



THE VISUAL TREK
by Martin Gruber

Making Sense!

Entering the Field of Sensory Studies.



**Joint Module organized by
University of Bremen and University of Eastern Finland
for YUFE**

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Syllabus (14 weeks, autumn term at UB: October - January)

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Sub-Units of the Module

Smell Trek: PD Dr. Cordula Weißköppel, UB

Sound Trek: Dr. Javier Gago Holzscheiter, UB

Visual Trek: Dr. Martin Gruber, UB

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**Unit “Visuality and Visual Storytelling“ for E-Module „Sensory Studies“ (BA-M4),
offered for YUFE in coop with UEF**

Unit for Subfield: Visual Studies & Visual Storytelling (16 SWS)

Teaching-Goals:

- Introduction to the role of visual perception and visual media in research
- Sensitize students to pay attention to their visual perception
- Provide students with a theoretical framework about the visual
- Provide students with an analytical framework to assess photo essays
- Enable students to produce a photo story / essay
- Introduction in smartphone photography
- Introduction to Layout software Scribus

Station 1: (2 SWS)

Introduction to Visuality and Visual Storytelling

This station introduces students to the themes of visuality and visual perception while at the same time giving them an introduction to the contents and timeline of this unit.

The station begins with a personal introduction of each participant. Therefore, each student has been asked in advance to bring to the session one image (photograph/drawing) that “tells a story” about them. The image should have been produced by the respective participant herself or himself and should not necessarily depict the person but rather an object, another person or landscape that is important to the person. Each person then shares the image with the other participants. One other student then explains what s/he sees on this image or associates with the image. Finally, the first student resolves the issue by briefly answering the following questions: 1. Where and when was the image made? 2. Why is it important to you? The idea of this exercise is to highlight the different ways in which images / the visual convey meaning, but also to put forward that contextualization is necessary and/or changes the meaning. This brings up the issue that images / the visual is interpreted differently by each person as well as the constructedness of photographic images and meaning more generally.

In a next step the teacher briefly introduces herself or himself, also by the means of an image that tells a story about the person. Analogous to the students, the teacher picks one image and ask several students what they see and which feelings and emotions this seeing evokes. He or she finally resolves the issue with an anecdote about the image.

Additionally, an introductory video that talks about visual perception and the way visuality may contribute to understanding the world will be shown. This film also introduces the content and structure of the “Visuality and Visual Storytelling” Unit.

Station 1 then continues with a “Looking Exercise” that is intended to make people sensible for looking and to prepare students for the further visual assignments on this unit. The students are asked to walk around in their flat and look out for an object that they find interesting or meaningful. After 20 minutes the students then get together in pairs and describe to each other how exactly the objects look like. They are asked to focus in the visual properties and discern description from interpretation. Finally, they show each other the objects. The exercise is then discussed within the entire group. The students are asked if they were able to describe the objects successfully with words and which aspects were easier conveyed by visual means.

Station 2: (2SWS)

Theoretical Framework for Visuality and Visual Storytelling

The theoretical and analytical framework of the session is provided by Visual Anthropologist David MacDougall's short paper 'Ways of Seeing' (2006), which the students read as a homework before Station 2. As a reading assignment, the students are asked to write down MacDougall's key arguments and answer some of the following questions:

- What is the connection between seeing and knowing?
- What is the difference between seeing/looking and making photographic images?
- How can an image tell the viewer about the author?
- What is the relationship between meaning and being?
- What is the difference between writing and making images?
- What is the difference between the knowledge conveyed by words and images?
- What is looking compared to seeing (and thinking)?

The text which is essentially concerned with the 'corporeal' aspects of seeing and visual knowledge, is then discussed in synchronous teaching, first in BOS and then together with all the students. MacDougall's key arguments should be conveyed through this discussion.

Vision: following MacDougall, our conscience of our own being is primarily a feeling but our conscience of everything around us involves vision. Vision therefore enables us to see and experience the world around us but also to experience being itself in that world.

Seeing: Our seeing is deeply predetermined through our cultural, social and neural conditioning. Pre-existing meaning imbues images with meaning, but meaning, when we force it on things, can also blind us, causing us to see only what we expect to see or distracting us from seeing very much at all. Seeing and meaning influence each other: "As we look at things our perception is guided by cultural and personal interests, but perception is also the mechanism by which these interests are altered and added to" (2). But we also see to some extent literally, without meaning and this is what MacDougall is interested in.

Visual Knowledge: There is a perceptual as well as a conceptual kind of knowledge. Vision is a primary means of comprehending or experiencing the world around us. And unlike the knowledge communicated by words, images have no transparency or volition. Visual knowledge is stubborn and opaque, but with capacity for the finest detail. This makes images dispute their consecrated meanings. For all the ways in which photographic images oversimplify and aggressively impose their messages (as they do in advertising) they are intrinsically tentative, oscillating between meaning and the self-sufficiency of their subjects (6).

