

## *Media Aesthetics: Image*

(A UChicago Humanities Core syllabus that I tailored by constructing assignments and rearranging and adding certain course materials.)



The top half of Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) and its “reflection” in the computer-generated, 3-D model created by David Stork and Yasuo Furuichi.

The Media Aesthetics sequence teaches skills of analyzing and interpreting images, texts, and sound; it also considers the philosophical and methodological questions raised when we seek to understand the effects of these media. In the autumn quarter, we concentrate on visual images—like paintings, photographs, and films—as well as writings about images and the visual arts. We will reflect on the particular kinds of knowledge and experience that visual media generate. One of the questions posed by the artifacts we study this quarter is whether images are better understood to reflect and imitate the real world, or to instantiate something new and transform the world in which they appear. To this end, our class will ask not only how visual media work but also why the relation between creating and copying, and between reality and imitation, has long occupied a central place in western culture. Our goals are to develop skills as spectators of visual media, readers of philosophical arguments, writers of sharp critical prose, and discussants of complex matters of representation; meanwhile, we'll also seek to continue growing as analytical thinkers.

### **Course Texts to Purchase:**

(note the ISBN; all other readings will be posted on Canvas as PDFs)

- Plato, *Republic*, trans/ed. Reeve, ISBN 0872207366
- Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, ISBN 0307278441

### Required events outside of class time

- Friday 10/11 4-6pm: Screening of *Close Up* at Doc Films, Ida Noyes Hall, 1212 E 59th St
- Friday 11/8 4-6pm: Screening of *Vertigo* at Doc Films, Ida Noyes Hall, 1212 E 59th St

### Requirements and Policies

*Reading.* Read and reread. Take notes; underline and circle words and phrases; mark important passages, writing them out by hand to understand them if necessary. Essentially, be an active reader. Your Commonplace Book will be essential here (more on this under “Assignments” below). Plan your time. Complete the reading before each session, give yourself time to think about the texts before class, and arrive with at least a handful of points and questions for discussion. Bring everything you have read thus far and all of your reading notes to class. NOTE: Unless needed as a disability accommodation, the use of screens—including laptops, tablets, phones, watches, augmented reality glasses, etc.—is not permitted in the classroom. I will print out PDFs and distribute them at the end of each class session. PDF readings are also available on Canvas.

*Attendance, deadlines.* Attendance at every class session is required; more than two unexcused absences will be grounds for failing the course. Any excuse for absence must be presented in writing before the next meeting of the class. Assignment due dates are provided on the syllabus so that you can plan your work for the semester. Extensions on writing assignments will be available but must be requested as far in advance as possible; failure to request an extension ahead of time may result in its denial. Late assignments will be docked half a letter grade each day they are late.

*Academic honesty.* I look forward to reading your work, which is to say, engaging with the ideas that you will write out to the best of your ability by drawing on what you have read and your own reasoning. Presenting ideas or phrases produced by other people or algorithms as if they are your own is plagiarism. Thus, when you use the work of other people, cite it correctly and consistently in MLA or Chicago style. It is crucial that you are familiar with these standards, and it is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with them. If these standards are in any way unclear to you, please consult with me and/or your Writing Specialist. Academic dishonesty is a very serious offense, *even if it is unintentional*. Any form of academic dishonesty may result in immediate failure of this course and disciplinary action.

*AI policy.* The use of generative artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT, Bard, Grammarly AI features, etc.) is prohibited on all writing assignments. Struggling to compose a clear and insightful phrase, sentence, or paragraph is how we learn to think critically through writing. Outsourcing this process to an algorithm short-circuits this process and produces inane critical prose, wasting both your time and mine. Your thoughts matter. Don’t throw them into an algorithmic blender. I expect you to practice critical writing in all its thrilling difficulty. If English is an additional language for you, you might consider the resources available at UChicago’s English Language Institute, <https://esl.uchicago.edu/>.

*Accessibility and Student Disability Services (SDS).* I am committed to doing whatever I can to make the course and its materials accessible. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of particular academic accommodations by SDS and need reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS. You can contact SDS by email ([disabilities@uchicago.edu](mailto:disabilities@uchicago.edu)), by phone (773-702-6000), and via its website ([disabilities.uchicago.edu](http://disabilities.uchicago.edu)).

