**ARH 208 – Art, Disaster, Memory**

**Master Syllabus**

**Course description:**

This class will consider the role photography, film, painting and sculpture plays in the experience of war and disaster, including the French Commune, the Civil War, WWI, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, Katrina and 9/11. Of particular interest are the consequences of the camera’s presence at scenes of disaster, the function of the memorial with regard to the formation of collective memory and the challenges that the seemingly unrepresentable nature of such events poses for artists and audiences. These issues will be explored through the lens of visual culture and as such will incorporate “high art” examples such as Impressionist painting and Dada conceptual art alongside the more “popular” forms of amateur photography and the disaster movie.

**Course Objectives:**

By the end of the course the student will be able to:

* Discuss the intimate relationship between modern disasters and the visual images that convey them to us.
* Illustrate the various ways in which artists have grappled with the seemingly unrepresentable nature of the modern disaster.
* Understand the ways in which large scale catastrophic events such as Hiroshima and the Holocaust affected prevailing trends of the art world.
* Apply the theoretical models introduced to works of art and/or visual culture beyond the parameters of the course.
* Articulate the historical and theoretical relationship between disaster and visual culture through written and oral presentation.

This course fulfills **Cluster 3B** of the University Studies Curriculum. The learning outcomes for this cluster are:

* Articulate the cultural context, history and formal and conceptual aspects of the art form studied.
* Interpret and create informed responses (via writing, presentation, performance or artifact) to the art form studied through the analysis of the form, content, context and methods of production using appropriate disciplinary terminology.
* Explain the ways in which the art form expresses the values that humans attach to their experiences.

**Final Grade Assessment:**

Exams (3 x 15%) – 45%

Essay (20% for essay, 5% for project presentation) - 25%

Presentation – 10%

Response – 10%

Participation– 10%

**Exams –** There will be three exams in the course of the semester. Each exam will cover material from the readings, in-class discussions and presentations. These exams will **not** be cumulative.

**Participation –** Your participation grade will be determined based on your attendance, contribution to class discussions and your level of engagement with various in-class activities.

**Oral Presentation -** (Cluster 3B, SLO # 1, 2)

Each student will participate in an oral presentation that introduces the argument of a given essay. While the format for this is somewhat open, your presentation should include three components:

1. **An account of the essay’s argument**. In order to make this doable in the time you have allotted, I would suggest splitting this component into two parts. First, try to boil down the author’s thesis to one or two paragraphs. Second, I would identify two or three specific points of the essay that interest you or that you deem important to the overall thesis and go into greater detail with them.
2. **An application of the argument to an image of your choice.** The work chosen should not be from the essay but should be from the same period and/or artist(s) discussed in the text. Please email me beforehand to get confirmation on your work of choice. You will be expected to project a digital version of the image for the class on the day of your presentation so bring in a USB drive or email the pic to yourself (or to me) before you arrive.
3. **Two or three thought-provoking questions posed to the class.** Ideally, these will be conversation starters that don’t necessarily yield a black-and-white answer. You may want to offer an alternate interpretation and see if your classmates buy it, extrapolate the argument to a different historical context or artist and see if it applies and so on.

Please remember that while this is a group presentation, your performance will be graded individually. This is to ensure that everyone does their fair share of the work. You will **not** be required to turn a written paper for this presentation. A sign-up sheet will be passed out on the first day of class. Good luck!

**Response Guidelines** (Cluster 3B, SLO # 2, 3)

Each presentation will be followed by a response from two or more students. As a responder, your job is to essentially add to the presentation with thought provoking questions, which ask for clarification or suggest relevance beyond the examples mentioned in the presentation. Responders are not responsible for evaluating the performance of the presentation, rather they are there to instigate dialogue. For example, you might ask for an explanation regarding a particularly difficult passage. You might also bring in outside examples (other essays or works of art) and ask whether or not certain aspects of the author’s argument applies or not. In any event, be specific and precise in your questions. Try to avoid overly general responses.

While the intent is that the conversation will flow organically, responders will need to come to class having read the essays thoroughly and prepared several questions. As a responder, you will also need to meet with the other member(s) of the group in order to develop some consistency to your questions and prevent overlapping.

**Essay Assignment** (Cluster 3B, SLO #1, 2, 3)

For the final paper, each student will choose an essay we’ve read in class or a recurring concept or idea between multiple essays (check with me on this first) and apply it to a single visual experience or object. The latter can be more traditional art objects (painting, sculpture) or non-traditional media (games, photographs, films, video, installation, etc.). Your first task will be to articulate the author’s position in clear and succinct terms. For this, you should, of course, engage in a close reading of the essay itself. However, I would also like you to consult a minimum of **two** secondary sources for this portion of your essay. You will then use a work of your choice to weigh the claims of the author. The relationship between the essay you are analyzing and the visual experience is up to you. It can confirm or contradict the ideas of the essay. More than likely, it will do a little of both.

Some temptations you will want to avoid:

* The biography of the theorist/critic/artist should only be addressed if it is crucial in understanding the argument of the essay you have chosen. Please avoid the Wikipedia construction that begins: “Jean Baudrillard was born in a small fishing village in 1948” (this is untrue, but what is truth except simulacra, right?).
* This paper is also not intended to be a formal analysis of the work. Obviously, formal elements will be important, but they should be discussed only as they relate to the argument of the essay.
* Be wary of going off on tangents about the work. You are not trying to fully explicate the work, but rather using the work to prove, disprove or simply evaluate the claims made in the essay you have chosen.
* Do not over quote. Quoting is not a substitute for writing. Only quote when the original text looses something integral when paraphrased.
* Avoid generalities. Be specific. Backup your claims with precise examples from the text or work. Approach the essay as an argument that you are trying to convince the reader of.
* Do not assume that the reader has any prior knowledge on the subject.
* Finally, avoid overly subjective evaluations such as “I loved the work…” or “it was beautiful.”