Making images: Looking purposefully (as in photography and filmmaking) imbues the images with more meaning. The images we make become artifacts of our desired and heightened responses. Corporeal images are not just images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera and its relations with the world. Sensibilities of the author are revealed by their distinctive way of looking, framing. Photographic images are therefore reflexive. They refer back to the photographer at the moment of their creation at the moment of their encounter. Meaning is produced by our whole bodies (not just by conscious thought). We see with our bodies and any image we make carries an imprint of our bodies. At the same time, however much it is directed, a camera produces an image that is independent of our bodies. There is an irreducible part of the photograph that escapes from us.

Looking vs. Seeing: Looking is more deliberate than seeing and yet more unguarded than thinking. We are putting ourselves in a sensory state that is at once of vacancy and of heightened awareness. It is different from thinking. To look carefully requires strength, calmness, and affection (7)

Station 3: (2SWS) 1 SWS asynchronous; 1 SWS synchronous

Introduction to Scribus Layout Software

Scribus is a free-to-use open-source layout software that we chose to use in this module. The participants are free to use any other software available to them but we can only provide training and technical advice in Scribus.

The students are asked to do the first step with Scribus as an independent asynchronous homework assignment. In order to do so, they have to read the Scribus introduction handout, download and install Scribus software on their Laptops and create a Scribus document that contains one or two photographs. For the exercise they are asked to use or make photographs of the object that they chose for the “looking exercise” in the first station.

The inhouse class of Station 3 then starts with a 5 minute long freewriting exercise around the topic: ‘What’s so special about...?’ referring to the same object that the respective student chose for the looking exercise. The freewriting will set the agenda (and provide the words) for the following exercise with Scribus.

The students are asked to continue appropriating Scribus, by designing captions for the photographs that they chose for their first Scribus exercise. The exercise is not only intended to increase their practical skills with the Layout programme but also to make them contemplate further on how images and texts are interdependent. They are asked to answer the following questions before starting to write: 1. Does the image need contextualization? 2. Which information is needed or desired? What should be written about the image? 3. How does the meaning of the images change with the content of the caption?

The students will be asked to rely on visual storytelling in this exercise, rather than on words. They are encouraged to be experimental and really try to give the meaning of the images a twist. The exercise is finalized with a discussion on these questions, first in small groups and then in the forum.

Station 4: (6 SWS) 3 SWS synchronous; 3 SWS asynchronous.

Visual Perception Walk

The main goal of this core Station 4 is to combine the approaches of visual ethnography, walking and storytelling. In a practical exercise the participants are asked to explore a pre-defined urban area. In Bremen this is Gröpelingen due to its diversity and openness, but it can be any other neighborhood. While we the exercise is grounded in multi-sensorial ontology the participants are asked to focus on the visual. The students are first invited to get into a mode of looking (MacDougall) and explore the public space until they find a place that seems to be worthwhile investigating further. It can be a square or a shop or a vending machine. It should be a place that raises their interest or fascination. It should be small enough so that it’s possible to get a good overview or impression. When the students found a place of interest, they should rest there and observe the place and try to make sense of it through this preliminary unmediated kind of visual knowledge that MacDougall advocates in his Text. The students are then asked to document this sensory experience with a focus on visual means: through taking photographs, drawing and mapping. Immediately after the walking experience the students are supposed to write a field diary entry in which they put down their thoughts and feelings. This material will serve as the basis of the following Station 5 in which the students produce an ethnographic photo story about their experience in the field. Together the various photo stories will constitute a visual portrait of the neighborhood.

Station 4 is guided by a dedicated handout which is used during the prep-talk (synchronous 1 SWS) and during the walking itself. The handout contains detailed information about the walk. The Visual Walk will take approximately 90 minutes. Students can go either alone or in pairs at a time that suits them best. Each student should take a minimum of ten images with smartphone, following the advice and inspiration from the smartphone photography film. They are also asked to take fieldnotes and choose one to three images in order to present their sensory experience to the other students in the following synchronous session. As part of the prep-talk, the students also watch an introductory film on smartphone photography. The film gives practical advice on smartphone photography and provides student with a sense of the constructedness of images.

During a feedback session (synchronous 2 SWS) all the students present their walking experience to the group by means of visual and aural storytelling. They are asked to convey a sense of the entire place and they are already invited to focus on one or two aspects that they found most interesting about the place. The following questions are guiding this feedback session: 1. How did the walk evolve? 2. Which place did you focus on? 3. What did you experience visually? 4. What did you find out from this exercise?

