

**Cross-Disciplinary Learning and Teaching Initiative
Visual Culture and Theory Workshop, Spring 2013
Final Report**

Workshop Participants:

Daniel Forbes
Margarita Pignataro
Zahi Zalloua

Summary of Proposal:

This workshop was designed to promote cross-disciplinary thought, collaboration, and the continued development of cross-disciplinary pedagogies among Whitman faculty whose teaching and research engages with Visual Culture and Theory. Participants included faculty from both Humanities and Fine Arts disciplines, as Visual Culture is interested in both theory and praxis. We were fortunate to have the participation of the Sheehan Gallery director, as Visual Culture studies critically engage with the display and installation of artwork and objects. One of the goals of this workshop was to explore future intellectual collaborations between our different Whitman departments and units and to foster more cross-disciplinary teaching and research opportunities.

Selected Commentaries from Participants:

Daniel Forbes: In terms of the goals set out for this workshop, I would have to say that the experience exceeded my expectations. The discussion of Visual Culture, its emergence as a field of study, its potential to shape conversations scanning a wide array of disciplines, and the challenges/ problems regarding both its definition and its function could not have come at a more opportune time. From the very first reading I found a rich discussion of exactly the kinds of issues I have been striving to address in my repeated proposals to the College regarding the construction of a new shared exhibition space on campus for the display of both art and object culture. I was incredibly pleased to see that my own intuitions regarding the ways in which such an interdisciplinary space could benefit this institution fit into a larger, vibrant discussion, one that is ongoing in fields well beyond the fine arts. The information provided offered me new language for shaping future conversations regarding such a facility.

Within the Visual Culture study group itself, conversations generated by the readings were immensely satisfying and crossed numerous disciplinary boundaries. Religion, philosophy, literature, cinema, gaming, politics, pop culture, ethnic studies, gender and queer theory, mass media, technology, anthropology, psychology, fine art: these were just some of the fields that collided and mingled in reflecting upon the information encountered. The discussions also frequently examined the ways in which varying aspects of Visual Culture affect and inform the pedagogical practices and personal research of the groups' participants.

In addition to the intellectual stimulation of the group, it was a rare opportunity to meet and get to know faculty I have not had the prior chance to spend much time with. To be able to engage in an atmosphere that was both scholarly and yet far more relaxed than many campus encounters

was very generative.

In terms of how this group will increase faculty /staff collaboration, Margarita Pignataro, one of the participants, had been using the Sheehan Gallery consistently this year in teaching her classes. Meeting in this format has deepened conversation around how the Gallery might better support her pedagogy in the upcoming year. Also, I will be working with next year's gender roundtable, led by Zahi Zalloua, the facilitator of this Visual Culture group. After having the chance to engage with him in this context, I am very excited about the roundtable and the possible incorporation of the October exhibit, a retrospective of the work of artist Frank Munns, into the schedule of events.

In addition to these aspects of the group, I believe this workshop will be very valuable in my teaching of Introduction to Studio Art Practices next fall. While the class has a studio focus, this course is also the initial introduction for many students (studio art and other) in discussing the process and powers of signification and the importance of being able to identify and interpret cultural subtexts. The development of such critical skills have benefits for students far beyond their application in the fine arts. There are several essays from the texts used in this workshop that I plan to incorporate into my syllabus.

Margarita Pignataro: My interest in the Visual Culture and Theory workshop stemmed from 1) my preparation for the 12th Conference on International Hispanic Literature in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, where I used in my presentation visuals, in form of music videos and power point, in relation to poetic themes in three Afro Hispanic Caribbean female works, and 2) my desire to raise my awareness concerning Visual Culture and Theory in order to elaborate in my SPAN 342 Art/Lyric/Verse class. As desired, implementation of the theories discussed in the workshop has already been fruitful in my Whitman experience as I have discussed with students Laura Mulvey's theory concerning Frida Kahlo and how said theory affects gender portrayal and the political and psychoanalytic implications of the art and feminist movement in Mexican Art. Also, in my 2013-14 academic year at Whitman, in the courses Media, Theater and Performance, Rise of Latinos in the U.S. and Hispanic Literature and Culture, I expect students will benefit from the teaching technique and theories discussed in the workshop, to name a few: the theory of the Gaze and the Look; paradoxes of contemporary media, and socio-political and economic domains that have been ungraspable by design in certain geographical locations—particularly along the Mexican United States border. Thus, the Visual Culture and Theory workshop corresponded to our goal of creating an interdisciplinary space in the classroom by addressing many aspects of Visual Culture and Theory in our field of study, and it was very rewarding to me as a scholar and professor and benefits the continued excellence of instruction here at Whitman College.

Zahi Zalloua: For me this workshop was a great intellectual experience. I will be drawing on most of the readings in my literature and gender studies courses in the coming years. In our discussions, we were able to engage with the complexities of the image and gain fresh insights into its ideological production and subversive potential. We debated the elusive duality of the image: how the image can become a spectacle—the site of fascination, mystification and complacency—or conversely, it can be effectively deployed to unsettle one's habitual mode of existence, to open-up a different way of seeing the social world. I found our discussion of the

male gaze—or rather the staging of the male gaze—particularly helpful. Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze, which foregrounds a psychoanalytic perspective, makes a useful contribution to a feminist interpretive framework. I plan to propose a new course in the near future on feminism and psychoanalysis where I will be drawing heavily on Mulvey's book *Visual and Other Pleasures*. I plan to assign W.J.T. Mitchell's essays to my literary theory class, since his essays articulate so well the interpretive and political demands that numerous types of images impose on their readers/spectators.