**Every picture tells a story: Understanding and practicing visual language**

**MODULE DESCRIPTION AND GUIDELINES FOR THE INSTRUCTOR**

The module covers three main topics:

1. The power of image & visual literacy
2. Understanding visual semiotics
3. Practicing visual storytelling

Each topic is presented with PPT slides, which can be used in 2 lectures, 1.5 hours each. The slides include the main concepts and approaches in visual communication, illustrations, videos, discussion questions and creative assignment to support the oral presentation given by teacher. Also, supporting material (e.g., scientific articles and other readings, examples, videos, etc.) is provided (up to 10 items in total). The module can be done in a blended or online way. However, at least one live session (lasting up to 1 hour) is recommended to discuss the material and answer students’ questions.

***Part 1: The power of image & visual literacy***

The first part of the module is dedicated to the 1st topic and discussion of the main implications of visual media and communication in contemporary society. The main concepts are addressed to provide with a better understanding of a contemporary visual culture.

Saturated by all kinds of information, verbal, oral, visual, multimedia and mobile, people are more and more confronted with visuals, including pictures, photography, films, TV, video games, podcasts, advertising, etc. The images, we are surrounded by, construct our attitudes, experience, social stratification - class, racial differences, gender and sexuality. Indeed, we live in a visual mediapolis, where mediated public space is dominated by various kinds of images, which are supporting and transforming our everyday life, work, education, entertainment and communication (Silverstone, 2007).

Addressing communication transformations in today’s societies, Manuel Castells (2009) argues that “the major convergence in communication is not technological or organizational, but cultural, to put it simply, those changes that are taking place in the minds of communicative subjects, who integrate various modes and channels of media in their everyday life and interaction with each other.” (p. 135) Hence, in order to be able to navigate through the multimedia culture, new generation needs to learn reading and writing the language of image and screen. On the other hand, research shows that integrating visual in teaching also results in a more successful learning and performance (Aisami, 2015). Apparently, there is a growing need for visually oriented curriculum, focused more on visual literacy and competences in production and consumption of visual messages (Messaris, 2003).

Visually saturated media demand for specific competences and social practices aimed at better understanding, critical thinking and practicing visual logic of meaning production. As a multidisciplinary concept developed in 1960s by John L. Debes, an executive of the Kodak Corporation, visual literacy refers to “a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences... When developed, they enable visually literate persons to discriminate and interpret the visual actions, objects, symbols, natural and man-made.” (Debes, 1969:27). To put it shorter, visual literacy refers to a set of vision-based competences and skills to think, learn and express oneself visually. These cognitive abilities should be learned and developed rather than gained intuitively.

**Assignments and discussion questions**

For small group discussion, select a case of commercial or social ad and apply the primary visual analysis questions, followed by deep viewing questions presented in the slides.

***Part 2: Understanding visual semiotics***

The second part of the module is addressing the main concepts of semiotics to provide students with general knowledge and skills in order to apply them in visual analysis and creative process.

Semiotics is concerned with everything what can be taken as a sign (Umberto Eco 1976). Anything can be a sign as long as it is interpreted as signifying something by a human being. Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign. Semiotics could be find anywhere. Signs include language, images, drawings, paintings and photographs, sounds and body language, also buildings, spaces, fashion, interiors, etc.

Semiotics embraces different disciplines, incl. linguistics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, literary studies, arts, aesthetics, media studies, psychoanalysis, education studies, etc. Visual semiotics is interested in fine arts, images, films, architecture, commercial advertisement, etc.

Modern semiotic theory is also sometimes allied with a Marxist approach which stresses the role of ideology and power. Ideology refers to a system of values, beliefs, and ideals guided by a worldview that shapes the ways in which people act. Cultural approach is particularly important, because how we read a sign, depends on our culture. Semiotics can be used to illuminate and explain interesting and in many cases neglected or overlooked aspects of everyday life.

Semiotics is about signs, their systems and structures, as well as culture. A sign is being composed of signifier (physical form in which the sign takes place) and the signified (the concept it represents). No sign can make sense on its own, but only in relation to other signs. Signs are not meaningful in isolation, but only when they are interpreted in relation to each other.

The meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated. Codes provide an interpretative framework within which signs make sense. There are social codes, logical codes, aesthetic codes.

Signs do not all work in the same way. Typology of signs by Charles Peirce is helpful to see different functions of signs:

* **Iconic signs** convey truth and reality (portrait, photography, cartoons, sound effects, imitative gestures, road signs, maps, etc.).
* **Index** is a sign which is related to the object it represents in a causal way rather than directly or in a concrete way (evidence, smoke, footprints, pain, thermometer, clock, knock on the door, handwriting, etc.).
* **Symbols** are signs which have no link at all with the thing it represents. The only reason we know what they mean is because we have learnt what they mean over time. 100% needs to be learned (language, alphabet, numbers, traffic lights, colours, etc.).

All kinds of texts have 2 layers of meaning – denotative and connotative. Denotative level refers to the surface meaning, i.e. what we actually see, we can easily understand and identify, without particular cultural knowledge or preparation. Connotative level refers to the deeper or hidden meanings and associations, i.e. what we associate with the image, while bringing cultural experiences to what we see, add our own information and attempt to identify the meaning.

Roland Barthes provides a useful framework of signification, which includes both, denotation and connotation. Denotation is the first order of signification, meaning the primary, literal, obvious or common sense meaning of a sign. Connotation is a second order signification, referring to the figurative, inferred or suggested meaning.

Combination of many consistent interpretations produce **ideology or myth**, which is the third order of signification according to Roland Barthes. Following his interpretation, myth is a semiological system: “Mythology represents a collective system of interpretative perspectives, including ideologies that are often shared and debated within a culture.”

