Rhetoric? At its simplest, this is the study of how persuasion happens through argumentation — so it is a study of texts that already exist but also is about how you can think systematically about making your own persuasive texts. But what is persuasion? What is argument? You probably have working definitions of these terms — but we will be discussing what persuasion is and how it happens, and we will be discussing different kinds and levels of argument. There are no absolute definitions of these terms, but we will come up with working definitions for the purposes of class (and discuss the consequences of our definitions).

Everyday texts? Comic books, posters, songs, speeches, websites, movies, cartoons, photographs, zines, poetry, TV Shows, newscasts, charts, graphs, surveys, weblogs, magazine covers, editorials, debates, amusement parks, sculptures... Anything meant to be consumed informally but that has been made to persuade in one way or another.

The Rhetoric of Everyday Texts? There are two levels at which we will be considering how these texts argue to persuade. We will be examining texts in and of themselves, but we will also be looking at how they argue and persuade as part of larger, repetitive, cultural practices. That is, we see and respond to individual texts, but we understand them because they fit into textual patterns we already know (awarely or not). And while individual texts each might seem to have a particular, specific, and one-time rhetorical purpose, they also fit within cultural habits that help us learn (awarely or not) what counts as good behavior and thinking.

And how does this all work in this particular class? We have the invigorating and challenging opportunity of the upcoming presidential election, which — as you have probably experienced — is responsible for a lot of everyday texts: weblogs for presidential candidates (and remember that the incumbent is a candidate as well), posters, buttons, mass but also directed mailings, newscasts, commercials, debates, coffee cups, bumper stickers, yard signs, messages on your phone machine. These various texts are certainly meant to persuade, but not in ways that we are (generally) supposed to question or notice too much.

In this class, we will focus almost exclusively on everyday texts connected to the 2004 presidential election to learn about persuasion and argument. Because this election occurs when the electorate is particularly polarized, this means we are bound to have a pretty passionate class — but our purpose here (if you look at the “goals”
page, you’ll see additional purposes) is not to persuade each other to vote one way or another (although your [and my] allegiances might change as a result of the work we do in class) but is rather to become adept at understanding how everyday texts work to shape our thinking and behaviors. We learn these things both so that we can be stronger in understanding (and perhaps resisting or else perhaps accepting more readily) the arguments we encounter but also so that we can become producers-with-integrity of our own texts.

I am looking forward to this tremendously.

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