

Myth and Mythology of the American West
E 324/AMS322
Summer 2008
M W 6PM – 8:30PM
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Contact Information:

Office Hours: By appointment. Please contact me by e-mail.

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Course Concept:

This course explores the development of the mythology of the American West. The guiding concept for the course comes from Fred Erisman's Introduction to *Unbridled Spirits: Short Fiction about Women in the Old West*.*

We would be lost without our myths. In a world that for generations has only become more complex, contradictory, and confusing, myths give us a core of certainty to cling to, for they are the mechanisms by which we interpret and dramatize the dominant, unifying values of our culture.

This course explores those mechanisms, examining through Hollywood Westerns, secondary literature, primary sources and short stories the "unifying values" so central to the American concept of self. The point is not to simply catalog historical inaccuracies, though that is part of the process. Rather, the point is to explore what the U.S. as a culture needs to believe about itself and why, and to ask what must be glossed over, re-written or forgotten in order to maintain those myths.

* Judy Alter and A. T. Row, editors. TCU Press: Fort Worth, 1994.

Course Structure

The course is divided into 4 main sections: Introduction, Expansion, Conflict and Looking Back. During the introduction, students are exposed to the basics of film studies, the concepts of mythology and how they operate in a culture, and the basic motifs that power the western as a genre. Class discussion will focus on building a foundation of ideas, concepts and vocabulary which become the tools for illuminating texts.

The next section examines non-aboriginal expansion into the frontier, including the role played by the Intercontinental Railroad. The focus in this section is on the establishing of the American frontier and the accompanying social constructs that come out of this period, such as ideals of egalitarianism and models of justice.

Expansion into the West leads to conflict, the focus of the third section of the course. We will explore anti-Chinese sentiment, the role the Civil War played in aboriginal politics and movements and the way in which barbed wire pitted homesteaders against free-ranging cattlemen.

Ever since the closing of the frontier, as a culture, we have always evinced tremendous nostalgia for what appears to be a simpler way of life. This final section of the course examines the phenomenon of nostalgia, in particular which aspects of experience must be erased in order for nostalgia to function. The distance of time allows also for the emergence of satire, another form of nostalgia. As part of a looking-back, we will screen *Shanghai Noon*, which is both a satire of and homage to the genre. An important question here is what in the mythology of the American West is a “safe” target for satire and what is still “sacred.”

Course Materials:

All assignments must be completed prior to the class meeting for which they are assigned. See calendar for details.

Films: All films will be on reserve. While some films are available for rental, some will be hard to find.

Covered Wagon

Bonanza: Day of Reckoning

Fistful of Dollars

Shane

The Bronze Buckaroo

Harlem Rides the Range

Stagecoach

Battle of Elderbrush Gulch

Thousand Pieces of Gold

The Outlaw Josey Wales

Lonely Are the Brave

Shanghai Noon

Tombstone

Texts: Articles and stories can be found on the course Blackboard site. Most are available on-line from alternative sources.

Introduction to *Unbridled Spirits*, handout

“The Western (Genre and Movie),” Douglas Pye

“*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films,” John Cawelti

“Feminism and the Limits of Genre,” Brett Westbrook

The Portable Western Reader, William Kittredge, ed., the following stories:

“The Last Running,” “Carrion Spring,” “Take My Saddle from the Wall” “The Gifts of the Deer,” and “Letters from a Woman Homesteader”

Roger D. Hardaway, “African-American Cowboys on the Western Frontier,” *Negro*

History Bulletin, Jan-Dec 2001 p27(6)

T. Stiles, “Buffalo Soldiers,” *Smithsonian*, Dec 1998 p82(1)

“Trails of Blood,”
“The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping,
1882-1924,” Erika Lee

Recommended:

Blithe Spirits, Fred Erisman, ed.
The Great Train Robbery

Class Attendance

Attendance, along with preparation, is mandatory as participation is an essential aspect of the course. Late arrivals and early departures count the same as an absence. Students should also realize that class discussion shapes exam questions, so it is strongly recommended that students who must miss class get the notes from a fellow student.

