

SM3721: CONCEPTS OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND IMAGING

Effective Term

Semester A 2025/26

Part I Course Overview

Course Title

Concepts of Photography and Imaging

Subject Code

SM - School of Creative Media

Course Number

3721

Academic Unit

School of Creative Media (SM)

College/School

School of Creative Media (SM)

Course Duration

One Semester

Credit Units

3

Level

B1, B2, B3, B4 - Bachelor's Degree

Medium of Instruction

English

Medium of Assessment

English

Prerequisites

SM1013 Introduction to Photography or GE1129 Creative Photography

Precursors

Nil

Equivalent Courses

Nil

Exclusive Courses

Nil

Part II Course Details

Abstract

This course highlights the use of theories and concepts in photography.

In the spirit of theory as practice, a course on the concepts of photography invites students to think through the many implications of photography and the many possible ways to understand photographic practices. The intention is to encourage students in photography to become more informed about the choices they make and the reasons they provide for their photo-making activities. For students who do not specialise in photography, this course enables them to be informed, intelligent users, and be able to benefit from the conceptual thinking in photography to improve other areas of academic/ artistic pursuits.

The first part of the course persuades students to acknowledge the importance and relevance of observation, reflection and discussion, and that even when we don't mention theory, our photographic activities always already rest on implicit, unspoken assumptions presented as 'common sense'. As Victor Burgin argues, "theory sets out to question the underlying assumptions of common sense in order to replace them."

You are invited to research on selected 20th-century and 21st century thinkers and practitioners who have contributed to our understanding of photography and photographic practices. We will examine concepts of image-making, the use of photography in contemporary everyday culture, theories of interpretation and meaning-making, photography within a broader system of picture-making, as well as the social and technological contexts and issues underpinning photography.

The course will deal with the impact of digitalisation and machine learning on our understanding and practice of photography, and the role of photography in contemporary art and visual culture. Throughout the semester, students will be guided to research independently different concepts of photography, theoretically and practically, present and discuss their findings and complete a final photography project with a research component.

Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs)

	CILOs	Weighting (if app.)	DEC-A1	DEC-A2	DEC-A3
1	Identify various conceptual perspectives and traditions in the study of photography			x	
2	Defend the value of theory and ways of applying concepts			x	
3	Evaluate photographs with an enriched vocabulary			x	
4	Assert students' own voices: conceive a critical research-creation project with a defensible position				x
5	Conduct extra research on the subject in relation to one's own experience as a self-reflective process				x

A1: Attitude

Develop an attitude of discovery/innovation/creativity, as demonstrated by students possessing a strong sense of curiosity, asking questions actively, challenging assumptions or engaging in inquiry together with teachers.

A2: Ability

Develop the ability/skill needed to discover/innovate/create, as demonstrated by students possessing critical thinking skills to assess ideas, acquiring research skills, synthesizing knowledge across disciplines or applying academic knowledge to real-life problems.

A3: Accomplishments

Demonstrate accomplishment of discovery/innovation/creativity through producing /constructing creative works/new artefacts, effective solutions to real-life problems or new processes.

Learning and Teaching Activities (LTAs)

LTAs		Brief Description	CILO No.	Hours/week (if applicable)
1	Lecture	Introduction to different concepts and theories of photography	1, 2	1
2	Analysis	Observation and examination of case studies	1, 2, 3, 5	1
3	Group work	Group discussion and presentation on assigned readings	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	1
4	Research-creation	Final project: theory-informed research creation	2, 4, 5	Individual
5	Analysis report	Response papers	1, 2, 3, 5	Individual

Assessment Tasks / Activities (ATs)

ATs		CILO No.	Weighting (%)	Remarks ("- " for nil entry)	Allow Use of GenAI?
1	Individual presentation on a specific concept	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	20	-	Yes
2	Short response papers on particular concepts	1, 5	20	-	Yes
3	Final project: theory-informed research creation Independent concept development and creative response to photography classics	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	40	-	Yes
4	In-class participation & discussion	1, 2, 3, 4	20	-	Yes

Continuous Assessment (%)

100

Examination (%)

0

Assessment Rubrics (AR)**Assessment Task**

1. Presentation

Criterion

This assessment will grade on content and fluency of presentation. Students should show their co-operation to conduct a well-organized presentation with their own argument and evidence from readings and notes. The threshold of 'discovery'

lied in a student' s self initiatives to conduct additional research and to personalize theories for her/his personal daily experience.

