

SAM FOX COMMONS COURSE PROPOSAL

Topics in Visual Culture: Commercial Modernism in America 1865-1965

Anticipated Spring Semester Offering

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Topics in Visual Culture: Commercial Modernism in America 1865-1965 Spring Semester

This survey course explores contributions to and expressions of visual modernism within the commercial tradition in the United States. Lectures, readings and screenings engage the intertwined histories of commerce, technology, society and aesthetics. Topics include periodical illustration from Harper's Weekly to the Ladies Home Journal, the newspaper comic strip and the comic book, animation from vaudeville to television, and science fiction and transportation design. Context provided by the advent of industrial image production; modernist art theory and high cultural disdain for mass markets (with resulting effects on the academy); avant-garde and commercial cross-pollination; the social histories of ethnic depiction (i.e., blackface minstrelsy); consideration of women as consumers and producers of commercial images.

CLASS MEETS

Sever Hall 102
T/TH 11:30-1:00

FACULTY OFFICE

Steinberg 9

OFFICE HOURS

Thursday 2:00-3:30
pm

Objects and images from the commercial tradition typically fall into a cultural and academic blind spot. They exist outside the realm of art history as traditionally defined and are not ideally served by the textual orientation of many culture studies courses. This course balances a quasi-canonical approach to relevant practitioners with an insistence on the primacy of the artifact as a radically contingent, embedded thing.

Students make use of materials in the collections of the Modern Graphic History Library at Washington University.

Course Requirements. The work of the course consists of class lectures, course readings, two tests, in-class writing exercises, a research report, and a take-home essay final examination. Three Tuesday evening animation screenings will be scheduled. Attendance at these screenings is required.

Relevance to Sam Fox Audiences:

1) Subject Area Popular images appear everywhere, yet are seldom engaged as serious subjects. The Danish cartoon riots of 2005-06 revealed widespread ignorance of the practices and traditions of cartooning among the commentariat. The 2008 Presidential election featured a controversy about a Barry Blitt New Yorker cover which likewise failed its subject. And the visual history of the JIm Crow cultural regime has been largely suppressed out of a combination of squeamishness and distinterest, leading to a minimization of the period's hardships.

2) Methodology This course addresses subjects and methods in the realm of material culture. The art historical narrative all too often becomes a story of disembodied style: objects become images, transactions become ideas. The class provides a methodological grounding in cultural materialism, an important perspective on objects and experiences in art, design and architecture. Students are asked to look hard and write critically. In the age of the digital image, a good dollop of Marx goes a long way.

COURSE OUTLINE

Part One: Terms, Histories, Methods, Technologies

week 1 Neglected Visualities: Toward a New Taxonomy

week 2 But is the Hammer Beautiful? Artifacts and Objets d'Art
Reading: Jules David Prown, "Style as Evidence"
Reading: David Penney, "The Archaeology of Aesthetics"

Visual Modernism Elaborated

Reading: Excerpts, Guillaume Apollinaire, Essays and Reviews

week 3 Industrial Images and the Modern Press

Reading: Paul Jobling, "Medium for the Masses I"

Platemaking and Printing 1400-1900

CLASS AT SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, OLIN LIBRARY

Reading: Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde & Kitsch"

week 4 Chromatic Printing Modes: Opacity and Transparency as Cultural Markers

Reading: Clement Greenberg, "Toward a Newer Laocöon"

Discussion / Workshop Session

Part Two: Illustration and Modernism

week 5 Illustration, Veracity and the Ideology of Nonfiction

Reading: William Ivins, Excerpt from *How Prints Look*

Modern but not Moderne: The Brandywine School of American Illustration

Reading: TBA

week 6 Drawing Conclusions: Illustrator as Reporter 1

Reading: Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life"

Reading: Alfred Waud, "The Battle of Raccoon Ford," *Harper's Weekly*, October 3, 1863

Illustrator as Reporter 2

Reading: Excerpts, Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*

week 7 Discussion / Workshop Session

Advertising, Images, Icons & Sales

Reading: Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp"

week 8 Price Points: Illustration and Publications for Women at Midcentury

Reading: D.B. Dowd, "Abstraction in (dis)Guise: Al Parker, Fiction Illustration and Commercial Modernism"

Women, Children & Illustration

Reading: Excerpt, Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*

- week 9 Categories & Exceptions: Why Does Norman Rockwell Have His Own Museum?
Reading: Dave Hickey, "The Kids Are Alright: After the Prom"

MIDTERM EXAMINATION

Part Three: Modernism and the Cartoon

- week 10 Serious Jest: On Caricature and Cartooning
Reading: Excerpt, Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*

Felix v. Koko: Competing Visions of an Animated Cinema

Reading: D.B. Dowd, "Strands of a Single Cord: Comics and Animation"

ANIMATION SCREENING: Graceful Girls v. Rubbernecks 1910-1940

- week 11 Comics and Modernism: Plastic Forms and Flying Bricks
Reading: TBA

From Uncle Remus to Chief Wahoo: Characterization, Typology & Pictorial Bigotry

Reading: Gerald Early, "The 1960s, African Americans, and the American Comic Book"

SCREENING: Adventures in Animated Propaganda

- week 12 Transitions: Graphic Design, Animation and Television
Reading: Chuck Jones, "The Tablet and the Dinosaur"

The Rise and Fall of the Comic Book

Reading: Excerpt, David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How it Changed America*

SCREENING: Animated Modernists

Part Four: Modernism, Science and Transportation

- week 13 From Atmos to Zeppelin: Streamline Design and the Automobile
Reading: TBA

Animated Futures & Illustrated Possibilities

Reading: TBA

- week 14 Review and Final Exam