

**Cross-Disciplinary Learning and Teaching Initiative**  
*Visual Literacies*  
**Summer 2015: Final Report**

**Workshop participants**

Breckenridge, Janis (Coordinator)  
Culp, Andrew  
Elseewi, Tarik  
Miller, Libby  
Reynolds, Matt

**Workshop description**

This collective enquiry explored a range of interdisciplinary theoretical, rhetorical and aesthetic approaches to visual literacy, with an emphasis on photography, painting, film and graphic novels. Workshop participants discussed prominent psychological, philosophical and anthropological approaches to political, social and cultural dimensions of visual media especially in times of crisis such as warfare, political upheaval and major cultural shifts (Cohn, Crary, Ranciere, Virilio, Butler).

Participants included five faculty members representing four academic departments (Spanish, Film & Media Studies, Art History and Visual Culture Studies, General Studies and Rhetoric Studies). Five meetings were led in turn by each member of the group, who introduced and then fostered discussion of their selected text. A sixth and final session examined supplemental readings that fostered continued reflections on the collaborative cross-disciplinary workshop.

The goals of this CDLTI included exploring diverse trends in the vast field of visual literacy through close analysis of leading schools of thought, major critical voices and contemporary approaches to visual studies, with particular attention paid to perception of images. Texts under study included works that the presenters regularly incorporate into their teaching while other selected books were those that had been on reading lists and were thus “new reads.” All discussions deliberately included questions of pedagogical concern: how could these concepts be included in our respective classrooms and our research endeavors?

**Practical Matters**

Participants met for five regular sessions to discuss specific theoretical and philosophical texts (see the syllabus below). These regular meetings each lasted two or more hours, whereby the participant who had selected the reading material took responsibility for leading the conversation. A final session lasted three hours, incorporating final readings as well as broader discussions regarding campus-wide teaching of visual literacy teaching as well as NW5C initiatives. The group met for a total of 15 hours over the course of July and August of 2015.

Scheduling meeting times this summer turned out to be a surprisingly smooth task, given that participants had similar calendars for out of town travel. I would advise future coordinators to plan the calendar well in advance and remain flexible in rescheduling if necessary. We met at Olive which, although often busy, was a comfortable and convenient venue.

## Workshop syllabus

### **JULY 15: (De)Constructing the Visual Language of Sequential Art**

Led by Janis Breckenridge

- *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. Neil Cohn.

### **JULY 17: Perceptual Disruptions and Artistic Reinventions**

Led by Libby Miller

- *Suspensions of Perception*. Jonathan Crary.
- *Visual Culture Reader* (selections). Nicholas Mirzoeff.

### **JULY 21: The Political Dimensions of Art**

Led by Tarik Elseewi

- *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Jacques Ranciere

### **JULY 31: Embodied Images**

Led by Matt Reynolds

- *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*. Hans Belting (Author), Thomas Dunlap (Translator)

### **AUGUST 4: Technologies of Perception and Destruction**

Led by Andrew Culp

- *War and Cinema*. Paul Virilio

### **AUGUST 6: Collaborative Roundtable Discussion**

- “Introduction” and “Torture and the Ethics of Photography” (from *Frames of War*). Judith Butler
- *Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Paul Virilio
- individual CDLTI report write-ups

### **Culp, Andrew**

The summer CDLTI on *Visual Literacies* was a success for a number of reasons. First, each participant brought a different set of concerns that enriched conversations about teaching visual literacy. For those teaching students trained in textual methods, we discussed how to appreciate the image. Others brought specific teaching challenges associated with habits of seeing. Second, the reading material was a rich exploration of visual literacy across fields. Visual methods are popular in many different disciplines – each with their own canons, theoretical models, and

academic conventions. It was fruitful to explore ways of seeing, the construction of arguments, and how to make an intervention in psychology, comic studies, art history, visual culture, anthropology, philosophy, rhetoric, and gender studies. Finally, the sessions were a joy – the whole CDLTI was well designed, everyone was incredibly collegial, and we always left feeling like there was a productive exchange.

The CDLTI reminded me that Whitman is full of bright minds. While the brief conversations in the hall are essential to academic life, the opportunity to meet for a sustained engagement was truly inspiring. Our conversations were especially generative because they were interdisciplinary and not just cross-disciplinary. This was partly due to the participants, none of whom limited themselves to their own discipline's perspective. The shape of our conversations was also a consequence of the topic and the texts we choose, all of which used visuality to make interdisciplinary interventions. In sum, the CDLTI may not have been as successful if its theme would have privileged a specific disciplinary approach.

