

# HOLLYWOOD AND THE WILD WEST

Professor Wise — University of North Texas — Maymester 2018



Roy Rogers filming in Lone Pine, California, 1938

This class provides a rigorous introduction to the critical study of western films from an historical perspective. We will study how the genre's art and performance have helped create and subvert popular understandings of western history, and how the genre's consistent popularity attests to its flexibility in interpreting complex historical relationships between freedom, violence, race, gender, and social inequality. So too, we will explore how imaginations of the American West as a "wild" place have opened possibilities for understanding nonhuman actors such as animals, the weather, or the earth itself as significant agents in historical transformations, a characteristic of western films that can powerfully disturb and naturalize viewers' cultural and political expectations. Students will learn to uncover, identify, and analyze from a critical perspective the meta-narratives of western history that have framed these historical visions in both past and present.

## History 4271: Hollywood and the Wild West

An introduction to the critical study of western films from an historical perspective.

**PROFESSOR MICHAEL D. WISE**

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### Required Materials/Credentials/Skills and Policies

**MATERIALS:** All required course materials (films and readings) are available online using the course Canvas site (available to students at: [unt.instructure.edu](http://unt.instructure.edu)). No books are required for purchase. A complete list of films and readings for this course is available at the end of this syllabus.

**CREDENTIALS:** Students will participate in this course through Canvas which requires logging in online with a UNT EUID and password.

**TECHNOLOGICAL SKILLS:** In order to succeed in this course, students will need to meet the following minimum technological requirements and skills:

- 1) A computer or device (one with a keyboard is highly recommended) with high-speed internet access and a Canvas-compatible web browser, such as Apple Safari, Google Chrome, or Mozilla Firefox.
- 2) Sufficient familiarity with web-based applications to comfortably operate Canvas on their computer or device.

**DISABILITY STATEMENT:** This course is committed to accessibility. If you need certain accommodations, please notify me as soon as possible at [Michael.wise@unt.edu](mailto:Michael.wise@unt.edu).

**LATE WORK:** Late submission of work will *not* be accepted unless it is arranged with me in advance, and only for reasons that conform to official university policy.

### Grading Criteria (out of 100 possible points)

Response Journal Entries	40% (8 at 5 points each)	A=90-100 points
Comparative Review Essays	40% (2 at 20 points each)	B=80-89 points
Critical Individual Film Review	20% (1 at 20 points)	C=70-79 points
		D=60-69 points
		F<60 points

## Course Objectives

**1) Students will examine how western films represent key narrative frames of American history.**

*This includes being able to:*

- 1A. Recognize major genres and periods of western filmography, including classic westerns, revisionist westerns, and domestic westerns, along with their recurrent themes and motifs.
- 1B. Identify the major interpretative frameworks of western history associated with western films that are invoked by cultural critics—such as the frontier thesis; the notion of defensive conquest; the idea of sectional reconciliation through national expansion following the Civil War; and the declension narrative of industrial America’s alienation from nature.

**2) Students will formulate their own critical-historical apparatus to compare and evaluate the cultural politics of western films.**

*This includes being able to:*

- 2A. Skillfully appraise historical depictions within western films by demonstrating how they represent specific interpretations of western history and by challenging the validity of those historical portrayals.
- 2B. Integrate the analysis of western history and western film with intellectual perspectives from Indigenous studies, gender and sexuality studies, and other broad fields of critical inquiry.

**3) Students will develop new sensitivities for discerning the impact of western films and other historical representations in our present.**

*This includes being able to:*

- 3A. Question and reconsider commonly held assumptions about the history of the American West that are reflected through film and other mediums.
- 3B. Propose new arguments about western history, as well as suggestions for their cultural representation, in order to help construct a more usable past for our current social and political concerns.

## Assignments

### Response Journal Entries:

In eight of the ten modules, students will write short (500 word) responses to writing prompts provided through the Canvas interface. These responses are to be submitted through the Canvas text entry box on the assignment page.

### Comparative Review Essays:

During Modules 4 and 8, students will write longer comparative review essays of the previous four films that put these films into conversation with course readings. These review essays should be uploaded as .doc, .docx, .pdf, or .txt files through the Canvas interface. In order to maintain on pace to finish the course, students need to upload their first comparative review essay no later than the Monday of the second week of Maymester, and their second comparative review essay no later than the Monday of the third week of Maymester.

### Critical Individual Film Review:

In lieu of a final exam, students will write one critical individual film review. Just like the comparative review essays, this review essay will be uploaded through the Canvas interface in a .doc, .docx, .pdf, or .txt file. Students will select their favorite film that we screened and studied in class, and write a critical review essay explaining why they selected it. This essay will be due no later than the end of our Maymester final exam period.

## Course Calendar and Schedule of Films and Readings

### MODULE 1: THE FRONTIER THESIS AND WESTERN NOSTALGIA

#### Film

1) Cecil B. DeMille, *The Squaw Man* (1914).

#### Readings

- 1) Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," (1893).
- 2) Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2004), 3-108.

### MODULE 2: Whiteness and the Studio Ranch

#### Film

1) Stuart Heisler, *Dallas* (1950).

#### Reading

1) David Blight, *Race and Reunion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1-6.

### MODULE 3: NATIVE OUTBREAK

#### Film

1) John Ford, *The Searchers* (1956).

#### Reading

1) Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2004), 3-108.

## MODULE 4: TELLING WESTERN STORIES

### Film

1) Sergio Leone, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966).

### Readings

1) Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, trans. Arendt, (New York, 1968 [1936]).

2) Larry McMurtry, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* (New York, 2001): excerpts.

## MODULE 5: VIOLENCE, SEEN AND UNSEEN

### Film

1) Sam Peckinpah, *The Wild Bunch* (1969).

### Readings

1) Richard Maxwell Brown, "Violence," in *The Oxford History of the American West* (1996).

2) Slavoj Zizek, *On Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), excerpts.

## MODULE 6: REVISING THE NARRATIVE OF EMANCIPATION

### Film

1) Quentin Tarantino, *Django Unchained* (2012).

### Reading

1) Walter Johnson, "Acts of Sale," in *Soul by Soul* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

## MODULE 7: THE AWKWARDNESS OF GUNS

### Film

1) Jim Jarmusch, *Dead Man* (1995).

### Readings

1) Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 1-32.

2) Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Acid Western," *Chicago Reader*, June 26, 1996.

## MODULE 8: THE NARRATIVE OF NATURE AND LOSS

### Film

1) Ang Lee, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

### Readings

1) Richard White, "Brokeback Mountain: A Western," *Montana*, 56:2 (Summer 2006): 65-66.

2) William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," *Environmental History* 1:1, (January 1996).

## MODULE 9: THE VIEW FROM BEHIND A BONNET

### Film

1) Kelly Reichardt, *Meek's Cutoff* (2011).

### Readings

1) A.O. Scott, "Out on the Frontier..." *New York Times*, April 7, 2011.

2) Larry McMurtry, "How the West Was Won or Lost," *The New Republic*, October 22, 1990.

## MODULE 10: WHEN TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION

### Film

- 1) Michael Crichton, *Westworld* (1973)
- 2) Jonathan Nolan, *Westworld*, Season 1, Episode 1 (2017)

Readings

- 1) Brian Welesko, "Interstitial Reality," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 47:1 (2014): 3-20.
- 2) Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" *Critical Inquiry*, 30:2 (2004): 225-248.