

ARTS/FILM 432 001 F23

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Film 432: The Western Film Genre

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Fall 2023/ Syllabus

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Instructor: Brian Huberman

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

Time: Tuesday 7-9:50pm

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

Location: Sewall Hall 301

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

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Film 432: Film Genre The Western invites the student to an experience of American history, myth, poetry, art and cinema. As the concerns of contemporary society shift, the course is always evolving, tracking the changes in the genre. From the open racism of D.W. Griffith's ***Battle of Elderbrush Gulch* (1913)** to Quentin Tarantino's bloodbath reconciliation of white and black in his ***The Hateful Eight* (2015)**, students examine the many faces of the American psyche. When I began teaching the western I was guided by my readings of Joseph Campbell and Levi Strauss that opened up the mythic dimension of the films. Campbell's "journey of the hero" in particular gave greater meaning to the purpose of the alienated, outlaw cowboy who returns from his adventure to rescue the helpless society as in films like George Stevens' *Shane* and Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*.

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My objective in this course is to show students how the characters and plots are organized to address the social structures that guide the behavior of individuals. A former student, Dr. Kirsten Day wrote, “I was an Ancient Mediterranean Civilizations major and to be honest I took your class as ‘fun’”. She goes on to say that she is now Chair of a Classics Department and that, “Encountering ***The Searchers*** in your Western film class led me to present at my first conference on that film as a Western *odyssey*”.

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During the 70s and 80s the western genre went into decline, in part due to protests against the Vietnam War. There is a direct correlation between the My Lai massacre in 1968 and the western films that followed. In ***Soldier Blue*** and ***Little Big Man***, America is on the wrong side of history. The progressive myth of history that was at the core of early westerns was now being attacked as a disguise for American Imperial aggression. When independent filmmaker Jim Jarmusch in 1992 appropriates the western genre it has become a topic for experimental filmmaking. “If death serves as the most prevalent theme in all Western films, then perhaps Jim Jarmusch’s ***Dead Man*** would be better understood as quintessentially Western rather than anti-western”, writes film student Trey Ferguson. He continues, “Jarmusch’s ironic, seemingly “anti-”take on the genre effectively disarms the Western of all its baggage to get to the core of what it is really about: the endless cycle of birth and death in America.” The western has been unmasked and shown itself to be a transgressive form encouraging outlawry, non-conformism and banditry. The wholesome rugged individual of the frontier myth has been replaced by a dead man. In his paper Ferguson writes, “In the end it is all for naught. The dead man’s fate is to wander the spirit world between the winds recalling a scene from John Ford’s ***The Searchers***,” where Wayne shoots out the eyes of a dead Indian. “Ain’t got no eyes, he can’t enter the spirit-land,” says Wayne. “He has to wander forever between the winds.” Ferguson concludes, “In Jarmusch’s hands this is not progress at all, but Hell.”

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Required Readings

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

The Frontier Thesis. Valid Interpretation of American History? R.A. Billington

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

Regeneration Through Violence, Richard Slotkin

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Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West, Cormac McCarthy

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Course Requirements

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

Regular class attendance & participation

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1st paper due Sept 26 (5-7 pages) = 30% of grade

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2nd paper due Dec 4 (8-10 pages) = 40%

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One Test Oct 31 = 30%

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Please note that this syllabus is a guide and that there may be changes made during the course. Any student with a documented disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to speak with me during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will remain confidential. Students with disabilities will need to also contact Disability Support Services in the Ley Student Center.

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Class Schedule

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Class 1: Aug 22 "What is a western?"

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In the beginning. America enters the twentieth century minus a frontier but with a new industry called silent movies.

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What is a film genre and why is it important? The so-called Western film genre satisfies a cultural need for historical identity and order. According to Judith Wright, "Genre films have been defined as pure myth, as well made plays, and as psychodramas...these films came into being and were financially successful because they temporarily relieved the fears aroused by a recognition of social and political conflicts...Genre films produce satisfaction rather than action, pity and fear rather than revolt...they throw a sop to oppressed groups who, because they are unorganized and therefore afraid to act, eagerly accept the genre film's absurd solutions to economic and social conflicts."