The final essay should be 4 – 6 pages, double spaced, 12 point font with 1” margins on all sides. **All ideas that are not your own should be cited.** Feel free to use any style in citing your sources as long as you are consistent throughout. Papers are due in hardcopy form on Tuesday, December 21, 3:00 PM. Late papers will be docked a half letter grade per day.

**Presentations**

During week 15 and 16, each student will give an informal presentation on their essay project so that they can receive some early feedback from the instructor and the class as a whole. Your presentation should include: a brief synopsis of the argument you plan to make and a discussion of the work(s) you plan to work with. As the paper will be a work in progress at this point, it is perfectly acceptable to discuss some of difficulties you are having with the project as long as these are specific content issues rather than general frustrations.

**Schedule:[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Week 1**  – **Introduction to the Course**

**Week 2 - French Realism and the Revolution of 1848**

*Reading:* Stephen F. Eisenman, “The Rhetoric of Realism: Courbet and the Origins of

the Avant-Garde,” [chapter 9] in Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History, ed. Stephen F. Eisenman (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), 206-224.

**Week 3 - Remembering to Forget: Art, the Commune and the New Paris**

*Reading:* Robert Herbert, “Paris Transformed,” [chapter 1], Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and

Parisian Society (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 1-32.

**Week 4 - Trauma and the Apparatus**

*Reading:* E. Ann Kaplan, “Why Trauma Studies Now?” in **Trauma Culture: the Politics**

**of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature (**New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 2005), 24-41.

Ulrich Baer, selections from “Toward a Democritean Gaze” in Spectral Evidence: The

Photography of Trauma (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 7-14.

**Week 5 - Photography at War: Matthew Brady and the Civil War –**

*Reading*: Keith F. Davis,“’A Terrible Distinctness’: Photography of the Civil War Era,”

Photography in Nineteenth Century America (New York : H.N. Abrams, 1991), 130-179.

**Exam #1**

**Week 6 - WWI, Dada and the Absurd**

*Reading:* Tristan Tzara, “Dada Manifesto, 1918,” in The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology, ed.

Dawn Ades (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 36-42.

**Week 7 - WWI and Surrealism**

*Reading:* Sigmund Freud, selections from “The Unconscious” in The Freud Reader, Peter Gay

ed. New York: Norton, 1998. Pp. 572-584.

*!!! Note: We will not meet on Tuesday, 10/12 (follow Monday schedule)!!!*

**Week 8 - WWI (cont.)**

**Week 9 - ‘Working-Through’ the Memorial – The Impasse of Memory in**

**Postwar Germany**

Tuesday (10/26): Richter, Kiefer and the Problem of the Past

*Reading*: **Theodor W. Adorno,** “The Meaning of Working Through the Past” in Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords (New York: Columbia 1998), 89-103.

Thursday (10/28): James Young and the Counter-Monument

*Reading:* James E. Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 2. (Winter, 1992), pp. 267-296.

**Week 10 - Hiroshima and the Problem of Representation**

## *Reading:* Peter B. Hales, “The Atomic Sublime” American Studies, Vol. 32, No. 1:

## (Spring 1991), 5-31.

**Exam #2**

**Week 11 - The Destruction of the City in Disaster Films**

*Reading*: Carl Abbot, “The Light on the Horizon: Imagining the Death of American Cities,” Journal of Urban History, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2006), 175-196.

**Week 12 - Disaster Tourism: Photographing the Disaster**

*Reading:* Susan Sontag, selections from *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus an

Giroux, 1977), 3-26, 85-114.

*Note: We will meet on Wednesday 11/10 (follow Thursday schedule). We will not meet on Thurs. 11/11 because of Veteran’s Day.*

**Week 13 - Vision and Visuality at the World Trade Center**

*Reading*: Marc Wigley, “Insecurity by Design” in After the World Trade Center. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 69-86.

*!!! Note: No Class on Thurs. 11/25 Thanksgiving Holiday !!!*

**Week 14 – Photographing the Disaster: 9/11 and the 21st century Camera**

*Reading*: Marianne Hirsch, “I Took Pictures” in Trauma at Home*,* ed. Judith Greenberg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 69-86.

**Exam #3**

**Week 15 and 16: Project Presentations**

**Papers Due During Exam Week**

**University Studies Rationale**

This course focuses on the history of visual media and disaster. Its intent is to look at the formative role that images and other forms of visual representation play in the memory and experience of these events. It also seeks to contextualize this discussion within a broader discussion of the reigning histories and theories of modern and contemporary art. As this course is being run exclusively as an honors section, the pedagogical approach will veer toward a seminar style rather than traditional lecture based course. Students will be active in both presenting and responding to the material. Additionally, research questions will be foregrounded throughout the class.

The reading and assignments dovetail with the Cluster 3B learning outcomes in several respects. Our analysis will integrate formal techniques and disciplinary terminology in class discussion, presentations and writing assignments. In the course of tracing this history, the class will introduce students to the conceptual basis of modern and contemporary art and visual culture. Throughout the class, students will produce written and oral presentations that engage these learning outcomes.

1. The schedule is subject to change as the semester proceeds. The instructor will inform you of all changes. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)