

INTERDISCIPLINARY THEORY TEACHING: CAN ONE SIZE REALLY FIT ALL?

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Abstract

The Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Johannesburg has diverse departments ranging from Architecture, Fine Arts and Multimedia to five different design disciplines. After years of being housed in geographically dispersed locations the faculty has recently moved into one building, and is in the process of consolidating and rationalizing the teaching programmes. One area of rationalization has been identified as the theory programme, and we have been assigned the task of identifying theoretical material and drawing up a single teaching programme that most departments could subscribe to.

This paper will begin by providing a breakdown of what has been taught thus far in the first year pilot programme of a single offering for the faculty and how it was received. Consideration will also be given to the problems we face in identifying curriculum content for subsequent years. The major concern thus far is that our material is not discipline specific enough to fulfill the requirements of the different departments. Previously most departments have concentrated on a policy of vocational teaching with specific practical outcomes reflecting the nature of both design and art practitioners. The theory has therefore been taught by individual departments with very specific content and outcomes.

Furthermore the course that is currently being piloted, although conceptualized as an art and design history course, employs a methodology that is shifting from a previously linear historical approach to an approach more comparable to that employed in the visual culture studies. This means that critical thinking and deconstructive methodologies of visual analysis are encouraged in students, rather than the acquisition of a cohesive historical knowledge. This does present another problem however, since some design departments are of the opinion that students need an encompassing knowledge of the major historical developments in design history as a basis for their studies. Many theorists such as W.J.T. Mitchell, Nicholas Mirzoeff and Stuart Hall have recently questioned the notion of history as a linear programme of progress. For the most part it is now commonly accepted that the idea of history excludes marginalized histories in its European-centric approach. The question then arises, where does history find itself in this new curriculum? Is it possible to provide students with a sound historical knowledge base, and not relapse into dangerous assumptions about the validity of linear approaches?

This paper will investigate whether indeed one can manufacture a “one size fits all” course. What strategies could be used to overcome diverse expectations of content and methodology while still providing a solid grounding in the theoretical tools and analytical/critical approaches required by all students of visual culture? Can theoretical content and specific historical content be adapted and incorporated to suit each discipline without maximizing teaching contact hours? These and other questions addressing both content and practicality will be unpacked and conclusions will be drawn about a possible interdisciplinary solution to be implemented as a pilot programme for second year students in 2010.

Key words: *curriculum, rationalization, design theory, art history, interdisciplinary.*

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and question a course that has recently been implemented at the Faculty of Art Design and Architecture at the University of Johannesburg. The course has thus far been unofficially titled Contextual Studies, and is in some respects similar to a history and theory of art and design course. This study will outline the premise for the current first year course, which is based on the notion that diachronic Western history (of art and design) is problematic as curriculum content. A brief outline of the current first year course as well as problems that have arisen from the course material will

be given. The proposed second year course will also be outlined along with criticisms that we have encountered. In short the problem with the course is that it replaces a series of history courses, but that its very premise problematises the notion of history. Departments that partake in the course feel that the teaching of history remains imperative to their programmes, so the Contextual Studies course is in the difficult position of attempting to employ both historical methodologies and alternative non-linear approaches to the notion of the history of art and design.

The first year Contextual Studies course was conceived of as a course that provides students with approaches to the history and theory of design and art. As such this new subject caters to six different disciplines, Industrial Design, Graphic Design, Multimedia Design, Interior Design, Jewellery Design and Visual Art. Previously the course consisted of material that was taught in a chronological manner in terms of the European conception of the history of art and design. The notion of design history is perhaps problematic in itself however, since it has often been seen as an extension of art history. In this sense its methodologies of inquiry could follow the same approach as that of traditional art history, as outlined by theorists such as Panofsky and Wolfflin or Gombrich. This is problematic though, because design was not formulated as a distinct area of aesthetic inquiry at the time when these theories were conceived (the Enlightenment). Thus the idea of design history as another version of art history is awkward.

