

Intro to Visual Culture

ARTH 15

Spring 2026 Section 81 Fully Online 3 Unit(s) 01/22/2026 to 05/11/2026 Modified 01/22/2026

Course Information

Visual Culture: Images, Power, and Identity serves as a General Education (GE) course fulfilling humanities or visual literacy requirements. It introduces non-majors to critical image analysis while meeting GE goals like cultural awareness and ethical reasoning.

Open to all majors, this class decodes everyday visuals—from ads and memes to museum art and social media—using accessible theories from Howells and Negreiros. Students learn to question how images shape perceptions of race, gender, and society, with Ana Pareica's selfie analysis highlighting digital selfhood's relevance to contemporary life.

The book structures visual analysis into five key approaches: formalism (form and design), iconology (content and symbolism), semiotics (signs and codes), ideology (power and politics), and hermeneutics (interpretation and context). Students apply these to case studies like paintings, ads, films, and social media, revealing how visuals construct reality rather than merely reflect it.

Chapters progress from theory to practice: early sections dissect fine art (e.g., Panofsky on Renaissance icons), mid-sections tackle photography and TV, and later ones address digital media's ideological stakes. The class follows the book with additional reading added in canvas.

Course Description and Requisites

Key ideas and debates pertaining to visual culture considered through interdisciplinary study of art and media as significant social forces.

Satisfies 3A. Arts (Formerly Area C1).

Grading: Letter Graded

Classroom Protocols

All classes will meet via Zoom during the regular class hours.

Questions and comments may be entered anytime during the in the “chat” box. Students are asked to remain on mute until called on to speak or speak up freely when asked to. Students wishing to speak should use the “hand raise” icon in the participant list. It is optional, but encouraged, to have video on. (points given for camera on during class -- see participation)

Anyone with video on should be seated and properly dressed for classroom attendance. Students are asked to arrive punctually for the Zoom classes. Late arrivals may have to wait a few minutes before entering the Zoom session as late admission requires intermittently checking the “waiting room.”

The sessions will be recorded and uploaded to Canvas.

The Zoom lectures will be recorded and uploaded to Canvas. The recordings will only be shared with students enrolled in the class through Canvas. Recordings may be used for personal, study purposes only and may not be distributed outside of the class.

Course materials, including readings, lectures and presentations, are copyrighted, and students are prohibited from independently recording class activities (including class lectures, office hours, advising sessions, etc.).

Program Information

Welcome to this General Education course.

SJSU’s General Education Program establishes a strong foundation of versatile skills, fosters curiosity about the world, promotes ethical judgment, and prepares students to engage and contribute responsibly and cooperatively in a multicultural, information-rich society. General education classes integrate areas of study and encourage progressively more complex and creative analysis, expression, and problem solving.

The General Education Program has three goals:

Goal 1: To develop students’ core competencies for academic, personal, creative, and professional pursuits.

Goal 2: To enact the university’s commitment to diversity, inclusion, and justice by ensuring that students have the knowledge and skills to serve and contribute to the well-being of local and global communities and the environment.

Goal 3: To offer students integrated, multidisciplinary, and innovative study in which they pose challenging questions, address complex issues, and develop cooperative and creative responses.

More information about the General Education Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) can be found on the [GE website \(https://sjsu.edu/general-education/ge-requirements/overview/learning-outcomes.php\)](https://sjsu.edu/general-education/ge-requirements/overview/learning-outcomes.php).

Course Goals

Please make sure to take the time and look at the **land acknowledgement** page:

<https://www.sjsu.edu/diversity/land-acknowledgement/index.php> (<https://www.sjsu.edu/diversity/land-acknowledgement/index.php>).

This course will facilitate student learning in developing skills in critical analysis, expository writing, visual-arts practices, and public speaking.

The course has three primary objectives:

1. to develop a critical vocabulary for the analysis and interpretation of visual images
2. to recognize cultural and historical contexts of the theories and practices of visual studies, including technical economic, social, and philosophical influences
3. to use these analytical skills in written, oral, and visual response to visual images and cultures

C1 Arts courses will enable students to recognize aesthetic qualities and processes that characterize works of the human intellect and imagination, and respond to these works of art in writing and presentation.

Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)

GE Area C1: Arts

Area C: Arts and Humanities courses help students to respond subjectively as well as objectively to aesthetic experiences and to develop an understanding of the integrity of both emotional and intellectual responses. C1 Arts courses emphasize the integration of history, theory, aesthetics, and criticism.