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Screening: The Great Train Robbery, 1903. Edwin Porter

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Readings:

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The idea of genre in the American cinema, Buscombe

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Class 2: Aug 29 The Captivity Narrative

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In 1675 in New England, Mary Rowlandson was taken prisoner during a bloody Indian conflict called King Philip's War. Her Puritan faith demanded that she passively accept her condition and pray for God's redemption. Her account of her trials is considered the earliest American narrative and has never been out of print since first published in 1682. The captivity narrative is according to Richard Slotkin a defining American tale born of our experience of the wilderness.

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Screenings:

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

Battle at Elderbrush Gulch, 1913. D.W.Griffith

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The Wind, 1928. Victor Seastrom

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Reading: *A true history of the capture & restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

Regeneration through violence, Slotkin. Chapters 4 & 5

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Class 3: Sept 5 ' *The Savage Eucharist.*' The Indian fighter narrative.

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In contrast to the passivity of the captive narrative, the white male hunter/hero of the Indian fighter narrative actively welcomes the embrace of "savage" wilderness forces. The goal of the Indian fighter is to expand the boundary of civilization while remaining free of the taint of the wilderness. Benjamin Church authored the first Indian fighter narrative during King Philip's War. A line of similar accounts has carried on the tradition of the Indian Fighter hero from Daniel Boone through Davy Crockett, Teddy Roosevelt and John Wayne.

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Screenings:

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The Making of Bronco Billy', 1910. George Anderson

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Lady of the Dugout, 1914. Al Jennings

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Reading:

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

Regeneration through violence, Slotkin

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-Class 4: Sept 12 The Vanishing American (part one)

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They waste us, ay, like April snow

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**In the warm noon, we shrink away; And fast they follow, as we go
Toward the setting day-
Till they shall fill the land, and we Are driven onto the Western sea.**

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“An Indian at the Burial place of his Fathers”, William C. Bryant, 1824.

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Screenings:

The Last of the Line, 1914. Thomas Ince

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The New World, 2005. Terence Malick

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Readings:

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

Shadows of Indians. R.Stedman

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-Class 5: Sept 19 The Vanishing American (part two)

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"The only good Indian is a dead Indian..." General William Tecumseh Sherman. History demonstrates that genocide and the path of progress and civilization have determined American history. There is another path however, and it leads to the good companions of the forest.

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Screenings:

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

One flew over the Cuckoo's nest, 1975. Milos Forman

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Readings:

<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>

Shadows of Indians. R.Stedman

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The Return of the Vanishing American. L.Feidler

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Class 6: Sept 26 "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"

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In 1890 the Federal census bureau declared the frontier over. Three years later Frederick Jackson Turner read a paper at the American Historical Association meeting in Chicago that stated that American democracy was a direct product of the existence of a frontier. A question reverberates through the ages. If the frontier is gone then how is American democracy to survive?

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Screening: Shane, 1953. George Stevens

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Readings: ***The Frontier Thesis. Edited by R. Billington***

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- Class 7: Oct 3 Remember the Alamo! (The Last Stand Myth)

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"The battle-bulletin, The Indian ambushade, the craft, the fatal environment the fall of Custer and all his horses and men." *A Death-Sonnet for Custer, Walt Whitman.*

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Prior to Custer's defeat in 1876 the Alamo battle of 1836 was considered a regional event but by the end of the 19th century it had joined an international group of Anglo-Saxon last stands that glorified the imperial/colonial agenda of western Europe and the United States. The Alamo story became a national racist epic that celebrated a unified white America standing alone against "the children of darkness". This image of American unity has slowly changed as evidenced by the Alamo movies of the 20th and 21st centuries.

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Screenings: Excerpts from several Alamo films including Martyrs of the

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Alamo 1915, Man from the Alamo 1953, The Alamo 1960 & The Alamo 2004

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Readings:

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Fabled Façade. B.Huberman & E. Hugetz

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October 9-10. Midterm Recess

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Class 8: Oct 17 Stagecoach

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Orson Welles referred to John Ford as a great American poet but in "Stagecoach" 1939, he created a hopeful metaphor for a crippled nation in the aftermath of the great depression.