*Mental Health and Wellness.* College life can be extremely stressful, and I recognize that the transition to college poses challenges for all students. Remember that you have in place a network of people who are ready and willing to help. Your College Advisor, your Resident Heads and Resident Assistants, and the staff at Student Counseling are available to you should you need or want to talk. You can find a description of services at [wellness.uchicago.edu/mental-health..](http://wellness.uchicago.edu/mental-health..)

## Assignments and Evaluation

*Essays.* You will write three for this course. I will share prompts for these papers on Canvas well in advance of their submission deadlines.

### *Grade breakdown.*

- Attendance & Participation: 15%
- Commonplace Book: 20%
- Essay One (750 ww.), due 10/20: 20%
- Essay Two (1000 ww.), due 11/17: 20%
- Final Essay (1500 ww.), due 12/11: 25%

*Participation.* This course is a seminar: we succeed or fail collectively. Arrive at each of our class sessions ready to talk and ready to listen. If a text excites you, talk about why. If something confuses you, ask questions. If you agree with comments someone makes, elaborate on your agreement for the class. If you disagree with someone, explain why. In short, contribute to our common intellectual enterprise. I evaluate participation in terms of quality rather than quantity. To explore questions and ideas you develop in your reading and in our class discussions, I encourage you to attend my office hours or email me to find other times. Even if your question or idea feels inchoate, don't hesitate to come by or get in touch. Similarly, if you feel that you're struggling to participate, for whatever reason, let me know. We will find ways for you to contribute. Let's think together.

*Writing seminars.* You will be divided into seminar groups in which you will meet regularly with your Writing Specialist, who will help you to devise drafts and workshop papers before and after final submission. These sessions are mandatory; missing a session is grounds for failing.

*Commonplace Book.* You will create this dynamic book of quotations, annotations, questions, observations, diagrams, drawings, etc., over the course of the quarter. You must use a physical notebook and write by hand, unless you require other accommodations. Throughout the quarter, you must write at least *nine* entries in your commonplace book as a way to organize your thinking. Each entry must incorporate these four components:

- *Copy out* one substantial passage from the week's reading that is intriguing or confounding or related to broader questions/themes explored within the course. You'll be reading by hand, so to speak. This practice should train your attention on things like syntax, rhythm, diction. Focus on what resonates with your particular interests. Good choices will be moments in the text that you feel helpfully illuminate the larger argument or point, that raise questions for you on a first read and that you think you'd like to spend more time with, or ones that you simply find difficult, even confounding. Occasionally, you may also feel drawn to a passage that is beautiful or moving!
- *Annotate* this handwritten text, identifying important terms or themes, pulling out memorable turns of phrase or strategies of argument or description, commenting on the text through a process of explication and unpacking (the Latin root *explicare* means "to

unfold”). Feel free to color-code, draw pictures/diagrams/lines, or use other creative annotations. Week to week, I will also do my best to print out images so that you can mark them up. Get creative!

- Include one to two *interesting questions* you have about the material.
- In two to three bullet points, note your *observations* about the passage.
- Note the key term(s) of the reading and define it/them in your own words. E.g., “mimesis,” “aura,” “male gaze,” etc.

Each time you complete an entry, upload a fully readable photo of it to Canvas using the submission pages under the "Assignments" tab. It is up to you to upload nine entries throughout the quarter—no make-ups will be granted. I encourage you to complete an entry once per week, or, at least, complete them earlier rather than later—because they will help you write essays.

Entries will also help you prepare for class discussion, and you should have your commonplace book ready at hand in class. Finally, and crucially, your commonplace book should not be the only form of notes you take for this class—it is meant to lend structure to your note-taking, which, in one form or another, should accompany any reading you do for this course. You might think of your commonplace book as the place you turn, beyond your usual notebook or notes document, when you are particularly struck by a passage and want to dig deeper. You might find yourself writing an entry several times a week, or you might just write the nine that are required. Figure out what works best for you.