GE Area C1 Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of a C1 course, students should be able to:

1. identify aesthetic qualities and processes that characterize works of the human intellect and imagination;
2. explore and articulate their own subjective aesthetic and intellectual responses to such works;
3. analyze the role and impact of the creative arts in culture and on the interrelationship of self and community; and
4. research and apply relevant aesthetic criteria and/or artistic conventions in effective written responses to works of art.

Writing Practice: Students will write a minimum of 1500 words in a language and style appropriate to the discipline.

Department Advising

For information about majors and minors in Art & Art History, for a change of major/minor forms and a list of advisors: <http://www.sjsu.edu/art/> or the Art & Art History department office in ART 116, 408-924-4320, art@sjsu.edu

"Visual Culture"

Author: Howells and Negreiros

Edition: 3rd

Year: 2018

ISBN: 9780745650715

Availability: Campus Bookstore

Recommended Books

A. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, ISBN 9780140135152

B. Ana Peraica, *Culture of the Selfie: Self-Representation in contemporary visual culture*

C. Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, ISBN 991010184639702919

D. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, *Visual Culture: A Reader*

Availability: SJSU Library

Library Liaison Contact Information for Art and Art History

The Art and Art History Department has a [Library Liaison](#).

Please see the contact information below:

Kate Steffens, MLIS – (*she/her/hers*)

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library

kate.steffens@sjsu.edu

(408) 808-2131

San José State University

Special Collections Librarian

Writing Support

SJSU writing center for support with writing:

<https://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/tutoring/index.php>
(<https://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/tutoring/index.php>)

Course Requirements and Assignments

Faculty Web Page and MYSJSU Messaging (Canvas)

Course materials such as syllabus, handouts, notes, assignment instructions, etc. can be found on our Canvas page.

You are responsible for regularly checking with the messaging system through Canvas and MySJSU on Spartan App Portal <http://one.sjsu.edu> (or other communication system as indicated by the instructor) to learn of any updates.

For help see https://www.sjsu.edu/ecampus/teaching-tools/canvas/student_resources/.

All written assignments must follow Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) for cited sources.

Description

What is visual culture and how is it important?

This course provides a critical vocabulary for discussing both objects and practices of visual cultures, including painting, sculpture, metalwork, architecture, installations, exhibitions, advertisements, photography, film, performance, fashion, and websites.

We will apply this vocabulary to pose questions about how different groups make different meanings from the similar objects and practices toward a better understanding of ways of seeing, visualizing, and interpreting modernities as they have moved across the globe - centered approaches to making and understanding visual culture.

We will examine paintings, photographs, sculpture, television and the internet.

Participation: GELO 1, 3

Make sure and take part in all of our classes. A written excuse prior to missing the class is helpful in understanding why you could not attend.

15% of grade (5% is in class assignment)

Whereby: Full 10 points given only with camera on throughout the term; 9 for camera on and no verbal/written communication; 8 for those who do not have their camera on but participate ; 7 for those who only sometimes participate ; 6 for those who have camera off throughout the term and only seldom participate (raise hand or speak up)

Writing: GELO 1, 2, 3

Writing assignments are due throughout the semester. These are to hone your writing skills as well as seeing skills.

The visual is at the center of these exercises. See Canvas and Modules for assignment due dates and times.

This assignment is and is 15% of your grade. They MUST be in Chicago style 12 point type, 1.50 spacing and .5 margins. Citations are essential (especially when using AI)

*PLEASE NOTE: The writing assignments will help you prepare and use language for your final PAPER.

20% of grade

Midterm and Final: GELO 1, 2, 3

Midterm and Final (15% each)

They are 30% of your grade.

Presentation: GELO 2

5 minute presentation (minimum 4 minutes!) in class on an image of your choosing. The topic is the same as your final paper. (10 points)

To accompany your presentation you must upload a jpg image to Canvas by due date.

(5 points)

The instructions will be discussed in class and posted on Canvas. The presentation will be peer reviewed.

This assignment is 15% of your grade.

Paper including outline and Bibliography: GELO 1, 2, 3

Semester paper based on your in-class presentation.

1. **One-page Outline and First Paragraph.** An outline of your paper and draft of your first paragraph is due on Canvas. References or Bibliography must be included if used.

This assignment is pass/no pass and is 8% of your grade.

2. Paper

There is a 3-5 page paper required for this course. The instructions for this assignment will be on Canvas. The paper is due on Canvas.