Station 5: (4 SWS) 2 SWS synchronous; 2 SWS asynchronous

Visual Storytelling through Photo Stories.

The final Station enables the students to represent and present their experience from the field in a personal photo story. In order to do so the genre of photo essay / photo story will be introduced and an analytical framework will be established by the students before they go into hands on training.

In the first part of Station 5 the students are going to look at different ethnographic photo essays and photo stories in order to get to know this genre in its variety. A special focus will be given on the different ways in which images and texts are combined. In order to do so the students are split up in three sub groups and each of them will view a different photo essay. When discussing the respective essays within sub-groups the students will be asked to set up criteria for the evaluation of and the design of future photo essays. In order to do so they will be asked to take notes on different aspects or criteria of storytelling in the following domains: 1. Images 2. Texts 3. Image/Text-Relationship. This is a selection of rather different photo essays that could be used.

- Windhoek with-out water
<https://blogs.uni-bremen.de/walkingwindhoek/windhoek-with-out-water/>
- Lead Belt:
<https://anthronow.com/print/good-earth-exploring-the-old-lead-belt>
- Refugee Crisis: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/camps-and-ruins-notes-from-greece-on-the-visual-representation-of-the-2015-refugee-crisis>

Each subgroup will write down their evaluation criteria in a tool for collaborative note-taking like the University of Bremen StudIpad. Each student has access and can contribute. After the session in sub-groups, all students will discuss the evaluation criteria they came up with in a short discussion. The notes of the different groups will be merged during this discussion. In a homework assignment the students are asked to vie the two remaining photo essays and complete the evaluation criteria accordingly. Here is a list of possible criteria that teachers may use to use for the discussion:

1. Picture(s)

- Composition
- Photographic subject (image content)
- Perspective
- Composition of various pictures → leitmotiv, common thread
- Role of the photographer
- Documenting or enactment
- Colour / black and white
- Lighting
- Effects / filters
- Dynamic
- Symbols / Text
- Quality and format
- Temporal context (context information)
- Atmosphere / mood
- Location / space

2. Text(s)

- What connections are between text and pictures?
- Is the text describing or analyzing? In what way is it relating to the topic?
- Content analysis:
 - Fact-checking
 - Rhetoric means (sarcastic, ...?)
 - What kind of text type?
 - Narrative Perspective - Who is talking?
 - Historical context / classification
- Background of text (where – country and platform – was it published and written?)

3. Relation Pictures and Text

- Size of picture(s) and text
- Is the field accessible for the reader/holder? (interpretation?)
→ context
- How is the relation between the picture(s) and text(s)?
→ Quantity / amount
→ Connection or relation between picture(s) and text(s)?
→ How does this effect the reception?
- Questioning the position of the author(s)
→ personal connection? In the field? Role of author?
- Work out context of photo essays: Is it an artistic or a scientific essay or content?
→ Which aspects convey artistic / scientific work?
- Where is the focus? What topics are central?
→ What is expressed (how)?
- Is there a suspense curve
- How is the narrative structure?
- How was it created?

In an independent homework assignment, the students are then asked to produce draft versions of their photo stories, taking the sample essays and the self-acquired evaluation criteria for storytelling and photo stories as guidelines. They are free to choose whatever aspect of the place they found most interesting. The **Photo Essay should include up to 10 images and a maximum of 300 words.**

In a final synchronic session, the students will present the draft versions of their photo essays and receive feedback, first in pairs and then in the overall group. The feedback receivers are encouraged to ask the feedback givers particular questions that they find most important. Everyone is asked to stick to the evaluation framework that they set up in the previous session collaboratively. The feedback that they receive will be used for finalizing the photo essays as an independent homework asynchronously.

Station	Synchrone	Asynchrone (Indep. Studies)	Tool / Material
1 Introduction to visuality & visual studies 2 SWS	-Introduction of students -Introduction of unit contents -different looking exercises		Introduction film
2 Theoretical framework MacDougall 2 SWS	- Discussion in pairs and group	-Independent Reading	MacDougall ext (2006)
3 Introduction to Scribus layout software 2 SWS		-choose object -make picture -Install Scribus -read instructions -start project	Scribus handout
4 Visual walk 6 SWS	-Introduction to smartphone photography -Introduction to walking -Feedback discussion	-neighborhood walk -take notes -make fotos	-Introduction film smartphone photography -Handout visual walk
5 Foto Essay 4 SWS	-View different photo essays - develop evaluation criteria - receive and give feedback in pairs and group	- conceive and implement personal photo story draft - finalize photo story	

Products

Introductory film on visuality (missing)

Handout for Scribus Layout software

Handout for walk (visual exploration of urban area)

Educational film on smartphone photography

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