Furthermore the idea of history itself, has in recent educational and research circles been questioned. This applies to the notion of Western history as having a beginning and an eventual “end”, running from antiquity to contemporaneity (Elkins 2005:45 – 49). Following such a view of history, art history is conceived of as the chronological unfolding of movements and trends within art (one may refer to the “history of progress”¹ as an example of this modernist notion of a cohesive and complete history). The idea of such a grand narrative of art history has been contested by thinkers such as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams (Dikovitskaya 2005:79), but also in a more expansive sense Michel Foucault, Jean Francois Lyotard and James Elkins.

Many thinkers interested in the notion of history, investigate it from the viewpoint of groups that were marginalized by this version of history, as a way to re-think the problematic of the grand narrative. Feminist thinkers such as Griselda Pollock (1988:66) purport that modernity was invented by European men in places such as nineteenth century Paris. Because of socio-cultural ideology women were not in the position to feature as voices within the development of a movement such as modernity². Ultimately history in this sense is exclusive, and is based on the observations of privileged European men. To contemporary designers the principles and debates that emerged from modernity are still of utmost importance however, but it is also questionable how one should regard it. Where do the values of modernity leave contemporary female designers? Are they to become complicit in their own historical exclusion by taking part in a discourse that in its conception fundamentally omitted the female gender?

Similar questions arise when one considers other markers of cultural difference such as race. How do Africans feature in Western history? Where should African design position itself? In a recent discussion with first year Industrial design students in a class on colonialism they assured me that Scandinavian countries still dominated the design world in their field. Where does this leave them? One student replied that he would aim to be an African designer of European standard. This may sum up the problem with the “history of progress”. It assumes that Europe is the standard, and it is that assumption which implied the justification for the power relationships between European men and the Others they encountered (such as in colonial encounters).

¹ The “history of progress” is discussed by Jurgen Habermas in his seminal discussions on Postmodernity and Modernity, although that is not his terminology. It conceives of history as a European project hinging on the ideals of progress in knowledge and the social and moral betterment of society which is related to the Enlightenment (Habermas & Ben-Habib 1981: 4). Adorno sees such a totalizing view of human progress as problematic, and foreshadows the deconstructionist thinking of authors like Lyotard in his rejection of such a view of history (Adorno in Phelan 1993:607-610).

² Modernity is here understood as it was discussed by thinkers such as Baudelaire, Benjamin and eventually Habermas as rooted in the revolutionary thinking of the Enlightenment towards progress, freedom, rationality and individuality (Habermas & Ben-Habib 1981).

In recent years there has been an upsurge in African design and art in the international arena. This is not only linked to much global political awareness of Africa, but also has to do with the notion that Africa has been excluded from many aspects of society in the West, such as education, economy and academics. Exhibitions such as *Africa Remix* in 2007 supposedly began giving a voice to a continent that has been excluded from Western art history, except for being seen as exotic and mythical. But what is the correct conception of history that must now be established? How can we investigate and teach history in Contextual Studies without ascribing to the flawed ideologies of modernity?

Lyotard's discussion on postmodernity (1984) may be helpful in this regard. He seems to be of the opinion that the only way forward is through a process of deconstruction. This means examining what was taken for granted as historical fact and deconstructing the ideologies inherent in these "facts". He advocates a critical approach to the notion of history. For him there are many histories, but they are contradictory and a cohesive version will never be established. In other words, excluded voices cannot simply be added onto history. W. J. T. Mitchell, Malcolm Barnard, Stuart Hall, Nicholas Mirzoeff and James Elkins are among those who may be seen to broadly align to this approach. This is one example of an approach in dealing with products of design and art. According to Dikovitskaya (2005:78) thinkers like W. J. T. Mitchell believe that visuality is best approached not by the use of specific methodologies (such as that of art history), but rather a set of tools. A deconstructive approach is one such tool that a student may apply.

