

## VIS 242. THEORIES OF MEDIA AND NEW MEDIA

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Seminar topic for 2004:

### **INFO-AESTHETICS**

#### **Seminar requirements**

Either a paper (about 5000 words) or an art/design project related to the topics of the seminar (accompanied by a short statement of 500-1000 words).

#### **The goal and the strategies**

The goal of this seminar is to analyze a number of emerging trends in contemporary culture using the paradigm of info-aesthetics as our guide. We will accomplish this using a number of complementary strategies:

- Reading and discussing of a number of key texts that are widely referred to in current cultural discussions.
- The assigned books will be supplemented by a number of texts available on the net.
- In addition to careful reading of selected texts – which is the standard strategy of graduate seminar – we will also try to quickly “scan” whole areas to identify the issues, the names, the strategies, etc. this would involve actively using the net and various information retrieval and summarization tools: advanced options of Search Engines, blog indexes, RSS feeds, and so on. (In other words, we will try to actively use the very tools we will discuss critically in the seminar.)
- We will also survey various cultural projects related to the seminar topic. Here again the same two strategies of close reading of selected works as well as scanning of whole domains to see the emerging and the typical strategies will be used. The projects will

come from architecture, industrial, graphic, and interface design, information architecture, film and moving image culture (music videos, motion graphics), media and new media art, and contemporary art.

## **Books**

[Ordered at Price Center bookstore –  
but you may be able to get them cheaper online]

1 -----

Title: The Rise of the Network Society

Author: Manuel Castells

ISBN: 0631221409

Edition: paperback

2 -----

Title: Supermodernism

Author: Hans Ibelings

ISBN: 9056622676

Edition: paperback 2002

3 -----

Title: DJ-culture

Author: Ulf Poshardt (translator Shaun Whiteside)

ISBN: 0704380986

Edition: paperback 2000

4 -----

Title: The New Media Reader

Author: Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort

ISBN: 0262232278

Edition: hardcover

5 -----

Title: Digital Culture

Author: Charlie Gere

ISBN: 1861891431

Edition: paperback 2003

## Seminar description

The seminar will scan contemporary culture to detect emerging aesthetics and cultural forms specific to global information society. Its method is a systematic comparison of our own period with the beginning of the 20th century when modernist artists created new aesthetics, new forms, new representational techniques, and new symbols of industrial society. How can we go about searching for their equivalents in information society – and does this very question make sense? Can there be forms specific to information society, given that software and computer networks redefine the very concept of form? (Instead of being solid, stable, finite, discrete, and limited in space and time, the new forms are often variable, emergent, distributed, and not directly observable.) Where are radically new representational techniques unique to own time, given that new media has largely been used in the service of older media practices: Web *TV*, electronic *book*, interactive *cinema*? Can information society be represented iconically, if the activities that define it – information processing, interaction between a human and a computer, telecommunication, networking – are all dynamic processes? How does the super-human scale of our information structures – from 16 million lines of computer codes making Windows OS, to forty years which would take one viewer to watch all video interviews stored on digital servers of the Shoah Foundation, to the Web itself which cannot be even mapped as a whole – be translated to the scale of human perception and cognition? In short, if the shift from modernism to informationalism (the term of Manuel Castells) has been accompanied by a shift *from form to information flows*, can we still map these information flows to forms, meaningful to a human?

The first few meetings will be devoted to establishing the key terms and the general discussion of the theoretical issues outlined above. In the second part of the seminar we will analyze and related to each other some of the most interesting and important projects in a variety of areas of contemporary culture (cinema, architecture, product design, fashion, Web design, interface design, information architecture, art, and new media art) to each other, seeing them as the expression of single problem – how to map information into forms. We will look at how architects such as Rem Koolhaas/OMA, UN Studio, NOX, Zara Hadid, and others record, analyze,

and map information flows, and then utilize resulting records and diagrams to drive the design of architectural forms and spaces. We will analyze how our ability to record and store media data on a new scale leads to new forms of cinematic narrative (*Timecode*, *Russian Arc*) and new forms of self-representation (*MyLifeBits* project by Microsoft and similar work). We will discuss the recent work in visual and multimedia computing concerned with finding patterns in what can be called “cultural and social data” - images stored in personal, institutional, and public digital collections; the traces of people’s daily lives as recorded in various corporate and government databases; the behavior of people in public spaces such as airports (i.e. surveillance applications); In summary, each class will look at how the problematic of mapping information into forms animates a particular already existing field, as well as motivates the emergence of a number of new fields.

A large proportion of cultural phenomena that we will discuss in the seminar so far have not been critically analyzed at all in any significant depth, or even named. We will discuss these phenomena, giving them names when they don’t exist: data visualization, metadata, Flash aesthetics, “augmented space,” “total recording.” Therefore, the theoretical premise of the seminar also acts as a pragmatic armature that will allow us to look at various recently emerged and still emerging phenomena, dimensions, and categories of contemporary culture that so far have not received sufficient critical analysis. The projects discussed will come from both art and popular culture, as well as from research labs. Thus along with photographs by Andreas Gursky and Koolhaas’s Prada store in NYC we discuss special effects in *Matrix* and *Lord of the Rings*, research on new MPEG standards, and the algorithms used in visual search engines.