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Screenings:

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Stagecoach, 1939. John Ford

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Readings:

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Westerns of John Ford. J.Place

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The American Film Par Excellence. A.Bazin

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Class 9: Oct 24 1950s America: High Noon and the Searchers.

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From the Great Depression through World War II into the Cold War years we track an America struggling with major forces of change including class, politics, race and gender. The Cold War produced a climate of fear and mistrust in the United States. The social paranoia of the time was expressed in films like Invasion of the body snatchers and High Noon. Both films were set in rural, small town America and showed how basic values of family and community were no longer to be trusted.

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"An Indian will never understand a crittur that'll keep comin' on,

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so we'll find 'em...just as sure as the turning of the earth!"

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The Searchers is a captive narrative that examines the sexual fears of white 50's America reeling at the idea of integration. The film is considered one of the great American films that has influenced a number of contemporary filmmakers including Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg.

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Screenings: High Noon, 1952. F.Zinneman,

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The Searchers, 1956. John Ford

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Readings:

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Western Movies. Don Graham & Robin Wood

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The Searchers. Brian Henderson

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The Searchers. Stuart Byron

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Class 10: Oct 31 "The Land of Cockayne" A European perspective on the west.

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"For a long time," according to Leslie Fiedler, "Europeans thought of themselves as inhabiting a world without a West...Excluded from geography and history, the West persisted as fantasy, legend, a place to be sought inside the skull of ordinary dreamers or inspired poets." Through the "spaghetti" westerns of Serge Leone we examine the lost dream of "Cockayne" or the Terrestrial Paradise.

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Screening: Once Upon a Time in the West, 1968. S. Leone

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Readings:

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Something to do with death. R. Jameson

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- Class 11: Nov 7 The "Gate of escape".

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"Jews, Chinamen, Huns, Italians...the trash of the world I hate!" Frederick Remington.

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Teddy Roosevelt, Frederick Remington and Emerson Hough were horrified at the threat posed to American values that this new wave of outsiders without a frontier memory would present the nation. Heaven's Gate about the Johnson County War in 1890 in Wyoming dared to foreground issues like class and sexuality in this tale of rich versus poor on the frontier. 'It's getting dangerous to be poor in this country these days,' says the barkeep. 'It always was!' says the hero.

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Screening:

Heaven's Gate, 1981. Michael Cimino

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Readings:

Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan. Robin Wood

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-Class 12: Nov 14 Friendship, Death, Dead Man & Deadwood

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- *"Do you believe in friendship Wyatt Earp?"*

End of the Trail. The western is a finite and subversive environment where progress & continuity

are less important than the embrace of a friend.

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Screening:

Dead Man, 1996. Jim Jarmusch

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Class 13: Nov 7 The Ballad of Little Jo & Horror, Nightmares and Zombies

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A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night ([Persian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persian_language) ⇨ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persian_language)): دختری
 در شب تنها به خانه می‌رود *Dokhtari dar šab tanhâ be xâne miravad*) is a 2014 American [horror](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horror_film) ⇨
[Western film](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horror_film) ⇨ ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_\(genre\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_(genre)))
^[4] ⇨ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Girl_Walks_Home_Alone_at_Night#cite_note-4) written and directed
 by [Ana Lily Amirpour](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ana_Lily_Amirpour) ⇨ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ana_Lily_Amirpour). Promoted as "The
 first [Iranian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian) ⇨ (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran>) [vampire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/vampire) ⇨ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vampire_film)
 Western

(<https://canvas.rice.edu/courses/59554/files/4752412?wrap=1>)

End of the trail. Horror overlaps western boundaries and female vampires wander the streets once the domain of gunfighters. Formerly a national myth the western is now inclusive of all nations and all human & inhuman types.

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White male hegemony in westerns is further challenged by this 1993 film by Maggie Greenwald.

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Class 14: Nov 28 Apocalypse Now

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BLOOD MERIDIAN or the EVENING REDNESS IN THE WEST

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The nation adrift in a sea of blood

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Course Summary:

Date	Details	Due
Tue Aug 22, 2023	 ARTS/FILM 432 001 F23 https://canvas.rice.edu/calendar?	6:30pm to 10:30pm