Memories project and the Hub City Project, consider talking to someone you know and ask them to tell you about something or somewhere important to them. Then ask them to take you to that place or show you that thing and help you document it.

Week 12
New ways of seeing: YouTube, online sharing & interactive seeing – brief discussion & photo circle 'show'

ACTIVITY: Go online – to YouTube, tumblr, Instagram, you pick. Consider the notion of distributed seeing – how people see with or without the benefit of context. Is there a cultural imperialism to seeing that flattens the act of seeing in an online, digital culture?
ACTIVITY: Show and tell class curation of objects and images.
DUE: Photo Circle 'Show' (accumulation of images)   30%

Week 13

Sharing final work with the class and possible publically

DUE: Final project (production & written statement)   30%

Assignment Details:

Selfie & Selfie without self plus analysis: 10%
Along with taking a 'selfie' at the start of the semester – an object of more or less familiarity these days, you are asked to take a 'selfie-without-self.' This involves considering the stuff that makes up who we are and how we negotiate the world. Is there stuff that signals 'you' to 'others'? Should you include all of it? Should you spread it out in a particular place or a particular way? How will your stuff show who you are?

Once you've taken both images – only hand in two – one selfie, one selfie-without-self – write a brief analysis of the process more so than a description of the differences. What can you learn about representing someone without showing them?

This should be done in digital form on a regular sized document page – created as an 'essay style' showing and discussing both photos.

Project Proposal: 15%
As a course on 'documenting culture' you have some considerable latitude for what you might want to do in your final project.

It must be visual, of course. You must make images and, most often, accompany them with words (written/spoken). The purpose is not to highlight your proficiency at taking nice pictures, but your ability to use images as data to communicate culture in some way – yes, it's 'research.'

Your proposal must describe what you plan to do for the final project, provide a few images to provide a sense of where you are going, have a question you will answer / thesis you will demonstrate, a plan for capturing the requisite images, and a bibliography of supporting research. You must also develop a reasonable ETHICS protocol (consent form, project description, etc.) and you MAY NOT start your project until this is cleared by me. Suggested photo interventions/projects –visual evaluation, participatory visioning process or documentary essay

- define a clear topic
- focus on a clear perspective or method of analysis
- define a question to consider and a photographic/video approach to answering it (methodology)
- articulate a plan to accomplish your method
- develop some sample shots if appropriate of the work you intend
- develop an ethics protocol (consent forms, releases, etc.)

This proposal is MANDATORY before undertaking any activities related to the final project.

Short Photo-essay: 15%

Just prior to reading week you will be given a topic – not yet determined – and you will be asked to create a photo essay – no words involved – that tells us a story about the topic. You will create a sequence of photographs that demonstrate a clear narrative, perform the function of documenting your perspective, and produce a logical order.

There is no preset number of images that must be produced but the expectation is that you will have no more and no less than necessary to provide a clear sense of the topic without the use of any additional words.

The topic will be highly personalized in the sense that there is no right or wrong way to do it, rather a thorough or not thorough enough approach. The purpose of the assignment is to help you test out the ability to communicate using images without words – kind of a test run for your final project.

The physical version should be placed on 8.5x11 photo quality paper with up to but not more than 4 images per single sided page – but 1 to 2 images per page makes the most sense usually. The sequence of the images must be clear and must answer the questions posed in the assignment without further explaining on your part. Please keep a digital copy of this work as well (hand in the digital to D2L and the physical in class). These will also be shared or might be part of the final class 'show.'

Photo-Circles: 30%

Every week you will participate (during class time) in a photo-circle. You will be with the same group through the semester but this IS NOT a group-graded exercise. Think of it as a journal or log of you learning different ways to see things, in concert with others.

The way that the groups will be set up you will spend at least 30 minutes taking images related to the week's focal point with your group and at least 20 to 30 minutes talking about the images you took – critique. You might be better off taking some 'test shots' prior to class based on the weekly theme and discussing them first before you go out and take shots collectively.

In the end, what you will hand in to represent your work in the photo-circles is NOT LESS THAN 2 photos per weekly topic and not more than 5 related photos per week for a total of 8 weeks worth of photographs. You will PRINT these photos and submit them (not to be handed back) and you are asked to submit a digital version as well – please keep a copy for your own portfolio/records. The exact specifications of the printed document will be outlined in class.

You will only submit this material ONCE – in week 12 when we will have a 'show' to profile the images. While you will hand in all of your images, for the show day, you will be asked to pick a few to contribute to the class sharing.

Remember, the purpose is not just beautiful pictures but pictures that DOCUMENT culture and tell clear stories in evocative ways.

The presentation of the photo-circles will be the same as for the mid-term photo essay, on 8.5x11 photo quality paper, no more than 4 images per page, but 1 to 2 images might be best. Clearly identify which

concepts the images explore (i.e. label them). Consider this as an act of curating your log of explorations into a document of your visual explorations of culture throughout the semester.

Final Project: 30%

See criteria as suggested in the project proposal. The actual details of everyone's projects will be slightly different. If you do not hand in a proposal, you MAY NOT hand in a final project.

The final projects may take just about any visual form that you can create (photographs, visual analysis, infographics, video, slide presentation, etc.).

Additional Information:

Policy on Good Academic Conduct:

All materials submitted for grading consideration in this class must be produced entirely by you and must be created for the purposes of this class only. You are expected to engage in ethical practices as a student that shall include respecting the intellectual and material property of others including identifying the use of other people's ideas (citations) and products (e.g. clippings, or copies, etc.), respecting the rights of other students to learn and participate in class and assignments, and the university, community, and beyond. As this course requires taking photographs, potentially involving people, you will need to pay special attention to the laws and ethics of privacy and you are expected to exercise particular caution and care following the Tri-Council policy on research ethics.

No work that you create for this class can be submitted in whole or in part to fulfill the requirements of another class, nor can any work from another class, in whole or in part, be submitted to fulfill the requirements of this class. Should your coursework in this class overlap work that you are undertaking in another class or for an outside-of-school purpose, you are required to inform the instructor in writing PRIOR to creating the work and YOU must obtain permission from the instructor of THIS course AND any other course or purpose and identify clearly how this work satisfies the separate requirements of each activity. The instructor of this course reserves the right to reject any proposal for overlapping submissions if they are deemed to be too similar in nature or on any other reasonable grounds, and or if you cannot clearly distinguish how the objectives undertaken for this course differ from the objectives and work required for the other purpose. Should you re-use your own existing material or create and use the same material for more than one purpose without prior consent from the instructor you may be awarded a grade of zero (0) for the assignment and/or the entire course.

Students are expected to attend class regularly and actively participate in their own learning and contribute to a learning environment that encourages and supports the learning of other students inside the class and beyond. You may be asked to leave class if you are found to be disruptive to the classroom environment and/or if you engage in activities that distract from your own learning or the learning of others (e.g. using your computer/tablet/mobile phone, etc. for non-class purposes during class time). Should this behaviour persist you may be referred to the Dean of the Faculty and/or asked to withdraw from the class.