

### Professor Piccolo's Seminar

The essays in this year's seminar focused primarily on topics related to American history and culture, with many focusing on film and film-related issues. Students researched and wrote about a variety of issues related to topics ranging from race, gender, and religion to the subtext of Iron Man and the iconic power of the island of Alcatraz.

Rika Kubota wrote about how the portrayal of women in American musical movies evolved over time. By examining representative movies from the 1920s to the early 21st century, Rika showed how historical and cultural events such as the Great Depression, World War Two, and the Women's Rights movement had an impact on the roles women played in these films. Hana Ishikawa focused on the growing presence of black actors and directors in American film and the changing representation of black characters in movies. Hana traces the presence and representation of black Americans in American films from "blackface" in *The Jazz Singer* and black stereotypes in *Gone with the Wind* to recent films such as *Marvel's Black Panther*. Special attention is given in the essay to the work and reputation of the actor Sidney Poitier in the history of American film. Keitaro Yatsuda also wrote about race in American film history; his focus, however, was on the phenomena of "yellow face" and "whitewashing" regarding representation of Asian characters and the available roles for Asian actors in American films.

Keitaro discusses movies such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Ghost in the Shell* and gives extended attention to the "Charlie Chan" series of films in the 1930s and '40s. And Reo Iwai chose the Marvel "Iron Man" movies, particularly *Iron Man 3*, as his topic. In his essay he shows how the story of Tony Stark ("Iron Man") can be read as a story of addiction and rehabilitation. Reo also notes how the personal struggles of the actor, Robert Downey Jr., add an extra layer of poignancy to his portrayal of Iron Man. Minami Sato chose a much different tack and did a cross-cultural study of the role of religion in American and Japanese public life. Minami writes that, when compared with a country such as the United States, religion is not a conspicuous problem. This is due not to Japan's being religious or nonreligious, she argue, but to its being "irreligious".

Finally, the award for Best Graduation Essay for 2018 goes to Tomone Kondo for her essay, "Alcatraz Island: The Most Famous Prison in the World". Tomone begins with a detailed tracing of Alcatraz's evolution from military fortress to notorious prison to tourist destination. She goes on to show how and why Alcatraz's notoriety led to its status as a pop culture icon, as evidenced by its role in such movies as *The Birdman of Alcatraz*, *The Rock*, and *Big Hero 6*.