The Atomic Bomb: Experience, History, Memory

Course Number: EAS 430/HIS 400

Term: Fall 1995

Instructor: Gerald Figal

Institution: Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon

Course manifesto

With the recent 50th year anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, public discussion of the historical, political, social, moral, and scientific impact of this momentous event has reached a high pitch. Whether in commemoration events for war veterans, museum displays for public viewing, television documentaries, memoirs and literature by bomb survivors, or scholarly reassessments by historians, the topic has been rife with controversy that reveals many intersecting layers of meaning emanating from various viewpoints. The primary task of this reading colloquium is to trace out to the greatest extent possible these layers of meaning and varying viewpoints within the historical perspective that is afforded us. It is my hope that such a study will furnish us all with an intelligent, articulate, and informed historical understanding of the making, use, and postwar consequences of the atomic bomb as well as a basis from which to contemplate its meaning and impact for each of us in our everyday lives today. Ultimately, we should be able to exit this course with a deeper and more engaged understanding of the forces that culminated in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings as well as of the unprecedented changes in human history which arose in their aftermath.

Course work

The bulk of the work for this course consists of short response writings, active class discussion, netsurfing, and presentations based on close and careful readings of course materials which cover historical studies, eyewitness accounts, literature, film, essays, museums, and currentmedia coverage of 50th year commemoration events. You are required to design a plan for a historical museum exhibit on the bomb to be presented during the last week of class. In addition, you will all be involved with researching and annotating atomic bomb-related World Wide Web sites for the WWW Hiroshima Archive Project recently initiated by Mayu Tsuruya and yours truly in conjunction with Lewis & Clark College InfoTech. There are no exams. Since intensive reading and group discussion are the heart and soul of any colloquium, diligent preparation of readings, punctual attendance, and quality participation in class
are of the essence. That means inadequate preparation, in-class lethargy, tardiness, and unexcused absences will reflect negatively in your final grade.

Course materials

Required Books:
Duras, Marguerite. Hiroshima Mon Amour
Goodman, David. After Apocalypse: Four Japanese Plays of Hiroshima and Nagasaki
Lifton & Mitchell, Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial
Lindee, M. Susan. Suffering Made Real: American Science and the Survivors at Hiroshima
Minear, Richard (ed.) Hiroshima: Three Witnesses
Nakazawa, Keiji. Barefoot Gen (volumes 1 and 2)
Nobile, Philip (ed.) Judgment at the Smithsonian
Sherwin, Martin. A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and the Origins of the Arms Race
Copy of Spring issue (v.19, no. 2) of Diplomatic History (Special on Hiroshima)

Recommended Book:
Treat, John. Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb

Reserved Readings (in Watzek)
An assortment of films shown both during and outside of scheduled class time.

Atomic Bomb-related sites on the World Wide Web

The Atomic Bomb: Experience, History, Memory

Trajectory of Readings (subject to deviations)

Unit I: Making Meanings of the Making & Dropping of the Bomb

9/7 Intro: Debating the bomb after 50 years: history & commemoration at odds
reading: Excerpts on Enola Gay exhibit (handout)
ABC Special: Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped (Peter Jennings)

9/11 The Manhattan Project: uneasy alliance of science, politics, and military
reading: A World Destroyed, Introductions; section I

9/14 Wartime plotting for postwar nuclear power
reading: A World Destroyed, section II
film: The Atomic Cafe (TBA)
9/18 Hot start to Cold War
reading: A World Destroyed, section III
9/21 film: The Day After Trinity (in class)
9/25 The Hiroshima narrative in American consciousness
reading: Hiroshima in America, Introduction and part I
9/28 reading: Hiroshima in America, part II
10/2 reading: Hiroshima in America, part III
10/5 reading: Hiroshima in America, part IV
film: Hiroshima/Nagasaki, August 1945=20

Unit II: Recording the Extraordinary: Atomic Art, Literature, and Theatre
10/9 The problems of writing the unimaginable
reading: Writing Ground Zero (pp. 1-81)
10/12 Bearing witness, unbearably
reading: Hara, Summer Flowers (Hiroshima: Three Witnesses)
10/16 Communal death/Death in life
reading: Ota, City of Corpses (Hiroshima: Three Witnesses)
film: Black Rain (TBA)
10/19 Impact beyond prose: atomic bomb poetry
reading: Toge, Poems of the Atomic Bomb (Hiroshima: Three Witnesses)
10/23 Impact beyond words: atomic bomb art
reading: "The Hiroshima Murals of Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi: A Note" (Hiroshima: Three Witnesses)
Dower, "Japanese Artists and the Atomic Bomb"
10/26 Dead serious comics
reading: Barefoot Gen, volumes 1 & 2 (all)
10/30 Staging atomic bomb experience & memory 1
reading: The Island (in After Apocalypse)

11/2 Staging atomic bomb experience & memory 2
reading: The Head of Mary (in After Apocalypse)

11/6 Staging atomic bomb experience & memory 3
reading: The Elephant (in After Apocalypse)

11/9 Post atomic (in)humanity
reading: Hiroshima, Mon Amour
film: Hiroshima, Mon Amour

Unit III: Postwar Fallout: science & public memory after the bomb

11/13 "This is only a test. . .": survivor surveys and atomic testing in the postwar world
reading: Suffering Made Real, One

11/16 reading: Suffering Made Real, Two

11/20 reading: Suffering Made Real, Three
film: Radio Bikini

11/27 Whose experience? Whose history? Whose memory?
reading: selections from Diplomatic History

11/30 reading: Nobile, "On the Steps of the Smithsonian" (in Judgment)

12/4 reading: "The Crossroads" (original Enola Gay script in Judgment)

12/7 reading: Berstein, "The Struggle Over History" (in Judgment)

12/11 Design Your Own Atomic Bomb Museum Display
presentation/discussion of your plans and rationale for an atomic bomb exhibit
bonus film: Dr Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb