

Seminar: VITAL SIGNS: The Life of Representations

W. J. T. Mitchell and Michael Taussig

NYU, English and Art History; Columbia, Anthropology Fall 2000

This seminar asks how it is that certain figures and objects seem to acquire a life of their own, standing over people, including many times the people who make them. As such it takes up classic questions concerning images--fetishism, totemism, idolatry, monuments, artworks, commodities, ethnic labels and stereotypes, social institutions--as well as verbal figures and metaphors. The course will be co-taught by an anthropologist (Taussig) and a professor of English and art history (Mitchell) with a mix of theoretical perspectives including theoretical work on images (Mitchell) and on magical mimesis (Taussig). Topics will include animation and animism; aura, agency, and autonomy; the uncanny; painting, sculpture and the materiality of media; iconoclasm and critique; dialectical images and petrification; culture, prehistory, and natural history. Readings from Walter Benjamin, Theodore Adorno, Blake, Nietzsche, Bataille, Freud, Marx, Durkheim, Bruno Latour, as well as other texts to be determined by consensus of the seminar.

Requirements: Each student will be asked to make a presentation and write a substantial paper by the end of the semester.

This seminar will be at NYU's Washington Square Campus and Columbia University on alternating weeks, Tuesdays from 4-6 PM.