This assignment is worth 12% of your grade.

The two assignments together make up 20% of your grade.

✓ Grading Information

Grading Information

Numerical Grade Equivalents

93% and above A

92% - 90% A-

89% - 88% B+

87% - 83% B

82% - 80% B-

79% - 78% C+

77% - 73% C

72% - 70% C-

69% - 68% D+

67% - 63% D

62% - 60% D

Below 60% F

Additional Grading Information

There is no extra credit for this course. **Students must be present in class to receive credit for in class assignments.**

Final Examination

The final exam will be similar to our midterm exam, and administered on the scheduled exam date. University policy S17-1 (<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S17-1.pdf>) which states that "Faculty members are required to have a culminating activity for their courses, which can include a final examination, a final research paper or project, a final creative work or performance, a final portfolio of work, or other appropriate assignment."

Criteria

Grading guidelines/rubrics will be provided for your final paper and any essay based exam questions. This is the criteria used for all assignments and especially writing.

CRITERIA	A	B	C	D	F
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(1) Responds appropriately to the assignment prompt	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	ADEQUATE	WEAK	POOR
(2) Presents a clear topic, argument, and examples	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	ADEQUATE	WEAK	POOR
(3) Exhibits critical thinking	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	ADEQUATE	WEAK	POOR
(4) Uses a variety of appropriate college level resources, cited	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	ADEQUATE	WEAK	POOR
(5) Focused and organized	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	ADEQUATE	WEAK	POOR
(6) Uses language that is appropriate for the discipline	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	ADEQUATE	WEAK	POOR
(7) Is free of errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and format	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	ADEQUATE	WEAK	POOR

Breakdown

1. Participation - 15%
2. Writing assignments - 20%
3. Midterm/Final - 30% (15% each)
5. Presentation - 15% (5 for uploading image and 10 for presentation)
6. Outline and 1st paragraph (including references) of paper - 8%
7. Paper - 12%

University Policies

Per [University Policy S16-9 \(PDF\)](http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf) (<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf>), relevant university policy concerning all courses, such as student responsibilities, academic integrity, accommodations, dropping and adding, consent for recording of class, etc. and available student services (e.g. learning assistance, counseling, and other resources) are listed on the [Syllabus Information](https://www.sjsu.edu/curriculum/courses/syllabus-info.php) (<https://www.sjsu.edu/curriculum/courses/syllabus-info.php>) web page. Make sure to visit this page to review and be aware of these university policies and resources.

Course Schedule

This schedule may change during the semester and remains open; make sure to check the syllabus and modules on canvas for assignments and due dates

When	Topic	Notes
Lecture Week 1 Online and Zoom	Introduction	Read: Introduction in "Visual Culture" (your textbook)
Lecture Week 2 (Jan. 27, 29)	Iconography and Iconology	Read Chapter 1 Due: Writing assignment 1
Lecture Week 3 online	Form	Read Chapter 2
Lecture Week 4 (Feb 10, 12) online	Art History	Read Chapter 3 Due: Writing assignment 2
Lecture Week 5	Ideology	Read Chapter 4
Lecture Week 6	Semiotics	Read Chapter 5
Lecture Week 7 (March 3, 5)	Hermeneutics	Read chapter 6 Due: Writing assignment 3
Lecture Week 8 (March 10, 12)	Fine Art	Read chapter 7 in section 2 Due: Midterm
Lecture Week 9 (March 17, 19)	Photography	Read chapter 8 Due: Writing assignment 4
Lecture Week 10 (March 24, 26)	Film	Read chapter 9 on Film Due: Picture for Presentation Due: Outline/first paragraph (topics you will cover) for presentation

When	Topic	Notes
Holidays Week 11 (March 31, April 2) Spring Break	review reading	review and catch up on assignments
Presentations Week 12 (April 7,9)	Presentations	Due: Presentations follow PDF
Presentations Week 13 (April 14,16)	Presentations	Due: Presentations follow PDF
Lecture Week 14 (April 21, 23)	The Selfie	Reading will be posted on Canvas Due: Writing Assignment 5
Lecture Week 15	New Media	Read chapter 11
Lecture Week 16 (May 5, 6)	Digital Visual Culture	Reading posted on Canvas Due: Final Paper
Final Exam	Final Exam	see: https://www.sjsu.edu/classes/final-exam-schedule/spring-2026.php (https://www.sjsu.edu/classes/final-exam-schedule/spring-2026.php).