May 18th, 9:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Capturing the Moment: A Rhetorical Analysis of World War II Celebration

Kylie Wagar
Western Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/scholwk
Part of the Higher Education Commons


This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Events at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholars Week by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.
CAPTURING THE MOMENT: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF WORLD WAR II CELEBRATION

To what extent are images from the 1940s romanticized, celebrated and replicated in reflection of remembrance of the World War II era?

By: Kylie Wagar, Communication Studies

ABSTRACT

The iconic image V-J Day in Times Square is nationally remembered for the celebration of the end of World War II. Focusing on the archival collection Victory and Peace from the National Archives, this research demonstrates a disconnection in American perceptions and the reality of culture through iconic images. Specifically I investigate the extent to which images from the 1940s romanticized, celebrated and replicated in reflection of remembrance of the World War II era. These replications do not properly reflect the true events in 1945, but rather the idea that many would like to take away from this era. The images I refer to throughout this research regarding a sudden kiss contributes to this generation’s nostalgia that comes from World War II phenomena. The relevance that this paper has to this contemporary moment contributes to the ideas of sexism, dominant American culture and the freedom of expression.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War II was one of the most destructive wars that our nation has been involved in (History Channel). At this time, the U.S. economy was falling, unemployment was at an all-time high, and criticism all over the world were in the midst of war (‘History WWII Minutes’). World War II took the lives of over 35 million people altogether with some deaths not recorded, making it one of the largest conflicts across seas ever (“World War II”). World War II created a divide in nations with Germany and Japan representing the Axis powers and America and Britain comprising the Allied powers (“Nation Archives”). One of the most popular images to come from the 1940s was the image of the sailor and the nurse entwined into a passionate kiss. Alfred Eisenstaedt was a German-American photographer. His work granted him a staff position for Life Magazine and is praised for his skill of “candid” photography. “Then suddenly, in a flash, I saw something white being grabbed,” Eisenstaedt recounted. “I turned around and clipped the moment the nurse tossed the sailor aboard” (Eisenstaedt, 1979).

LITERATURE REVIEW

At a simple denotational level, however, there are questions about Franklin’s Ground Zero Spirit that cannot be answered without association to Rosenthal’s photograph from two days ago. For example, abstracting ourselves from immediate history, how do we know, on the basis of the photograph alone, that the three firefighters are raising the flag?” (Helmers and Hill, 9). This passage from Hills and Helmer references the fact that one image cannot exist without the other; therefore giving it the iconic and remembrance quality. Edwards also indulges in the way that these images contribute to the overall national memory of patriotism. “The resonance of a news photo showing firefighters raising a flag over the ruins of the World Trade Center in 2002 is due, at least in part, to a thematic resemblance to the image of a flag being raised over the scene of a protracted and difficult battle in the war with Japan. Both photographs evoke values of collective effort and victory over threat, with the 2002 photo obviously building on the established rhetorical framework of its 1945 predecessor” (Edwards, 179).

CLOSE READ

The familiarity of the image can be related to today’s relevant popular culture. Most people have seen this photo, whether it be in poster form or online. The replication of this image is strong not only in modern media outlets, but also through the statue that stands in San Diego, California. Titled Unconditional Surrender, the statue is a replication of Eisenstaedt’s iconic image. Second Johnson sculpted this statue in 2005, but it isn’t certain whether or not it is based off Eisenstaedt’s or Jorgenson’s image. Depending on the angle one is standing, both replications of images are present. For many families, mine included, family photos are taken next to this iconic duo. Without knowledge of the actual time period or the fact that these two people didn’t know each other; the romantic qualities of the image-turned-statue leave can leave viewers in awe.

METHODS

The analysis for the images of Victory and Peace will derive from the comparison of 1940s images with replications produced in the 21st century. I am choosing to compare V-J Day in Times Square with the images from the National Archives and the replication through statues, internet findings and poster sales and production of the image V-J Day in Times Square in popular culture, and how these contribue to the overall narrative of the World War II era. I conduct a close read of both V-J Day in Times Square and New York City Celebrating the Surrender of Japan. The close read of each photo will involve taking what is seen within the image and translate that into a visual rhetoric perspective rather than using these photos in history, but an history (Punsegar, 199).

DISCUSSION

The analysis for this paper demonstrates a disconnection in American perceptions and the reality of culture through iconic images. Specifically I investigate the extent to which images from the 1940s romanticized, celebrated and replicated in reflection of remembrance of the World War II era. These replications do not properly reflect the true events in 1945, but rather the idea that many would like to take away from this era. The images I refer to throughout this research regarding a sudden kiss contributes to this generation’s nostalgia that comes from World War II phenomena. The relevance that this paper has to this contemporary moment contributes to the ideas of sexism, dominant American culture and the freedom of expression.