*Essay Writing.* Apart from your Commonplace Book and other notes you take, *all* of the writing you do for credit in this course must be *directly performed* in the Google Doc found under the Collaborations tab in Canvas. This includes papers and short assignments that you will complete in conjunction with your reading. The latter may include brief responses to questions, close reading of a sentence or image, outlining an argument, and so on. NOTE: You may *not* copy/paste external writing into your Google Doc. If you are found to have done so (found, that is, via the Google Doc’s revision history) the writing in question will, by default, be considered generative AI-use and will not be evaluated for credit. On a case-by-case basis, instances of suspected generative AI-use may lead to an entire re-write, a grade penalty, or more serious consequences. In essence, localizing your writing in this way is the best means I’ve yet found of ensuring that I am able to engage with your writing—your *thinking*—and not that of probabilistic machine. Google Docs also facilitates dynamic and detailed forms of writerly collaboration and feedback.

*Formatting.* All essays should be formatted in 12-point, double-spaced Times New Roman font, with a header (assignment name, submission date), a title, and footnoted citations in Chicago or MLA style (no need for a bibliography). Each assignment should begin as a new section within your Google Doc and the title of each assignment should be formatted as a heading (this produces a useful table of contents).

*Submitting.* To submit your assignment, email me before 11:59pm on the date that it is due, then make no further edits to your Google Doc. If you email me at 12:30am that next morning, that is OK. 4am is pushing it. Plan ahead and don’t lose sleep. Any late changes to the assignment will be deleted because I will revert the document back to its original form at submission.

## Schedule of Readings and Assignments

### Week 1

### Introduction: Image and Medium

- M 9/30 Diego Velazquez, *Las Meninas*
- W 10/2 Foucault, “Las Meninas”
- F 10/4 Foucault, “Las Meninas” (re-read)  
Raymond Williams, “Aesthetic,” from *Keywords*  
“Medium,” Oxford English Dictionary

**Week 2**                      **The Ethical Problem of Images**

- M 10/7 Essay 1 assigned  
Plato, *Republic*, Introduction (through xiii), Synopsis (skim it), Book 7 (pp. 208-214)—and, if you have time, get started on Book 3
- W 10/9 Plato, *Republic*, Book 3 (through p. 86) and 10 (all)
- F 10/11 Kara Walker, *The Jubilant Martyrs of Obsolescence and Ruin*  
Motion Picture Production Code

**Friday 4-6pm: SCREENING OF *CLOSE UP* AT DOC FILMS, Ida Noyes Hall, 1212 E 59th**

**Week 3**                      **Images and the Real**

- M 10/14 Terms for Film Analysis (Handout)
- W 10/16 Phillip Lopate, “Kiarostami *Close Up*”
- F 10/18 Bernard Stiegler, “On Abbas Kiarostami’s *Close Up*”
- S 10/20 **Essay 1 due**

**Week 4**                      **Photography and the Promise of Images**

- M 10/21 Andre Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”
- W 10/23 Edgar Allen Poe, “The Daguerrotype”  
Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope”  
Charles Baudelaire “Modern Public and Photography”
- F 10/25 Coco Fusco, “Racial Time, Racial Marks, Racial Metaphors”

**Week 5**                      **Technological Mediations of the Image I**

- M 10/28 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (I-V)  
John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Episode 1 (30 min)
- W 10/30 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (VI-VIII)
- F 11/1 Smart Museum Visit  
John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Episode 1 (30 min)

**Week 6**                      **Technological Mediations of the Image II**

- M 11/4 Essay 2 Assigned  
Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (IX-XIV)  
Tom Gunning, "Cinema of Attractions"
- W 11/6 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (XV-XIX)
- F 11/8 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (re-read XVII-XIX)  
Peter Bürger, excerpt from *Theory of the Avant Garde*

**Friday 4-6pm SCREENING OF VERTIGO AT DOC FILMS, Ida Noyes Hall, 1212 E 59th**

**Week 7**                      **Looking and the gaze I**

- M 11/11 Laura Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"
- W 11/13 Stanley Cavell, "Automatism"
- F 11/15 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (pp. 1-37)
- S 11/17 **Essay 2 Due**

**Week 8**                      **Looking and the gaze II**

- M 11/18 Final Essay Assigned  
Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (pp. 38-93)
- W 11/20 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (pp. 94-131)
- F 11/22 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (pp. 132-163)
- S 12/1 **Drafting assignment 1 due**

**THANKSGIVING WEEK****Week 9****Wrap-up**

M 12/2

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (pp. 164-206)**Drafting assignment 2 due. Schedule meeting.**

W 12/4

In-class writing discussion and workshop

F 12/6

Writing workshop

**W 12/11****Final Essay due**