Chenier 2015/16 GLS Course

Debating Design: Critical Perspectives On Industrial Design

Description:

Ask a designer “what is design?” and there’s a good chance she will answer, “design is everything.” Certainly, design seems omnipresent today. Our phones declare our allegiance to “innovative” firms like Apple and Samsung. Ikea has transformed our homes into galleries of cheap yet stylish home goods. And yet, the history and practice of design weighs heavier than these immediate examples suggest. Design can be political; it can influence our bodies and our environment. Design can reflect and multiply changes culture and it can influence how we think. Design can be utopian, authoritarian, or revolutionary.

Exploring an exciting literature concerned with objects smaller than buildings but larger than atoms, this course introduces students to the history and critique of industrial design since the end of the 19th century. Following a thematic agenda, we will critically engage design by examining the relationships between objects and people. Historical perspectives will predominate, but we will widen our gaze to include theory, technology, and material culture. Through a combination of lectures, seminars, museum visits, and shopping sprees, we will consider how the objects, people, ideas and organizations that constitute the practice and trade of design became a source of optimism and debate in the last one hundred years.

Rather than a comprehensive survey of specific design eras or movements, this course offers students an opportunity to assemble a “toolkit” of theoretical and methodological approaches for thinking about the objects around us. This toolkit will accrue by examining debates surrounding the design and production of objects as well as their consumption. We will ask: Can objects be gendered? Does technology drive history? Does design only serve capitalism? In short: is design political?

Assignments

Midterm - Object Biography:

Craft a 5-page biography of an object. This can be a narrative of its origin, use, or a retelling of your relationship to the object. Consider the ways the object’s form, material, or value (personal, monetary, etc...) influenced or mediated your relationship with it or with others. Consider questions like: Who designed it? Who made it? Is the object sustainable? Is it modern? Streamlined? Digital? Use concepts from our discussion and readings to locate this object within its rich social and cultural context.

Research Essay:

Using both primary and secondary sources compose an essay about an important story, theory, or concept in design. This paper will be 10-12 pages in length and take a clear stance on an issue. Idea papers (Approximately 250 words) will be handed in by week 5 of class. Students will receive writing and editing guidance throughout this process.

Our final session will be an opportunity to show-off your research. Each student may give an informal talk presenting their ideas, discoveries, and challenges encountered while writing their essays. These talks will be bursting with stunning and beautiful slides, piled high with citations and bowl us over with unique, baffling, random, and obscure sources. Presentations will last 10-15 minutes. Videos, live music, and pyrotechnics are welcome.
Assessment

Active participation is crucial to success in this course. Zombies need not apply. Thoughtful participation enhances all aspects of your experience and produces a far more meaningful experience for your peers. There will be reading and research assignments, weekly blog posts and discussion, student presentations, and assisted research periods throughout term. Students are expected to be present for all class meetings. Please email me ASAP if you must miss a class. Chronic lateness and/or more than 2 absences will jeopardize your ability to pass.

Students will be evaluated on the following: Participation/attitude, writing/conceptual work, and progress throughout term. In concrete terms this means: Class participation (30%), the midterm essay (30%), and the final essay (40%).

Reading (Books listed reflect selections. Reading demand will vary, often including an article and a pair of chapters on a given topic)

Week 1: What is Design?

Read Selections:


Suggested: Meikle, Jeffrey. Twentieth century limited : industrial design in America, 1925-1939.


Week 2: Design History: Survey

Read Selections:


Week 3: Theories of Objects: Do objects have politics?

Read Selections:


Week 4: Consumption and Mass Culture

Read Selections:


Week 5: Advertising

Idea papers and bibliographies due!

**Read Selections:**


Week 6: Modernity and Modernism - Midterm papers due!

**Read Selections:**


Week 7: Materials and Commodities

**Read Selections:**


**Week 7: Designers Becoming Professionals**

**Read Selections:**


**Week 9: Design in Business and Manufacturing**

**Read Selections:**


Week 10: Do Users Matter?

Read Selections:


Week 11: Design and the Body

Read Selections:


Week 12: Design and Digits

Read Selections:


Week 13: Long session end of semester paper talk party!

Final Essays due in one week, no exceptions.
...Thanks for playing!