Based on this model it is the intention of the first year Contextual Studies course to provide students with the skills to develop such an approach to the design and art disciplines. Students are encouraged to think and write critically about any design or artwork, without having to rely solely on historical knowledge. Visual analysis is a large part of the process, and it concerns itself with the supposed meaning behind cultural products. The course is divided into four units, the first of which is an introduction to "visual culture studies". Most of the authors I have cited thus far work in this new field, and it is sometimes called visual studies as well. Visual studies or visual culture studies is not the same as design history. This relatively new field does not limit itself to the nature of the cultural products it addresses however, but rather embraces fields and disciplines not traditionally covered by art history, such as the mass media (Tobing Rony in Dikovitskaya 2005:74). Furthermore it aims to "chart new inventories and write local histories" in terms of a contemporary perspective around issues that are current (Dikovitskaya 2005:75). The field is interdisciplinary and lends itself to investigating the histories of art and design, although it is neither. This was problematic for many of the departments at FADA as it was felt that visual culture might not be (or sound) inclusive of design in terms of the study of space and objects. The concern arose that the approach may focus too much on the visual (at the expense of disciplines concerned with space), although I would not agree. The debate is unresolved, but as a result the term "visual culture" is no longer used in the course material. The fundamental thinking behind the approaches to visual studies remains relevant, however, in the methodologies that students develop and employ in Contextual Studies. Much of this hinges on the significance of acts related to representation.

Current first year programme

Before discussing the importance of meaning further it may be helpful to explicate the structure of the current first year course. There are four units of study, governed by four themes taught across the year. Within each unit there are two contact sessions per week, a lecture to all the students, introducing the major theoretical premises of each unit of study (in about seven weeks per unit), and a tutorial elaborating on the lecture and focusing on reading material which is prescribed. Each unit has about two texts that are prescribed readings. Every unit is assessed through two assignments, a smaller one earlier in the term, and a longer four page essay at the end of the term. Since many students are not familiar with academic writing there is also one contact session per week of academic support that assists students with essay writing. At the end of the year, students will write an exam.

The notion of representation and meaning was introduced to first year students in the first unit of the course, titled: "Representation (looking, writing, image and text)". The unit was aimed at giving students a brief history of representation, which seems chronological, but the emphasis was placed on how representation lead to the construction of meaning, rather than the facts of the historical development of representation. Thus the idea is not to abstractly discuss theories but to use historical and contemporary

material to actively practice the theory. Instead of providing students with facts to remember (as the idea of legitimate history as grand narrative would), they are engaged in questioning what they encounter (which were historical artworks, designed objects and spaces). Texts by Stuart Hall and Malcolm Barnard were assigned.

Despite the intention of using historical material as departure point for this approach to the subject some concerns surfaced. The interior design department amongst others was concerned with the lack of background knowledge provided to the first year students. Would there be space in the Contextual Studies curriculum to investigate technical histories such as architectural history rooted in antiquity and Roman architecture?

The second unit of study was conceived around the theme of the modern city, and titled "The city as visual space". Urban space is an interesting background for the introduction of some modernist theory, focusing on Industrialisation as well as gender theory. Many authors have seen a correlation between modernist thinking and gender roles as it played out in the Impressionist paintings of Parisian life in the nineteenth century. A text by Griselda Pollock (1988) was assigned to the students, as she focuses on the division between public and private space in Paris at the time, and how women were relegated to the domestic realm of the interior and men developed sophisticated manners of interacting with the spectacle of the city, such as the discerning wandering gaze of the "flâneur". Another text by Nancy Forgione (2005) focusing on the modernising of Paris during *Hausmanisation* was also assigned.

Since the first year course is introductory and serves to provide students with approaches rather than facts I have aimed to avoid well-defined movements within art and design history. To my mind it makes more sense to introduce students to methodologies and ways of thinking, rather than established theories which may lead them to think of these as absolute truths. Thus the emphasis of the unit was on ideologies of space, and not on the technical and aesthetic theory of the built environment. It seemed as if including technical histories in the course was not really possible in this unit, although there is much discussion of Hausmannisation³ in the material.

