course DESCRIPTION

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, magazine articles, graffiti, posters, songs, speeches, websites, movies, cartoons, bumper stickers, photographs, zines, poetry, parodies, TV Shows, newscasts, charts, graphs, surveys, weblogs, magazine covers, editorials, debates, amusement parks, sculptures, coffeemakers... Anything meant to be consumed informally but that has been made to shape your behavior, thinking, or feeling in some particular way.

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? You are going to be choosing many of the examples we use: many days, I am going to ask you to bring to class some text you find that exemplifies what we’ve been discussing. I am counting on you to bring in a wide range of examples. Look again at the list of kinds of texts I mentioned above —

Comic books, magazine articles, graffiti, posters, songs, speeches, websites, movies, cartoons, bumper stickers, photographs, zines, poetry, parodies, TV Shows, newscasts, charts, graphs, surveys, weblogs, magazine covers, editorials, debates, amusement parks, sculptures, coffeemakers
— and note that this is obviously the tip of the iceberg. If you bring to class only webpages you print out, this will make our work less interesting. But if you bring in your roommate’s T-shirt for a candidate in the last election, or a photograph of the Las Vegas wedding chapel where Britney got married the second time, or the coffeemaker you’ve had for the last 10 years that has been designed to make you feel really smart, we will all be enriched.

We will all learn more about what rhetoric is and how it functions to shape us into the people we are in this particular place and time if you bring in examples of the most mundane everyday texts you can imagine.

“...the world is more malleable than you think.” Bono