Excellent (A+, A, A-)

- Rich, informative content, excellent grasp of the material with in-depth and extensive knowledge of the subject matter
- Rigorous organization, coherent structure, and systematic exposition with a strong sense of narrative
- Superior presentation skills: distinct pronunciation, fluent expression and appropriate diction, exact time-management
- Critical analysis with insightful comments opening up new issues, or suggesting the ability to theorize

Good (B+, B, B-)

- Adequate content with firm grasp of the material that informs the audience on a subject matter
- Reasonable organization, balanced structure and composition
- Good verbal communication: comprehensible pronunciation, fluent expression and diction, fair time-management

Fair (C+, C, C-)

- Adequate content with comprehensive grasp of the material demonstrating basic knowledge of the subject matter
- Fair organization, weak structure and composition
- Fair presentation skills: acceptable pronunciation, expression and diction, fair time-management

Marginal (D)

- Weak content, loose grasp of the general ideas with some knowledge of the subject matter
- Poor organization, structure and composition
- Poor presentation skills: marginal pronunciation, expression and diction, poor time-management

Failure (F)

- Inadequate content, fail to identify the general ideas with knowledge of the subject matter
- No organization, structure or/and composition
- Poor presentation skills: marginal pronunciation, expression and diction, minimal time-management

Assessment Task

2. Response Paper

Criterion

This assessment will grade on rationality, clarity and fluency of argument and comment. The threshold of 'discovery' lied in a student' s self initiatives to conduct additional research and to personalize theories for her/his personal daily experience.

Excellent (A+, A, A-)

- Rich content, excellent ability to interpret and integrate various resources
- Rigorous organization, coherent structure, systematic composition
- Precision in argument, well defined and reasoned points of view grounded in insightful interpretation of existing literature
- Readiness to respond to peer opinion and other views initiated in class discussion
- Discussion shed light on new dimensions of the issue

Good (B+, B, B-)

- Adequate content, sufficient ability to integrate various resources based on demand
- Reasonable organization with balanced structure and composition
- Clear elaboration of ideas that sticks to the point, with clearly differentiated issues, ability to interpret opinions independently
- Sufficient responses to peer comments to sustain a discussion

Fair (C+, C, C-)

- Adequate content, fair ability to integrate various resources based on demand
- Fair organization with adequate structure and composition
- Relevant points made to the subject matter in question
- Ability to respond to other statements and engage in class discussion

Marginal (D)

- Weak content, limited use of resources
- Poor organization, structure and composition
- Relevant points to the subject matter, marginal ability to interpret opinions
- Ability to respond to other comments in simple terms

Failure (F)

- Inadequate content, no/ irrelevant use of resources
- No organization, structure or/and composition
- Irrelevant points to the subject matter, no ability to interpret opinions
- Fail to respond to other comments

Assessment Task

3. Final Paper

Criterion

Students should demonstrate ability to utilize primary and secondary sources, build up argument and analysis. The threshold of 'discovery' lied in a student' s self initiatives to conduct additional research and to personalize theories for her/his personal daily experience.

Excellent (A+, A, A-)

- Excellent grasp of research material, able to explain key concepts, assumptions and debates
- Rigorous organization, coherent structure, distinct thesis, properly argued with strong narrative
- Insightful interpretation of the subject matter with distinct themes and thesis
- Critical analysis with insightful comments opening up new issues, or suggesting the ability to theorize
- Ability to approach a text or a theme using a variety of theories and analytical tools
- Strong bibliography suggesting breadth and depth of coverage and informed insights

Good (B+, B, B-)

- Firm grasp of materials, able to explain key concepts and assumptions
- Reasonable organization, balanced structure, adequate content, sufficient ability to integrate various resources based on demand
- Clear ideas which keep to the point, clear-cut subject, ability to interpret opinions independently
- Organized bibliography which can be utilized in accordance with the topic

Fair (C+, C, C-)

- Comprehensive grasp of materials, able to explain key concepts
- Fair organization, weak structure, adequate content, fair ability to integrate various resources based on demand
- Relevant points to the subject matter, fair ability to interpret opinions
- Unorganized bibliography which can be utilized in accordance with the topic

Marginal (D)

- Loose grasp of materials, cannot explain key concepts
- Poor organization and structure, weak content, limited use of resources
- Relevant points to the subject matter, marginal ability to interpret opinions
- Insufficient and/or unorganized bibliography

Failure (F)

- Poor grasp of materials

- No organization and structure, inadequate content, no/ irrelevant use of resources
 - Irrelevant points to the subject matter, minimal ability to interpret opinions
 - Irrelevant bibliography
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Assessment Task

4. In-Class Participation and Discussion

Criterion

This assessment task reviews students' participation and performance in discussions, debates and peer critique during the tutorial sessions. The evidence of 'negotiation', the sign of discovery, lies in students' pre-class preparation and interpersonal sensitivity to his/her peer members.

