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Deconstructing NFL Films' *They Call It Pro Football*

Summary and Rationale for Assignment

COMS 339 (Masculinity in Film) is a course that takes a feminist perspective to analyze portrayals of sex and gender in film with a particular emphasis on how men and masculinity can be represented. The focus is on how films construct different notions of gender, how films can be read in different ways, and to what social uses film portrayals may be put. The course includes lectures on film criticism, gender theory, and theories of representation, as well as screenings and discussion.

In this course I utilize NFL Films' first picture, *They Call It Pro Football* (Sabol, 1966), to examine documentary constructions of reality and to help students understand what the film reveals to us about the world and how we as viewers respond to the film as it relates to our lives.

Prior to class, students prepare by reading about the construction of gender identity (Bem, 1993) and the centrality of the male body image in pro football (Morse, 2003). During lecture, I first outline how pro football's materialization on television effectively engaged emerging domestic viewing patterns and rituals. Second, I define the ways documentary films engage the world via representation. Third, I point out that Sabol's vision was the product of a particular kind of technological and corporate organization based on sponsored film's importance as a means of branding a particular product. Fourth, I introduce issues pertinent to masculinity, militarization, nationalism, and public health for students to consider as they watch the film. After screening the film, I present discussion prompts:

- 1) How do you read this film? How might Morse read this film?
- 2) How is masculinity constructed?
- 3) What are the relationships between sport (specifically pro football) and development of masculine identities?
- 4) In a debate on football, journalist Malcolm Gladwell argues, "As long as the risks are explicit, the players are warned, and those injured properly compensated, then I'm not sure we can stop people from playing. A better question is whether it is ethical to WATCH football. That's a harder question" (Waldman, 2012). Do you agree or disagree with Gladwell? Is it ethical to "WATCH" football?

As an assignment, students write a three-page reaction paper in response to one (or more) of these questions. To begin the class in which the paper is due, students identify a half page worth of material from their paper representative of their strongest work and proceed to frame, read/perform, and briefly expand on, their excerpt for the class.

Overall, this approach to the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality and the military-sport-media nexus forces students to consider the social construction of manhood and how masculine identities vary historically and cross-culturally, makes students confront sport media and its

valorization of particular themes and ideas, and finally, compels students to produce and evaluate claims concerning *They Call It Pro Football* (Sabol, 1966).

Student Reactions:

Aaron Budihas, sophomore WGST major: “Televised football, in its endeavor to achieve masculine success through the use of a machine-like body, focuses its attention on the individual, thus creating value for independence and self-reliance.”

Kelsey Engbrecht, senior COMS major: “Phrases like “bolt of lightning,” “the speed and the fury,” “swift,” and “fierce” emphasize again the physicality of the players. The phrases, “no-man’s land,” “he’s on the attack,” and “search and destroy” allude to war and the concepts of duty, power, and valor. The descriptors, “racehorse halfback,” “locomotive fullback,” and “the face of the tiger” simultaneously mechanize and animalize the players, alluding to concepts of dehumanization, mechanical power, and animalistic drive.”

Henry Jungbauer, sophomore MATH major: “Effectively using violence and brute force to glorify a sport as a game of war, as *They Call It Pro Football* does, comes at a cost. But what is the cost? What is at stake in accepting the equalization of football and war? The safety of the players, present and future, is at stake.”

Charlotte Page, senior NURS major: “Now it hard for me to say that watching professional football is unethical, for what does that say about those that I know and love who watch the sport? Despite these thoughts, I do believe on some level watching professional football is unethical. Those who watch and defend the ethics of the sport should first, like I have, take time to understand their relationship with the sport through time, and decide for themselves whether the defense they have constructed in honor of professional football is strong enough to cave under this ethical dilemma.”

Readings:

Bem, S.L. (1993). *The lenses of gender*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Morse, M. (2003). Sport on television: Replay and display. In T. Miller (Ed.), *Television: Critical concepts in media and cultural studies, vol. 2* (pp. 376-398). New York: Routledge.

Sabol, S. (1966). *They call it pro football*. Mount Laurel, NJ: NFL Films.

Waldman, K. (2012). Head games. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/intelligence_squared/2012/04/the_next_slate_intelligence_squared_debate_is_may_8_why_malcolm_gladwell_thinks_we_should_ban_college_football_.html.

Notes on Contributor

Thomas C. Johnson is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Luther College. He teaches courses in the areas of critical media studies and media production. He received his PhD and MA in Communication Studies from the University of Minnesota and his BA in Communication from Saint John's University.