War and Representation

Fall 2024
COML 150
Tuesdays and Thursdays 10.15 pm to 11.44 pm

Course Instructor:
Anju Parvathy Biju
anjub@sas.upenn.edu

This course will explore representations of war in the 20th and 21st centuries. With the two world wars and multiple violent conflicts after with varying degrees of intensity and technological sophistication, war has become a complex phenomenon that challenges our perception, cognition, emotions, and knowledge. War has been traditionally thought of as a visible eruption of violence. In the last 50 years it has also become increasingly difficult to fix the arenas, motivations, and actors of war, as newer forms of warfare often eschew direct conflict, like in the 'Cold War', the 'War on Terror' and cyberwarfare. War is also a profoundly social and political question, where global inequalities and oppressions result in warfare. The socio-political dimension of war should also make us consider how wars are remembered, how survivors are acknowledged, and what social identities like gender, race, nationality, and religion are invoked or not invoked in discourses of war.

Faced with the radical uncertainty that accompanies war in contemporary times, the artists, filmmakers, and scholars we will read in this course force us to reconsider even seemingly basic definitions of a war story. Keeping this in mind, we will ask: Where does a war narrative happen? Who narrates a war story? How does literature respond to the different kinds of war? How does literature understand and represent the rise of terrorist or ideology war, the philosophical and material consequences of biological and cyber wars, the role of the nuclear state? How do representations of war complicate our understanding of fiction and non-fiction? How do propaganda, nationalist messages, memorials, and xenophobic depictions shape our understanding of war?

The reading list will include novels, short stories, graphic novels, films, and secondary scholarship on war. We will read works from Virginia Woolf, Philip K. Dick, Tan Twang Eng and Mohsin Hamid among others. Students of every level and major are welcome in and encouraged to join this class, regardless of literary experience.

This course will meet in person for Fall 2024 between August 27 (first class) and December 5 (last class). The class will include in-person lectures and interactive sessions that students are expected to attend. There will also be ungraded exercises and activities that will allow students to work together in smaller groups while in class. Overall, students can expect to not only understand the core themes of this course, but also learn models of cultural analysis, critical writing, and oral presentation skills. Preparation for each week's lectures involves reading or watching the primary texts before class. Apart from a few weeks where we tackle longer texts for which students

will have more time, the reading load will be around 80-100 pages per week spread across 2 lectures. All texts will be in English and no prior familiarity with the material is required.

Most readings will be made available on Canvas. You will be informed of the four texts that you have to acquire as physical copies. Some will be placed on course reserve.

Outline of Assignments and Assessments:

Class Participation (30%)

Students are expected to attend class having read the assigned readings for the week and to share their impressions with each other. Class work is meant to be collaborative. This includes listening and responding to what the instructor and fellow students have to say in class.

Weekly reaction post: Students will write a short reaction of less than 250 words to the week's texts. They will have to pick out a key quote or scene from the text that stood out to them, write a brief critical reflection on it, and posit a question that the student would like the class to discuss. This should be posted on the discussion board on Canvas by 9 pm the day before the class meets (Mondays and Wednesdays).

Class Discussion (15%)

During week 2, students will choose one primary literary or cinematic text from the syllabus and sign up for presentation days. The students will meet the instructor the week before the presentation to discuss ideas and get guidance/help if they require it. Each presentation should ideally be between 5 to 7 minutes; students are not expected to use powerpoint. The student will introduce the work, the author/filmmaker, and the historical and geographic context of the respective text.
While students are strongly encouraged to present in class, if due to discomfort or hesitation to speak, someone would rather not present in class, accommodations can be made to reframe this assignment for such a student under exceptional circumstances.

Short Midterm Essay (20%)

Students will choose a theoretical essay that we will have discussed in the classes leading up to this week. They will identify the key words used in the essay and explain them; they will then use that theoretical frame to analyze a literary, cinematic, visual or social text of their choosing from outside the syllabus. 2-3 pages, double spaced. Due October 12th, 9pm as a Word Document submitted on Canvas.

Final Essay Proposal (5%)

Students will submit a written proposal of approximately 250 words for their final essay detailing the primary text they will choose, theoretical frames with which they will analyze it, and the general argument. Due November 18th, 9 pm as a Word Document on Canvas.

Final Essay (30%)

Students are expected to write a 1500-2000 word essay engaging with the themes of the course discussed over the semester. Elaborating on their submitted proposals, they will write a critical essay employing literary analysis or comparison between various texts. A more creative project rewriting a specific text from the syllabus according to the student's own interpretation is also viable with prior consultation with the instructor. Due December 20th, 9pm as a Word Document on Canvas.

There is no final exam for this course.