Graded Assignments

The course requires 2, in-class essay exams and 1 short paper:

Exams	40%
Paper	35%
<u>Participation</u>	<u>25%</u>
TOTAL	100%

Services for Students with Disabilities Statement

“Any student with a documented disability (physical or cognitive) who requires academic accommodations should contact the Services for Students with Disabilities area of the Office of the Dean of Students at 471-6259 (voice) or 471-4641 (TTY for users who are deaf or hard of hearing) as soon as possible to request an official letter outlining authorized accommodations.” (From the *SSD Faculty and Staff Guide*)

Scholastic Dishonesty Statement

In promoting a high standard of academic integrity, the University broadly defines scholastic dishonesty—basically, all conduct that violates this standard, including *any act designed to give an unfair or undeserved academic advantage*, such as:

- Cheating
- Plagiarism
- Unauthorized Collaboration
- Collusion
- Falsifying Academic Records
- Misrepresenting Facts (e.g., providing false information to postpone an exam, obtain an extended deadline for an assignment, or even gain an unearned financial benefit)
- Any other acts (or attempted acts) that violate the basic standard of academic integrity (e.g., multiple submissions—submitting essentially the same written assignment for two courses without authorization to do so)

Several types of scholastic dishonesty—unauthorized collaboration, plagiarism, and multiple submissions—are discussed in more detail on the UEX Web site at <http://www.utexas.edu/cee/uex/classroom/policies/index.php?page=sdishonesty>. This site helps to correct common misperceptions about these particular offenses and also suggests ways to avoid committing them. If you have any concerns at all, please see the instructor *before* handing in an assignment.

For the University's official definition of scholastic dishonesty, see Section 11-802, Institutional Rules on Student Services:

Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. Since such dishonesty harms the individual, all students, and the integrity of the University, policies on scholastic dishonesty will be strictly enforced. For further information please visit the Student Judicial Services Web site: <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs>.

Please take a moment to visit the UEX Web site, also. You can review all the UEX and classroom course policies under the Policies link in the Classroom column.

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The calendar is subject to change. Changes are discussed in class and posted on Announcements section of Blackboard. Students are responsible for staying current with those changes. Readings and movies are due on the indicated date. Some of the films are available at video outlets such as Vulcan Video. Others, such as *Covered Wagon* and *Bonanza* will be harder to come by. Allot enough time to get to the reserves and view the films. Students should come to every class prepared for discussion.

Reading/Screening
Discussion/Assignment

INTRODUCTION

Week 1

June 11
West

(in class) *Great Train Robbery*

iconography of the

cultural function of
myths

the Hollywood

Western

basic movie concepts

Week 2

June 16	Introduction to <i>Unbridled Spirits</i> (handout) <i>Covered Wagon</i> (on reserve) artists	early images Remington and other early consumers of the “West” as product
June 18	<i>Bonanza</i> “The Western (Genre and Movie)” “Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films”	TV westerns genre criticism Romanticism
<u>Week 3</u>		
June 23	<i>Fistful of Dollars</i> (on reserve) “Feminism and the Limits of Genre” (PDF on Blackboard)	revisionist Westerns genre criticism
EXPANSION		
June 25	“Letters from a Woman Homesteader” “Carrion Spring,” “The Walking Woman” <i>Shane</i>	frontier values entrepreneurship intra-Anglo conflict warrior king
<u>Week 4</u>		
June 30	“African-American Cowboys on the Western Frontier” Buffalo Soldier article film TBA	
July 2	Film TBA Exam review (Intro and Expansion) Discuss paper topics	
<u>Week 5</u>		
July 7		Exam I
July 9	No class; work on paper	
CONFLICT		
<u>Week 6</u>		
July 14	<i>Stagecoach</i> <i>Battle of Elderbush Gulch</i> West	law v justice, figures of the
July 16	<i>1000 Pieces of Gold</i>	Chinese
exclusion	“Chinese Exclusion, Photography, and the Development	

of U.S. Immigration Policy
anti-political cartoons

Week 7

July 21

The Outlaw Josey Wales

Paper due
Oral
presentations

NOSTALGIA

July 23

“The Last Running”
“Take My Saddle from the Wall”
“Gifts of the Deer”

nostalgia
cultural taboos

Week 8

July 28
Western

Lonely Are the Brave

values of the

in conflict
with
civilization

July 30

Shanghai Noon
Tombstone

homage to the
Western

FINALS

Aug 6

Conflict and Nostalgia

Exam II