The CDLTI exposed me to material that will certainly appear in my rhetoric courses. The reading group gave me an opportunity to read rhetoric scholar Judith Butler's *Frames of War*, which has been an essential resource at the intersection of war and visuality. Furthermore, it sparked interest in canonical texts from other fields, such as Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception*. While visual rhetoric has developed its own conventions, I am excited to supplement them with new approaches, such as Belting's anthropological method or Virilio's media materiality.

### **Elsewi, Tarik**

Having just completed my first year at Whitman I can unequivocally say that this CDLTI workshop was one of the intellectual highlights of my academic term. If the goal was to stimulate intellectual inquiry and encourage the use of new interdisciplinary materials, the workshop was a great success. Not since graduate school have I had a chance to engage in a sustained and directed intellectual journey with colleagues. Socially, the workshop introduced me to the intellectual and pedagogical interests of my Whitman colleagues in a way that exceeds the necessarily superficial engagements at lectures or in informal meetings. Most interesting and rewarding was the chance to discuss common intellectual material from very different disciplinary perspectives. The group was itself interdisciplinary and the texts that we chose came from the fields of philosophy, media studies, art history, linguistics, and anthropology. Each of us picked up on different parts of the works and the synthesis of the group superseded what we could have incorporated individually.

In terms of actionable realizations, this workshop has helped broaden my understanding of the philosophical and historical context of image analysis. Although I am in Film and Media Studies and by nature of the field *always* approach texts from a visual perspective, the multidisciplinary makeup of the group and of the texts that we studied has encouraged me to think through the composition of visual imagery in a way that film studies traditionally hasn't done. Whether from the disciplinary features of art history, which has its own arguments about the production of meaning in images historically and with its own take on aesthetics, or from anthropology—which approaches images from cultural and ideological perspectives—many of the ideas we discussed in this workshop will enter into my teaching. Specifically, I will be using selected sections of the texts we read (Virilio, Crary and Belting) in my Intro to Film and Media Studies

classes. I will be using these texts to contrast how different disciplines approach modes of viewing, understanding and meaning making differently.

### **Miller, Libby**

The texts for the Visual Literacies workshop, chosen from a wide range of disciplines that included art history, anthropology, psychological linguistics, and philosophy, dealt with the conditions of visibility in modernity. The workshop was productive both in terms of research and pedagogy: during our meetings, we took pains to ask about every text what its concrete applicability was in the classroom and in our own work. The principle connecting threads were on one hand, how ideas help us to read specific images, and on the other, how images inform the construction of collective and individual subjectivities.

As a new member of faculty unaffiliated with a specific department, it was useful for me to get to know other faculty working with visual material on campus and to hear about their research. Furthermore, as I prepare to teach Whitman's Introduction to Art History and Visual Culture for the first time in the spring of 2016, I am thinking actively about how to work with visual materials in the classroom and what texts support visual literacy. Through this workshop, I read texts that I have considered assigning, some of which I have decided against, and others that I will adopt in the future.

Some of the readings that we did and others that were suggested in the context of the workshop provided me with new avenues for research. I am currently working on a book about modern art in Egypt. I was interested in the critiques that my colleagues leveled at a book that I consider as a model for the kind of account I want to write, Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception*, as it allowed me to deepen my understanding of the ideas and frameworks put forth in the book.

In short, I enjoyed and benefitted tremendously from this workshop. Opportunities such as this one to read and discuss scholarship with peers are invaluable in terms of intellectual growth that translates into both pedagogy and research.

### **Reynolds, Matt**

The Visual Literacies reading group and workshop was highly successful in "encouraging creative inquiry into the possibilities of cross-disciplinary learning and teaching." Each of the readings chosen by the participants provided important examples of interdisciplinary scholarship. For example, my own selection was a recent book by the art historian Hans Belting titled *An Anthropology of Images* in which he attempts to account for the body as a medium of envisioning and imagining images. The body's material dimension then has a historical specificity that can and should be understood (according to Belting) through a cultural anthropological frame. It was perhaps just as valuable to discuss how specific texts related to other scholarly pursuits of the participants, how it might be applied, and in this case, how we can use these diverse texts to think about comics and graphic novels.

I plan to incorporate the comics exhibition in Sheehan going on throughout the fall semester into my course curriculum, particularly Introduction to Art History and Visual Culture (ARTH 103). Readings from 2 books were particularly useful in thinking about how to teach this material: *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential*

*Images* by Neil Cohn and Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception*. While the first text deals with the grammar and reception of the comics medium, the second historicizes the moment in time in which perception begins to take a different form as a result of mass media, comics being one example.

The workshop was also an opportunity to think about future iterations of the NW5C Visual Culture Colloquium via the work of other scholars who aren't necessarily working in art history but are using and discussing visual culture in their own teaching and writing. As such, I felt like the organization was thoughtfully designed and a very nice experience overall. I learned a lot.