In an attempt to provide students with more discipline specific visual material in the second semester the third unit for the year was simplified to apply to Western encounters with Africa. The unit was titled "Encountering cultures: Africa", and the sub-theme for this unit was colonial theory. A text on colonialism from "Selves and others" was chosen (Holloway, Kane, Roos, Titlestad 2004), as well as a text by Stuart Hall. Both books are written for students and introduce seminal concerns in visual studies. The essay question for the unit was discipline specific, and focused on colonial stereotypes of the "savage" African as found in contemporary design.

When the learning guide was distributed to students some were a little outraged, however, and the concern with specific histories resurfaced. How could they find colonial stereotypes in interior design or industrial design? Through much discussion and visual analysis, examples of stereotypes were found in every design discipline and students who were concerned about finding discipline specific material to write about seem to have succeeded.

The fourth unit of study focuses on digital culture and the motif of the cyborg specifically in the film "Blade Runner" by Ridley Scott. The unit, titled "Blade Runner technological dystopia" takes as premise the importance of technology in the manufacturing process in much of industrialized design. Technological progress has throughout modernity been seen not as only an improving force in terms of lifestyle and industry, but also as potential threat to the humanity of society (Sparke 2004:139-149) . This is embodied by the "replicants" in Scott's film. A text by Douglas Williams (1988) was selected which combines the approaches applied thus far in the year, ideology criticism with a focus on difference and gender. The second reading by Michael Webb (1987) discusses the notion of the city as monstrous motif in science fiction films, with specific reference to the set design of the film. The essay question asks students to

³ Baron Eugene Haussman's project of urban renewal in nineteenth-century Paris which is discussed in some detail by Forgione (2005).

discuss the notion of dystopia as theorized by Williams, as well as to find evidence of the specific themes Williams proposes within still images from the film.

Modernity as various theories has been central, though implicit, not explicit, to the course thus far. In an interview with Thomas Gunning, Dikovitskaya (2005:79) writes that he theorises the alteration of the modern experience as intrinsic to the field of visual studies. This is due to the proliferation of visual media, since the inception of industrial reproductive processes such as photography and film, which implied that the visual transgressed the boundaries of what was traditionally seen as culture (in terms of art). Images became abundant and available to many people. This is also sometimes called the pictorial turn (Mitchell 1994: 11-34). In contemporary terms, since modernity, visual culture has become both the visual experience and the record of that experience, which means that one can study it in a manner different to those methodologies which art history favours. This also relates to the idea that meaning is in the visual object itself, but in the experience of that object. In this sense, an historical movement like modernity remains important to a field such as visual studies, although at the same time it must be contested, as some of its premises become problematic.

The aim of the first year course has been to provide students with basic tools towards such an approach to the history of art and design. As we have outlined thus far, the history of design can no longer be thought of as similar to the history of art. History itself should be questioned. When students have acquired the capacity to question cultural products efficiently they are ready for the proposed second year course, which deals with seminal movements and developments such as Modernity itself.

Proposed second year course

As an art historian and the person responsible for a large part of the art and design history teaching in the faculty I was asked to join Landi in planning the offering for second year Contextual Studies. This was an attempt to include specific historical content and simultaneously ease the transition between the old diachronic approach to art and design history and a new thematic approach, comparable to that employed in visual studies. Our challenge lies in accommodating the requirements of all the different disciplines, who were asked to present us with lists of historical material or specific information that they consider vital for inclusion. We are further constrained by the Dean who does not wish us to present streamed offerings (ie. A shared offering for the first half of the year and then optional modules aimed at the different disciplines for the second half of the year) which was our first suggestion.

Considering our mandate was to provide a single offering but to make it relevant to each discipline I suggested that, as in first year, there should be a single lecture given to all students once a week. This lecture would consist of a historical overview of the time period under discussion. It would include an introduction to the main theorists, the social implications, political changes and the effects of all these aspects on visual culture. While visual examples should be referred to as illustrations of the effects of these theories and historical events, this should not be a long and involved visual history but a theoretical background from which to approach the visual history provided in the individual lectures. The lectures would also introduce relevant readings to the students and time should be allocated for unpacking and explaining the readings if necessary.

