



COMM 411: COMMUNICATION CRITICISM
Fall, 2014
Class #20625
12:30-1:50 TTh
ANN 405

Course Information

It is a truism that we are bombarded by thousands of persuasive messages every day. Politicians lobby for our votes; companies lobby for our dollars; causes of all kinds lobby for our allegiance. Communication criticism is the process of analyzing these messages for the purpose of figuring out *how* they persuade us. It differs from two other forms of “criticism” with which you may be familiar. It is not critique because it does not assume that messages are always merely the effects of ideology and power. It is not criticism in the popular sense of carping or complaining, because it is not merely the expression of personal opinion. The communication critic believes that messages are far richer, more complicated, and more diverse than this, and approaches them as strategic responses to actual, and specific, communicative situations. Thus, communication criticism is a systematic, three-stage process. First, the critic studies the context within which the message was produced, in order to understand how circumstances might have “called forth” (or stimulated creation of) the message while also constraining (or limiting) the kind of message that would be understood as responding appropriately to those conditions. Second, the critic studies the message itself, in order to understand its component parts and how they combine. Finally, the critic “matches” the message to its context, in order to understand how—or whether—the message responded to the demands of the situation, and to evaluate it as a persuasive effort.

In this class, we will explore a vast range of persuasive messages, from some of the most important speeches ever delivered to some of the cleverest advertisements ever devised; from powerful documentary films to popular TV programs; from political cartoons to internet memes. As communication critics, we will seek to understand, interpret, and evaluate these messages as attempts to shape beliefs and attitudes, and motivate action, in particular audiences in specific circumstances.

The main assignment in the course will be a semester-long project devoted to an artifact, or public message, of your choice (with my approval). It will be completed in three stages, and will involve three papers, reflecting the critical process outlined above: Stage 1 will be a description of context (which might be historical or very contemporary, depending on your artifact); Stage 2 will be an analysis of the artifact itself; Stage 3 will be your finished project, which interprets and evaluates your artifact (see Stage 2) as a strategic response to a communicative situation (see Stage 1). Of course, we'll talk about how to complete these stages in much greater detail in class.

Texts

Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. 4th ed. Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2008.

Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs, and Thomas A. Burkholder. *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*. 2nd ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996.

Further details, including a daily syllabus, are under development!