

Teaching the History of War with a Smelly Rubber Gas Mask

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I keep my Second World War relics in my office, because my wife finds them odd and tacky, and (quite reasonably) does not want them adorning the walls of our home. Three metal helmets hang next to my office door, some wartime propaganda posters are pinned above my desk, and high on a shelf in its original cardboard box sits a Second World War ‘General Civilian Respirator’.



Figure 1. Gas Masks by Sara Goldsmith. Source: Flickr

This is not the gas mask I use in my teaching. Second World War gas masks sometimes contain asbestos, so I can't use it in handling sessions. It sits on its shelf in a sealed plastic bag. For classes on the material culture of modern conflict I use a Soviet GP5 gas mask, that usually hangs on a hook next to my desk looking spooky.

The GP5 is a sinister, goggle-eyed mask. The rubber face piece covers most of the head and tucks behind the ears, and the round eye-pieces have metal rings around them. The round green metal filter screws on to a threaded nozzle in front of the mouth. These Cold-War era masks are quite common in militaria markets and army surplus stores. I bought mine at an airshow for £7, because I was writing an article on gas masks, and I thought it would be good research to wear one for a while.

The gas mask is good to teach with. It's a striking object, tactile, and instantly recognisable. I pass it round the classroom and encourage students to try it on. Most give it a try, taking off glasses and stretching the thin rubber over their heads. Few can stand wearing it for more than a few seconds. The rubber clings to the skin and pulls at your hair, the eyepieces mist up, and it's hard to breathe through the filter nozzle. Sounds are distorted and your voice buzzes inside the mask. There's an overwhelming smell of hot rubber and sweat. The whole experience is odd and unpleasant, an attack on the senses.

When the students have tried the mask on, I begin to ask questions. Can you imagine wearing this for 24 hours? Can you imagine running, driving, fighting for your life? The class covers material culture of war from all perspectives, not only the combatants. I ask, could you imagine making a small child wear this? How would you teach them that their life depends on it? How would you teach them not to be afraid of you in your mask?

Teaching with a gas mask creates empathy with people in war, from the First World War to military and civil conflicts around the world today. Through the experience of putting on and wearing a mask, students can better imagine the realities of a gas attack, the stumbling sensory deprivation and growing sense of panic. In the process, they are also learning the power of an artefact to evoke a strong sensory and emotional response.

I use the gas mask most effectively to teach the connections between material culture, memory, and the senses. Students who have worn or handled the mask are better equipped to grasp the sensory power of the object. They read oral histories where the smell of gas masks and their rubbery feeling against the face become the focus of stories of wartime life. In the process, they encounter the idea that the different senses form powerful memories, and that the same smells and tastes can trigger those memories in powerful and often unexpected ways.

One of the most interesting challenges of teaching with a gas mask is the wide range of associations that comes with it. Gas masks are symbols of protest, but also of policing and the military. They are symbols of air pollution, of bad smells. They appear in music videos, sculpture, graffiti art, and Doctor Who. They are used to take drugs or to play out sexual fetishes. These free-floating associations make them rich objects to think with, but it sometimes makes it difficult to pin them down to one meaning, one historical significance.

I use a whole range of objects in my teaching. Pieces of steel shrapnel, artworks made from artillery shell-cases, pieces of barbed wire, military badges and buttons, and pieces of crashed aircraft. Handling objects in the classroom is a powerful experience, even for the graduate students I mostly teach. Handling creates a sense of connection with historical events and people, providing a material reality or foundation for otherwise abstract ideas. The gas mask, more than any of these objects, has the power to evoke the past through its overwhelming sensory barrage of touch, smell, sight and sound. Personally, I can't bear to wear it at all.