There would then be a second set of classes each week which would be discipline specific individual lectures concentrating on the analysis and discussion of visual examples. Such discussions would relate these examples to the broader social and theoretical context that was introduced in the main lectures but would also take into consideration things like building innovations and interior styles for Interior design, for example, or the development of practical objects and technological innovations for industrial design, or stylistic developments in painting and sculpture for Visual Arts. Tasks such as essays and projects would be allocated and dealt with during these lectures where the prescribed readings from the main lecture could be applied to analyses of specific examples. Each of these lectures could thus be tailored and adapted to the requirements of each course.

At this stage we are proposing a loose overview of possible modules for second year which takes into account much of the material that is presently being taught in the various disciplines and which was

requested by each department. Firstly, to make up for the lack of ancient history in first year, and in response to suggestions from the Interior Design department, we outlined a module on “The role and influence of Classicism, from Ancient Greece to Post- modernism.” This covers an investigation of the ‘canon’ resulting in idealism, and the impact this has had on aesthetics from ancient Greece through to the present day. It also investigates social implications such as the way Classicism is used to enhance the dignity and grandeur of the state and religion in architecture, painting, sculpture and design throughout the ages. The module would culminate in an overview of the ironic re-use of classicism in postmodern art and design.

In practice, certain elements of Classicism would be emphasised, where relevant, for the different disciplines. Interior Design, for example, could begin by understanding the attributes of the classical orders, and then investigate the way classical architectural vocabulary and sculptural decoration has been used over the years, adapted through various classical revivals, to imbue government buildings with official stature and gravitas, or provide private homes with an air of grandeur. Classical proportions in ancient architecture have also inspired modernist architectural manifestations such as modular proportion in Le Corbusier’s architecture and subtle references to a Classical Greek temple can turn an industrial building such as Behren’s *Turbine Factory* into a temple to the all powerful ‘industrial cult’ in Germany.

Visual Art, on the other hand, could consider the use of the Classical ideal, both in its original manifestation and its revival during the Renaissance, to produce images of timeless perfection. Hauser (1977:82), when discussing Renaissance idealism in *The Social History of Art*, notes that “Classical art describes this elite society as it wants to see itself and as it wants to be seen.” A striving for order, permanence, calm, stability and continuity is seen in the lack of transient emotions and physical perfection of Renaissance Classicism. There are ongoing references to classical perfection throughout art history including examples of contemporary art that could be analysed as part of this module. It is not possible, within the scope of this paper, to explain this application for each of the disciplines in detail, but hopefully it is clear from these examples how the emphases can shift to suit the requirements of each course.

The second proposed module provides an overview of “The Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution”. This module begins with the search for scientific knowledge and philosophical discussion in the 18th Century and the effect this had on the visual and applied arts. Two events in particular, according to Mary Pratt (1992:15), changed the understanding that the European elite had of themselves and their relation to the rest of the world. The first event was the publishing of a scientifically based biological classificatory system by the Swedish naturalist Carl Linne (known as Linnaeus in Latin), called *Systema Naturae* in 1735⁴. The second was the La Condamine scientific expedition, also in 1735, which set out to determine the exact shape of the earth. Both of these events led to a fascination with collecting and classifying scientific information. Linnaeus in particular created structures of knowledge based on identifying and naming, thus placing the natural world into regulated easily accessible information aimed at the educated European (usually male). The intense public interest they aroused also led to the proliferation of other studies in classifying the world and its peoples during the later 18th Century and the hunt for knowledge, often in unknown lands, became a popular European pastime.

It is important for students to understand that this thirst for knowledge, order and classification resulted in an attempt to control the world through access to learning (an access that was carefully delineated by a scholarly knowledge of Latin). One also cannot imagine the Industrial Revolution with its explosion of scientific knowledge, colonialism, technological innovation and huge social change without the Enlightenment preceding it. The 18th and 19th Centuries are thus the source of the structures that have dominated our learning institutions and which are now being questioned in postmodern paradigms of teaching practice, as mentioned earlier in relation to the field of visual studies and the work of authors such as Mitchell and Hall. This can be identified as the foundation for the hegemony of elitist Western knowledge systems with their linearity, rationality, intellectual logic, patriarchal and colonial domination and the philistinism evidenced in Victorian attitudes towards ‘the other’ thanks to so called ‘scientific’

⁴ This was a descriptive system designed to categorise all plant forms on the planet according to their reproductive parts.

developments like social Darwinism. It later developed into the Modernist conception of a unified history as discussed earlier in this paper.

