MDA 599/VIST 599: Atlas Fever: From the Wunderkammer to the Database

Instructors: W.J.T. Mitchell (University of Chicago) and Justin Underhill (University of Southern California)

Summer 2015 1:00 5:10 PM, Getty Research Institute

Course Description:
What is involved in trying to comprehend a totality with a visual array? This seminar will investigate practices of visual display that construct totalizing assemblages of multiple images, texts, and objects in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of a situation, period, or body of knowledge. The central example for examination will be the famous Mnemosyne Bilderatlas of the German art historian, Aby Warburg, which aimed at producing a comprehensive overview of the entire world of visual arts and media, embracing such disparate phenomenon as Hopi serpent rituals, Renaissance and ancient sculpture, and the coronation of Mussolini. The seminar will aim more specifically at the “wall atlas,” the slide table, and the forensic “evidence wall” that serves as operational tableaux for seeking out patterns in massive amounts of data.
From Andre Malraux’s Musée imaginaire to the cinematic editing table to the bulletin board array of suspects, victims, locations, and other clues in criminal investigations, the Bilderatlas has provided an investigative tool for organizing and comprehending large bodies of information. Artistic projects such as Gerhard Richter’s Atlas will be considered, along with cinematic explorations of the evidence wall in crime and espionage films (e.g., the virtual evidence wall in Stephen Spielberg’s Minority Report; John Nash’s schizophrenic assemblages of “evidence” in Ron Howard’s A Beautiful Mind.) As this last example (and the case of Warburg) suggests, we will be interested in the psychological aspects of “atlas fever,” its relation to paranoid “discoveries” of patterns where none exist, hidden meanings in insignificant clues. The effort to see a totality, in other words, may have pathological as well as cognitive effects, encouraging forms of obsessive compulsive behavior and post---traumatic stress disorder, the occupational hazards of drone operators, flight controllers, and code---breakers. Readings for the course will include Ernst Gombrich and David Freedberg on Aby Warburg, Carlo Ginzburg on clues and historical method, Georgio Agamben, and Georges Didi-Huberman on the concept of the Bilderatlas, Sergei Eisenstein on montage, and W. J. T. Mitchell on montage, method, and madness.

Grading:
30% Attendance and Participation 70% Research Paper/Final Project: A final research paper of 20-30 pages on the topic of your choice (relevant to the course) will be due on August 24. Preliminary research paper proposals are due July 24 via email.

Schedule of Meetings (With GRI Seminar Room Locations):
July 13: Course Introduction, Foundational Concepts (L3 Seminar Room)
Films: Homeland, Memento, True Detective

July 15: Warburg, Images, Coping (L3 Seminar Room)
Aby Warburg, Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne, ed. Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000).
Note: Even if you cannot read German well, you are expected to take a look at this book and examine it.
Benjamin Anderson et al., Mnemosyne: Meanderings Through Aby Warburg’s Atlas, 2013, warburg.library.cornell.edu
Films: A Beautiful Mind, The Man Who Fell to Earth, Crazy Talk
July 17: Introduction to Getty Collections (L3 Seminar Room)

July 20: Didi-Huberman’s Atlas Project (Plaza Conference Room)
Georges Didi-Huberman, Atlas, How to Carry the World on One’s Back (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2010), 118-191.

July 22: Introduction to Digital and Forensic Methodologies (L3 Seminar Room)

July 24: Phantasmagoria and Montage (L3 Seminar Room)

July 27: Cinema and Worldbuilding (L3 Seminar Room)
Films: Minority Report, Alex McDowell: Worldbuilding

July 29: The (Visual) Order of Things (L3 Seminar Room)

August 3: Why You Should Care About Dinosaurs/The Atlas and Cultural Icons (Plaza Conference Room)
Films: Gertie the Dinosaur, Jurassic Park

August 5: Countersurveillance and Counterpractice (L2 Conference Room)
Films: 1984, Citizen 4

August 10: Student Presentations (20-30 minutes each) (L3 Seminar Room)
August 24: PAPERS DUE

Students are invited and encouraged to participate in a VSRI/VSGC back-to-school event on August 28, 12:30-2 PM (details forthcoming).