Communication 310

Mass Mediated History: The Vietnam War

Special Topics in Communication
Professor: Thomas J. Conroy

Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from.

- R. Barthes, Mythologies

Course Overview:
This eleven day 31/2 hour course will explore popular cultural texts and their relationship to the ideological debate over the meaning of the Vietnam War. Texts will include the films themselves as well as a sampling of the debates they inspired within various communication theoretical frames and how these debates contrast with and complement a critically acclaimed historical text. In addition, there will be handouts offering different perspectives on the films and oral histories of Vietnam veterans. While viewing films is an important component of the course, there is substantial required reading.

Our examination of the war will include a discussion of the conflict's historical evolution in its colonial manifestation, liberation movement, and the multifaceted American Intervention. Although the genesis of the conflict can be traced to at least the nineteenth century, we will spend most of our time looking at more the more familiar eras which served as grist for the popular culture industry. Therefore, the first three quarters of the course will cover different eras of the American Vietnam War. The last quarter will reflect on the experience of the war veterans, especially as it relates to perceptions of Vietnam veterans' social mobility.

The goal of the course is to analyze how popular culture appropriates history, repackages it, and through marketing that product as an historical representation, creates a popular history that can be used to construct a specific political consensus.

V. Course Policies: Student Expectations Professionalism Policy: Per university policy and classroom etiquette; mobile phones, iPods, etc. must be silenced during all classroom lectures. Acknowledging that some students have “cell phone addiction” students should place phones on designated table Laptops are to be used ONLY for note taking but will not be needed. Those not heeding this rule will be asked to leave the classroom immediately so as to not disrupt the learning environment. Please arrive on time for all class meetings. Students who habitually disturb the class by talking, arriving late, texting, surfing the net etc., and have been warned will suffer a reduction in their participation and final class grade. After one warning, subsequent disturbances will result in a 5% grade for each disturbance – this could result in a failing grade.

Group Projects and Presentation (30%)

Working in a group of three or four, students will detail how meaning was made in a Vietnam War film. They will show clips of the film and, using scholarly essays as evidence, present to the class their view that the film reinforces or refutes information from Young's history text. The student audience members will be required to fill out a short critiques of each presentation. Analysis of films will use semiotic techniques.

Portfolio will include:
An Introductory Essay This short essay will describe the student’s interest in the course and why s/he decided on the sources in the bibliography.

Annotated Bibliography Each student will complete an annotated bibliography of at least 2 scholarly sources related to their project. These can be from group presentation (I will not accept duplicated student work!!) Articles from academic journals, chapters from scholarly books and/or whole books are the acceptable sources. Annotations should be at least a paragraph, but should demonstrate how that source helped you to understand the relationship between the film(s) and history. You must closely read the source to do this!

Daily Log: Each student should take 15-20 minutes a day to reflect on coursework/film/discussion

Personal Reflection: Each portfolio should conclude with a personal essay 500-750 words describing what you learned from the course.

Required Texts:
Suggested text: We will read about 1/3 of this text.

Readings from:
Conroy, T., & Hanson, J. (2008). Constructing America’s war culture: Iraq, media, and images at home. Lanham: Lexington
Films for viewing and analysis may include: China Gate, The Green Berets, The Deer Hunter, Apocalypse Now, Coming Home, Born on the Fourth of July, Uncommon Valor, Rambo II, Ashes and Embers, Cutters Way
For semiotic analysis techniques:
http://www.slideshare.net/MediaStudiesSaltash/semiotics-for-beginners-as-level
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEgxTKUP_WI
Films not shown in their entirety should be viewed by students after class in library or HUB

GRADES
Tests (1) 10%
Group Project 30%
Final Test 20%
Portfolio 30%

NOTE: Since this course is concerned with our poor understanding of history and the media’s role in that confusion, the tests will be particularly enjoyable to those who closely read the history text.