

Center for Teaching and Learning
Trinity College
Report for 2018-2019
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My goal for CTL was to integrate visual culture into American Political Thought (APT) to enhance the teaching of concepts from APT and to encourage students to bring the kinds of interpretive skills they bring to visual culture to their interpretation of written texts, which tends to be less sophisticated and nuanced than their interpretation of visual culture. There were two obstacles that I anticipated with this project. First, my discipline (political science), is uncomfortable with culture and particularly uncomfortable with visual culture. Political theory, as subfield of political science, is more attentive to culture and visual culture.¹ However, I knew that I would have to consult writing on pedagogy outside my field. Second, I was concerned about how to structure writing assignments so that students could productively integrate their interpretations of written and visual texts, had clear standards and expectations, and yet had the opportunity to experiment with diverse texts.

To deal with the first obstacle I turned to the literature on object-oriented learning (OOL) from museum studies. Although, there is a large literature on OOL much of it is for public education (casual adult visitors to museums), programs meant for K-12 students, or art history graduate students.² Because of this I could not find an OOL guide that suited my purposes and so I

¹ One example is Richard Iton's amazing *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, which is the inspiration for my project. As insightful as his analysis is, it does not provide a pedagogical guide.

² Sources I consulted include: Burnham, Rika. *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. Interpretation as Experience. Los Angeles: Los Angeles : J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011; Falk, John H. Dierking, Lynn D. *Learning from Museums*. AltaMira Press, 2018; Gray, Denise A. "Creative Endeavors in Art: Looking, Thinking, Making, Articulating, and Reflecting." *Journal of Museum Education* 30, no. 1 (2005): 18–22; Hailey, Dabney. "Visual Thinking, Art, and University Teaching Across Disciplines." *About Campus* 19, no. 4 (2014): 9–16; Paris, Scott G. *Perspectives on Object-Centered Learning in Museums*. Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc., 2002; Pitts, Phillippa. "Visitor to Visitor Learning: Setting up Open-Ended Inquiry in an Unstaffed Space." *Journal of Museum Education* 43, no. 4 (2018): 306–15; Sims, Sarah. "Thinking about How We Think: Promoting Museum Literacy Skills with Metacognition." *Journal of Museum Education* 43, no. 4 (2018): 325–33.; Turner Kelly, Bridget, and Kamaria B. Porter. "Using Film to Critically Engage Student Development Theory." *About Campus* 19, no. 4 (2014): 24–28; Weil, Stephen. *Making Museums Matter*. Smithsonian Books, 2012; Whitehead, Christopher, 1972-. *Interpreting Art in Museums and Galleries*. Routledge, 2012.

drastically simplified one meant for art history graduate students (see Appendix 1).³ I settled on Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) as my approach to OOL. VTS returns interpreters to the object to support their interpretations with evidence from the object. Although, in my own work I focus on the historical context in which texts are produced in order to interpret them, in the context of a 16-week course that spans 200 years this approach simply isn't feasible. VTS also has the advantage of mirroring my pedagogical approach to written texts. When students offer an interpretation of a text in class or in writing I ask them: "What, from the text, supports that interpretation?". VTS is the same strategy applied to visual texts. When students offer an interpretation, you ask: "What do you see that makes you say that?" VTS has several advantages: it levels the playing field, we are all working with the same information; it models the kind of reading and interpretation students should do with written texts; and it can be utilized across types of visual texts – movies, posters, paintings, clothing, ephemera, and architecture. I found that VTS worked well with all the visual texts that we used except architecture. If I were to include architecture again I would include more preparatory work on interpreting architecture.

Similarly, my second concern was less of a challenge than I anticipated. I include daily in-class response papers in APT and so those frequent low-stakes writing assignments (see example, Appendix 2) provide enough opportunity for students to experiment with interpretation and using visual text as evidence for arguments. When they wrote their take-home papers, most students were confident in their ability to interpret visual texts, use their interpretations as evidence for arguments, and confident in my expectations for how to use visual texts in their writing (see example, Appendix 3).