Hence, myth is a second-order semiological system. A connotative sign system of representation that implies meanings within a particular cultural context that are accepted as true according to habit without the possibility of verification.

Myth is a type of communication: “Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters its message: there formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones. Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions.” (p. 107)

A myth is where a “socially agreed” symbolic association becomes widely accepted and legitimated to be seen as iconic.

To encourage students to use semiotics and its concepts in practicing visual analysis, you may choose a visual example and the following questions for semiotic analysis of visuals:

* Decide what the signs are represented
* Decide what they signify ‘in themselves’
* Think about how they relate to other signs ‘in themselves’
* Explore their connections to wider systems of meaning, from codes (conventionalized codes) to ideologies (legitimated representations of power)
* Then return to the signs via their codes to explore the precise articulation of ideology and mythology

The last concepts to be introduced are major visual figurations: metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor and metonymy are two types of tropes, that is, “a word or phrase used in a sense other than that which is proper to it” (Leithart, Peter): In metaphor, “a descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable”. In metonymy, “a word or phrase denoting an object, action, institution, etc.,” is functionally replaced with “a word or phrase denoting one of its properties or something associated with it”.

A visual metaphor is the representation of a person, place, thing, or idea by means of a visual image that suggests a particular association or point of similarity. It's also known as pictorial metaphor and analogical juxtaposition.

A pictorial, or visual, metaphor occurs when one visual element (tenor/target) is compared to another visual element (vehicle/source) which belongs to a different category or frame of meaning.

Metonymy is a figure of speech (or trope) in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it's closely associated (such as "crown" for “royalty”, “Brussels” for “EU”, “Sabonis” for “Lithuanian basketball”). Metonymy is also the rhetorical strategy of describing something indirectly by referring to things around it, as in describing someone's clothing to characterize the individual.

"Metonymy and metaphor also have fundamentally different functions. Metonymy is about referring: a method of naming or identifying something by mentioning something else which is a component part or symbolically linked. In contrast, a metaphor is about understanding and interpretation: it is a means to understand or explain one phenomenon by describing it in terms of another." (Murray Knowles and Rosamund Moon, Introducing Metaphor. Routledge, 2006)

**Assignments and discussion questions**

For in-class discussion, select an image or video and apply questions of semiotic analysis presented in the slides (Part 2):

* Decide what the signs are represented
* Decide what they signify
* Think about how they relate to other signs
* Explore their connections to wider systems of meaning, from codes (conventionalized signs) to ideologies (legitimated representations of power)
* Return to the signs via their codes to explore precise articulation of ideology and mythology

***Part 3: Practicing visual storytelling***

The last part of the module is dedicated to the development of practical skills of visual communication and storytelling. The main aim here is to engage students into hands-on learning and to become producers, as well as critical users of visual media.

Taking students inside visual production process is one of the best ways to develop students´ cognitive abilities and understanding of visual media and communication. Trainers and researchers agree that visual education should focus on creating visual images and meanings rather than consuming them only (Messaris, 2003). Abilities to communicate through images in a meaningful way are not self-evident and require intellectual efforts, as well as practical skills. In other words, this kind of knowledge must be gained through hands-on visual education aimed at enhancing students´ cognitive abilities by putting images together and applying visual conventions in a meaningful way. Hence, potential of visual education interventions is based on theoretical and practical visual learning, as well as transferable skills gained, such as creativity, problem solving and critical thinking.

The main aim of the course is to integrate hands on learning in a meaningful way, i.e. linking theory and practice of visual and popular culture. Students have to produce a creative project and had to critically reflect on the production process demonstrating their creativity and critical thinking. In the first part of the module students are provided with an overview of classical and modern approaches to visual culture. In the second part of module, they are invited to apply the knowledge in planning, managing and producing a visual project on a selected topic.

The assignment requires students to independently choose the project idea, topic, objectives, audiences, relevant media and relevant examples to follow. However, switching from abstract conceptual thinking into very concrete visual thinking and meaning production is a challenge for many students. Often, they are finding it difficult to identify a topic and develop an action plan, when ideas are generated and an overall vision of the project is planned in detail (writing a script for video or developing an idea/topic, deciding on location, subjects, media). Therefore, it is recommended to monitor and help students to engage with hands on learning approach and facilitate the creative process. Monitoring of visual production includes discussing project development phases in class and providing students with a feedback. Explaining the importance of pre-production phase and project planning. Also, the role of the project brief explained, which is about describing project idea in detail, including objectives, target audience, content, aesthetic and technological means, research done, constraints, and personal motivation in the project.

While learning visual thinking as the „language of their generation“, students are encouraged to shift their focus from consuming of media to creating and producing (Hofer & Owings, 2006). Hands-on learning approach should be considered as the core objective of an actively oriented visual curriculum. By developing students’ cognitive abilities of visual thinking and communication, education interventions usually integrate theoretical and practical learning, and promote transferable skills, including creativity, problem solving and critical thinking.

**Assignments and discussion questions**

Visual concept and its presentation in class - students are invited to creatively engage into the visual storytelling process by developing a concept for a visual story. Students may choose their topic and the genre of their visual story (an educational video, a mock ad campaign, a branding logo strategy, a website or blog, an artwork or multimedia art exhibit, a video or a short film, etc.). For the assignment, students have to discuss and prepare a project brief (visual concept). The project brief is aimed at discussing the project idea in detail, including the objectives, target audience, content, aesthetic and technological means, relevant examples, constraints, as well as participants’ roles and responsibilities in the project, etc. Visual concepts are presented orally by the end of the module.

For discussion of the project ideas, you may use the following questions: What is unique about the story? Is it motivating to an audience? What do you want to achieve by telling this story? What sort of preparation is needed to be able to produce this story? Who can help you to share your story and reach your target audiences? What impact might the story have on people?