Excellent (A+, A, A-)

- Active in-class participation, positive listening, strong ability to stimulate class discussion and comment on other points
- In-depth pre-class preparation and familiarity with peer reports and other materials
- Interpret others' views with an open mind and ready to negotiate
- Readiness to share personal insight via analysis and synthesis with informed views
- Constructively critical, thus facilitating the discovery of new issues

Good (B+, B, B-)

- Active in-class participation, positive listening, ability to initiate class discussion and comment on other points
- Adequate pre-class preparation and familiarity with peer reports and other materials
- Interpret opinions effectively

Fair (C+, C, C-)

- Attentive in in-class participation, listening with comprehension, but only infrequently contributing
- Adequate pre-class preparation but little familiarity with peer reports and other materials
- Fair ability in interpreting opinions

Marginal (D)

- Unmotivated to participate in class discussion or comment on other people's views
- Little pre-class preparation and familiarity with peer reports and other materials
- Poor ability in interpreting opinions

Failure (F)

- Unwilling to participate in class discussion and comment on other points, even when requested by the teacher
 - No pre-class preparation and familiarity with peer reports and other materials
 - Minimal ability in interpreting opinions
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Additional Information for AR

All A+/A/A- grade assignment should comply with the highest performance of Discovery-oriented learning.

Part III Other Information

Keyword Syllabus

What is photography? - automatic record of a reality, expression of an individual, photograph as "a record of a reality refracted through a sensibility" (Burgin)

Concepts of photographic practices / the uses of the photograph / performative photography / photography for archiving / what is documentary photography / history of photography: before chemical-base photography / concepts and genres of photography: portrait, landscape, fashion, still-live, documentary, motion, colour, scientific imaging, digital vs analogue, impact of generative AI, etc.

Complementary theories to photography: photography and cognitive psychology, perception theories, the social dimension of photography, feminism and photography / photography and realism / semiology / intertextuality

Roland Barthes: Camera Lucida, archives of the dead / Walter Benjamin: the Optical Unconscious / Susan Sontag: photography within the humanities / W.J. T. Mitchell: beyond the visual / Lev Manovich: the paradox of digital photography

Reading List

Compulsory Readings

	Title
1	Mark Durden and Jane Tormey (ed.), 2019: The Routledge Companion to Photography Theory. Routledge, New York and London.
2	Liz Wells (ed.), 2002: The Photography Reader. Routledge, New York and London.
3	Susan Sontag, 2001: On Photography; Picador.
4	Sally Miller, 2020: Contemporary Photography and Theory Concepts and Debates. Routledge, London and New York
5	Victor Burgin, 1984: "Something About Photography Theory" (A review by Victor Burgin), Screen no. 25(1), January/February, 61-66. (The essay is a transcript of Burgin's speech given on September 30, 1983 at the School of Communication of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, Toronto, as part of a public talk series to discuss the introduction of courses in the theory of photography into its syllabus. The panel had three other speakers: Hollis Frampton, Allan Sekula, and Joel Snyder.)
6	Clément Chéroux, Andreas Fischer, Pierre Apraxine, Denis Canguilhem, and Sophie Schmit, 2005: The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult. Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
7	W.J.T. Mitchell, 2006: What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
8	Jo Spence, 1995: Cultural Sniping. Routledge, London and New York
9	Allan Sekula, 1984: Photography against the grain. The Press of Nova Scotia College
10	Graham Clarke (ed.), 1992: The Portrait in Photography. Reaktion Books, Seattle

Additional Readings

	Title
1	Martin Lister, ed., 2013. The Photographic Image in Visual Culture 2nd Edition. London: Routledge
2	Ingrid Hoelzl & Remi Marie, 2015. Softimage: Towards a New Theory of the Digital Image. Bristol/Chicago: Intellect
3	Roland Barthes, 1980: Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Hill and Wang, New York
4	John Berger, 2008: Ways of Seeing. Penguin Classics
5	Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction
6	William Henry Fox Talbot, 1844: The Pencil of Nature. Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, London