Of course the Industrial Revolution is also the catalyst for Modernism which is the topic of the third module and covers the historical, social and theoretical contexts and various manifestations of Modernism from its inception in the late 19th Century onwards. This module could also include the shift towards the postmodern condition (from the mid 20th Century) and the resulting manifestations in visual culture.

Wherever possible and appropriate, the lectures on the proposed topics should also include a discussion of the effects and manifestations of each theme within a South African context. For example, the beginnings of colonialism and doctrine of difference that is investigated in the module on 18th Century Enlightenment and the Victorian era, ultimately gave birth to the ideology of apartheid. Such connections must be identified during the course to ensure the relevance of historical material. We had proposed a fourth module covering ecologically aware design and architecture, so called 'green design', but there is so much material to cover in modules two and three that we are considering the necessity for expanding these sections instead and breaking them into three separate modules for the final three terms of 2010.

Having debunked the notion of a diachronic historical approach at the outset it is somewhat ironic that our proposed course appears to develop chronologically and is also based largely in western ideas of linear progression. However the notion of cause and effect has to be taken into consideration when dealing with a history of ideas culminating in modernism which is, ultimately, a history of western logic, reason and knowledge, and which is intrinsically tied to a chronological development. Our suggestion is, therefore, to allow the history of Modernism to develop along suitably modernist lines and rather to concentrate on the offshoots of the postmodern era in third year as thematic self-contained modules.

For example the module on ecological design engages with the later effects of technology on the environment and the introduction of 'green design' to counter this (beginning with 'design for need' and the theories of Buckminster Fuller and Victor Papanek and moving on to more recent theorists in this field). Examples of activist art and design that is aimed specifically at raising awareness about ecological problems (and resulting social problems) can also be covered here. Third year topics might also include African studies, Postmodernism, Feminism, Colonialism / Post-Colonialism and Globalism (which would include hybridity/identity crises etc.). It is not yet clear whether we will be asked to construct a single offering for third year or whether this will remain discipline specific throughout. It will possibly depend on the success of the second year offering and the perception of whether we have managed to cover the knowledge that is considered necessary for each course.

Thus far we have already received some criticism for this proposal. An example of the informational lacunae identified in our suggested course was that certain disciplines required a more technical knowledge of their area of study. In response I would suggest that the discipline specific lectures would be devised in such a way as to cover any specific technical as well as historical knowledge required, as is the case in the present history curriculum. Such criticism arises from a lack of understanding that a historical course arguably needs to engage with broader social issues and to engage with belief systems in an understanding of the visual output of any particular society or time period. Nothing is created in a vacuum but rather as a response to a multitude of influences, so both social *and* technological developments must be taken into consideration when looking at material culture. This is in keeping with the visual studies methodologies outlined as possible strategies earlier.

Having said this, we do understand that one cannot impose a certain curriculum or structure on any course so the formulation of a "one size fits all" offering is fraught with difficulties. The decision to take part in this programme rests with each head of department who is free to decide on appropriate material for their students. We are also attempting to work against an entrenched system of teaching which is based on the Technikon emphasis on practicality and linear history rather than the more theoretical and thematic approach favoured by University systems. We at the University of Johannesburg are officially a 'Comprehensive University' and are still offering both diplomas and degrees. In our theory offering we have therefore tried to steer a middle course by raising the

theoretical input while simultaneously catering to specifics for each discipline. Perhaps we are trying too hard to be all things to all people, but I do think it is possible to cater meaningfully for the requirements of today's students who live in a postmodern world (where everything one needs to know can be 'Googled' instantly) and who are perhaps more inherently fluid in their approach to knowledge than those of us who were taught in the old linear manner.

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Short Biography

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