³ I started with the very lengthy and opinionated *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding* by Terry Barrett, McGraw-Hill, 2002. Barrett, for example, argues that professors should not allow students to make claims about authorial intention.

Visual culture works well to illustrate and make accessible complex concepts from political philosophy. For example, although the concept of marronage is easy for students to define it can be difficult for them to extend the implications of marronage to state formation and the concepts of freedom and citizenship. The Jabari tribe in *The Black Panther* helps students consider the implications of marronage more fully. The risk of using visual text to complement written texts is that some students relied on visual texts to replace their engagement with written texts rather than complement their engagement.

A challenge that I did not anticipate, however, was that keeping the organization of the course in historical eras led some students to conclude that types of cultural production “belong” particular eras. For example, many students concluded that the frontier narrative and the idea that “America” is a civilizational project “belongs” to 1700s-1800s. This assumption prevents students from seeing how the frontier narrative still informs contemporary American politics. If I were to continue to integrate visual texts into the course I would take more care to unsettle the narrative of historical progress, the “consensus narrative,”⁴ by including texts from different historical eras within the same thematic fields.

⁴ The consensus school is mostly closely identified with the work of Louis Hartz, *Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), who argued that America had and could only have a liberal political tradition. He displaced the tradition that saw American political development as series of conflicts and replaced it with a sort of Hegelian dialectic where all conflicts are subsumed by an inner Lockean unity. His conclusion was that neither Communism nor fascism could take root in America.

Appendix A

American Political Thought Interpreting Visual Culture

Description:

What do you see?

- Objects - people, places, things
- Elements - color, line, texture, light, shape

Formal Analysis:

How do objects and elements relate to each other within the piece?

- Contrast or repetition of colors, shapes, materials, etc.
- Organization of work overall - simple / complex, harmonious / discordant, fluid / frozen?

Interpretation:

What is the artist / work trying to communicate? What evidence do you have in the work for your interpretation?

- What is the significance of the work?
- What does it mean (how it makes you feel can be evidence of its meaning)?

Context:

Works of art are open to interpretation, which is what makes them art (unlike, say, an advertisement for Coke); but there are better and worse interpretations. The best interpretations are more convincing because they make use of evidence from the object, the context in which the object was made, or other objects / texts in which the object being interpreted are in conversation.

The context in which an object is produced can aid interpretation of the object, but objects can also help us understand the context in which the object is produced.

- What might the object mean in the context in which it was made?
- What might it mean in the context in which it is interpreted?
- What kind of economic, political, and / or social context would produce the object under consideration?

Appendix 2

American Political Thought

Exegesis: *Regeneration Through Violence*

Name: _____

Write an exegesis of the following quote:

“The Indian – for Filson, as for the Puritans and for Buffon and de Pauw – represents a *memento mori*, a warning of the power of the wilderness to kill man’s better nature. Like Boone, the Indian is the product of a wilderness environment, but his politics lack the inner controls, the self-restraint, necessary to the citizen of an ideal republican democracy” (p. 275).

Appendix 3

American Political Thought

Short Response Paper #1

Choose one of the following two options:

1. Why does the frontier offer a distinctly American identity according to the texts we have considered? You should include the Hudson River School, *The Searchers*, *Regeneration Through Violence*, and Walt Whitman in your discussion.
2. The domestic ideal (or the “cult of true womanhood”) offers, simultaneously, a model of postwar national reconciliation and a way to maintain hierarchy. How does the domestic ideal offer both reconciliation and hierarchy? You should include writing about Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and our HBSH visit, in your discussion.

Note bene: You could include de Tocqueville in either.

Your paper should be no more than 5 pages in length. Papers must be typed, double spaced, on unlined white paper, with 1-inch margins on all sides, using no larger than 12-point font and no smaller than 10-point font.

Due by November 19, 2018 at the beginning of class.