



SELF PROGRAM

2026/2027

Images and Truth in the Digital Age

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Course information

Number of credits: 6 credits

Contact hours: 30 hours

Hours taught per week: 3 hours

Teaching period: Spring 2027

Course description

This course examines the relationship between images and truth, from the invention of photography to the age of artificial intelligence. For nearly two centuries, photographs and moving images have occupied a privileged position within modern cultures as records of reality. Their apparent ability to capture and preserve the visible world has made them central not only to art and entertainment, but also to journalism, science, law, politics, surveillance, and historical memory.

Yet images have never been neutral windows onto reality. Long before the advent of digital technologies, photographs could be staged, manipulated, cropped, edited, or placed into

misleading contexts. The digital revolution has nevertheless transformed the production, circulation, and reception of images, raising new questions about authenticity, evidence, credibility, manipulation, and trust. More recently, the emergence of technologies such as generative artificial intelligence has further complicated the relationship between images and reality by making it possible to produce highly convincing synthetic images without any referent in the physical world.

Drawing on visual studies, film and media theory, and contemporary debates surrounding technology and misinformation, this course explores the history of how images create meaning and authority, why audiences trust certain images more than others, what it means to “manipulate” an image, and how these assumptions have evolved over time. Through a series of historical and contemporary case studies (including examples from a diverse corpus of images: photography, cinema, television, scientific imaging, surveillance technologies, social media, deepfakes, and generative AI), the course will examine the cultural, aesthetic, and political implications of trusting images in an image-saturated world.

Course outline

Module 1: What is an image?

- Images as representations, signs, entertainment, documents, communication devices...
- The complicated question of what it means to “manipulate” an image
- How do images “manipulate” us?
- Visual literacy

Module 2: Recording Reality: Photography and the Birth of Mechanical Truth

- Photography and the promise of objectivity
- Indexicality and visual evidence
- Spirit photography and photographic fraud
- The social construction of trust in images

Module 3: The First Moving Images: Between Reality and Illusion

- Optical toys and pre-cinema
- Lumières, Méliès, Edison
- “Actualités” and staged events
- Historical reconstructions and early special effects

Module 4: Montage, Narrative, and the Construction of Fictions

- Editing and the grammar of cinema
- Soviet montage and propaganda
- Hollywood continuity editing, Hollywood montage

- Fiction, persuasion, and emotional truth

Module 5: Scientific Images, Observation, and the Art of Seeing

- Chronophotography (Muybridge, Marey)
- Microscopy and telescopic vision
- Timelapse films as a scientific tool
- NASA, data visualization, and the aesthetics of scientific images

Module 6: Documentary, Evidence, and the Juridical Image

- Documentary traditions
- News photography and photojournalism
- Surveillance images, bodycams, and evidentiary images
- Citizen journalism and smartphone footage

Module 7: Animation, Digital Images, and the End of Indexical Certainty

- Animation and constructed worlds
- CGI and digital compositing
- Synthetic realism
- The changing status of photographic truth

Module 8: Photoshop, Deepfakes, and AI-Generated Images

- Digital “manipulation”
- Image verification and forensic methods
- Deepfakes and generative AI
- Authenticity, trust, “vibes”, and the future of visual culture

Conclusions: Beyond the Real/Fake Divide

- Images and contemporary visual culture

Prerequisites

none

Course objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to critically analyze images as historical, cultural, and technological objects; evaluate competing claims about visual evidence, image manipulation, and authenticity; and reflect on the changing role of technologies in the production of meaning through.

Assessment

Participation and preparation for class: 10%

Midterm evaluation (written or oral, TBD pending enrollment): 40%

Final exam (written): 50%

Attendance

In order to participate, students must be present. Nevertheless, a maximum of 2 (two) unexcused absences will be allowed; otherwise, no mark will be given. An unexcused absence at a test (final test or continuous assessment) means no credits for the course.

Bibliography

Course materials will be made available to students on Moodle. This includes images for analysis, film clips and references, as well as short theoretical, critical, or philosophical texts for each module. On occasion, students may be asked to view a film or television episode outside of class time.