

Senior Seminar Topics 2023-2024

Jack Davis: “Cheating, Vengeful, Neglected: How the Saw Franchise Challenges the Post 9/11 World of Family Values”

This paper explores the ways The Saw movie franchise challenges the dominant cultural narrative that the family is the only place of safety in an unsafe world by considering how, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, families represented sources of stress, terror, and repression.

Olivia Hahn: “Cycles of Decay and Renewal: Native American Ecological Consciousness and the Use of Fungi to Inspire Hope for Future Generations”

Fungi have been widely explored and used throughout history for their nutritional, medicinal, biotechnological, and regarded spiritual properties. Understanding the use of mushrooms and the subsequent ecological consciousness procured by Native American communities is vital to the various functional possibilities of fungi remediation in the twenty-first century. As the United States begins to adopt a more positive attitude towards mushrooms, the sociological and ethical implications of mycology, the study of mushrooms and fungi, are increasingly useful for finding a meaningful template for modern day remediation. To understand the history, it's equally significant to account for environmental injustices that have been and are still currently perpetuated against these populations since the era of settler colonialism. In acknowledgment of the past and with a specific focus on fungi use, this paper argues for the adoption of these beliefs to overcome current obstacles of neoliberal dominance, impacts of global warming, revitalization of the American Rust Belt, and the capabilities of fungi for the resolution of the widespread mental health crisis in the twenty-first century. In addition, this paper references an ethnographic analysis of Collar City Mushrooms, an established urban vertical mushroom farm and community space in Troy, New York. Use of material from interviews with the owner are applied as a case study to determine how these transformations might be achieved.

Ethan Johnson-LeComte “Capturing ‘Truth’: An Exploration of Photography in the Iraq War”

This thesis deals with photography in the Iraq War of 2003 and its production of distinct themes, trends, and motifs in relation to humanization and dehumanization. At the outset of the Iraq War, the United States sought to visually dehumanize its Iraqi subjects. However, as the war waged on, atrocities like Abu Ghraib ironically served to humanize Iraqis as they were captured on camera. At the same time, American soldiers were dehumanized as these horrors came to light, amplified by the perception of fighting a controversial and imperial war. Later in the conflict, American soldiers were humanized by the repository of soldier-produced photographs which depicted the banality and everyday horror of military life in Iraq. These instances in turn worked to amplify the ethical obscurity of the Iraq War and the photography that preserved it. Through this dynamic, photographic intentions and public reactions to their products reveal the complexity of depicting modern warfare, and the issues of interpretation that arise from often-conflicting narratives. By using the Iraq War as a case study, this work demonstrates the constructive and destructive power of access to myriad photographic perspectives, and the ways in which modern visual coverage of conflict comes to bear on how we perceive it.

Taerin Kim: “Godzilla vs. Giant Robot: Asian American Counter-cultural Development in The Nineties”

The Godzilla Network nurtured and maintained a communal web of communications, as well as offered a space for Asian-American artists to collectively voice their perspectives towards civil institutions and amongst themselves. Giant Robot Magazine synthesized two Asian-American individuals’ curated interests in their own culture, and proved its value within a mass market two decades before the concept of curation for the masses became popular as it has in the contemporary zeitgeist. Both groups were prescient landmarks for Asian American cultural development in the nineties. Although the two

strategically differed, the fact of their existence at all is worthwhile and important to archive and write about so newer cohorts of Asian Americans, whether immigrants or generational, can look back and acknowledge that Asian American culture not only has roots in this country's past, but was built by individuals with passionate fervor in unifying our globally spanning diaspora.

Quinn Magnus: “From the Courts to Culture: Intersectionality and the Transformative Legacy of Serena and Venus Williams”

The multidimensional identities of the Black female athlete create a unique experience in American sports culture. I argue that the careers of Black female tennis players, Venus and Serena Williams, in a traditionally white-dominated sport, have directly changed the landscape of tennis for contemporary and future Black female athletes. The successes of their careers, despite experiencing moments of inherent racism and sexism, have allowed young Black female tennis players, such as Coco Gauff, to experience a new and continually changing world of tennis. Gauff's greater opportunities as a young Black female tennis player become more evident when one compares the treatment of Venus and Serena by the media and public with their treatment of Gauff. This paper documents this shift in public acceptance and aims to answer the question: why has this transformation occurred between 2018 and 2023? Analysis of media such as press conferences, news articles and social media shows that the popularity and influence of Serena and Venus Williams have changed the way that Black female athletes are accepted into tennis culture. Through comparison of the 2018 US Open championship match and Gauff's 2023 US Open first round match, I reveal the striking change in acceptance towards the reaction to Black female athletes in tennis.

Caitlyn Matthews: “Turning Pink into Green: How Barbie's Marketing Strategies Contributed to its Success”

Barbie is a complex blockbuster movie that explores various ideologies in modern American culture while maintaining an entertaining narrative. While Barbie critiques these social systems, it also uses them to generate a larger profit. Through extensive marketing strategies that targeted various gender and age demographics, Barbie became a part of American consumerism in a way that was unusually normal. Moreover, it emphasizes Mattel's role in the production of the film and its ability to recognize trends in American consumerism following periods of economic failure. By examining Mattel's role in the film, the relationship between Hollywood marketing and trends in consumerism, and the various strategies that ensured Barbie was everywhere, I argue Barbie is an anti-consumerist consumerism text that provides a foundation for films that center around revered mass-produced American goods.

Ryan Tineo: "Peoples Temple, Jim Jones, and the Dystopian Consequences of Utopian Schemes"

I'm sure many of us have heard of the phrase, "Drinking the Kool-Aid." It's quite a common one; however, its exact origins represent much more than a quick-witted response or reaction. This phrase signifies immense sorrow, fallen dreams, and a failure at utopian redemption for those whom the phrase references: the deceased members of Peoples Temple. For the purposes of this paper, I centered the narratives of Peoples Temple members to uphold the notion that the Temple was an attractive escape for marginalized communities being intimately impacted by a racially divided and disenfranchised America. Jim Jones and his Temple offered Black Americans a place of solace, an avenue for utopian redemption free from the jurisdictions and constraints of American society. Despite the fact that Temple members followed Jones to their deaths, they were more active agents in their own fatalities than just the hopeless dupes of a controlling cult figure. And even though the story of Peoples Temple remains misrepresented, underdeveloped, and unexplained, their story is one that deserves to be brought into the fold.