

Professor Ocean Howell  
**Email:** ohowell@uoregon.edu  
**Office hours:** Th, 1:45 - 3:45

**GTF:** Ian Halter  
**Email:** ihalter@uoregon.edu  
**Office hours:** by appointment

## **HIST 368:**

# **The American West in Popular Culture**

### **Course Description**

This course examines the idea of the West in the American imagination as expressed in popular literature, captivity narratives, dime novels, travel literature, art, Wild West shows, films, and television, emphasizing the 19th and 20th centuries. We will analyze these within the context of their times, compare them with the actual lived experience in the West, and consider how the image of the region changed over time as Euroamericans gained more experience with the actual West. Central to the course is an examination of the Western as a film genre, emphasizing the classic tropes of the genre, gender, violence, the portrayal of Native Americans, and the ways in which Western films have served as allegories for contemporary events. Students will view a full-length feature film each week that will reveal how the Western film genre has changed over time, and these will be complemented by readings that help place those films in their historical context.

### **Learning Objectives** (by the end of this course students will be able to . . .)

- Analyze the historical development of the major course themes, using interdisciplinary approaches, including historical analysis and literary and film criticism
- Understand how different cultures in the American West have been portrayed in popular culture
- Analyze and interpret “primary” sources of historical information, including fiction
- Analyze films through “close reading”
- Compare and contrast the imagery of the West with the actual historical experience
- Write an essay and develop your own argument
- Write a film criticism paper that integrates your knowledge of western history, literature, and film

## Readings

Course readings are selected from a variety of scholarly works, and from primary source documents and images. Readings will average between 90 - 120 pages of secondary source material, or an equivalent of primary source material, per week. Occasional longer assignments will be accompanied with tips about what areas to focus on and what sections to skim. All readings will be made available electronically through Canvas.

## Films

A key element of this course is Western film. Each week, you will view a full-length feature film. Because the vast western landscape is a significant aspect of these films, I strongly encourage you to stream the films on a relatively large screen, such as a flat TV screen. (Cell phones, iPads, and laptops will significantly diminish your experience of the films.) Film-viewing groups are encouraged. I also strongly encourage you to google the script for each film before watching. Pause when the dialog is unclear and check the script.

Many of the films are free through the UO Library system, and will be made available on Canvas. Unfortunately, not all of the films are available free-of-charge. However, they are all available to rent for between \$1.99 and \$3.99 on Amazon, and on other streaming services.

## Assignments/Grading

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| Participation (including discussion posts): | 25% of total grade |
| Research Paper:                             | 25%                |
| Exam 1:                                     | 25%                |
| Final Exam:                                 | 25%                |

NOTE: Failure to complete any component of the course will result in a failing grade

### *Participation:*

Participation will take place in the classroom, and on Canvas discussion boards. Each week, the instructor will pose a question, or questions, about course materials in order to start conversation. Each student must both 1) respond to a question and 2) ask a question. If you feel that other students have adequately responded to the instructor question(s), then you are free to respond to a question posed by another student. As always, conclude your post by posing a question of your own. Questions and responses should be oriented towards a critical analysis of the material, rather than a subjective reaction. Discussions of whether we liked a film or a reading, or whether we find it interesting, are fine for casual conversation, but are ultimately rooted in subjective

reactions. Better discussion topics include analysis of how filmmakers use certain narratives, or editing techniques, or how films compare to another. With scholarly readings, too, do not offer subjective impressions, but objective analyses. Consider, for example, the ways that authors use their sources, or offer critical comparisons of different course readings. If you're unsure about whether a question/response is appropriate, feel free to contact instructor. Together, written responses and questions should average about a page of writing (single-spaced, 12-point font) a week.

*Historiographical Research Paper:*

Students will write a 4 to 5-page essay. Students will use the UO library's digital resources to locate two scholarly, peer-reviewed articles on whichever aspect of Western films most interests them, provided films from the class feature prominently in those articles. Student essays will advance comparative analyses of those scholarly pieces. While students are free to choose whatever subject interests them, they are encouraged to choose a subject that deals with inequality or difference in some way. This would include, but would not be limited to, topics pertaining to race, ethnicity, immigration, class, gender, or sexuality. Detailed prompt to come.

*Exams:*

Exams will assess students' grasp on all course material (readings, films, lectures, and in-class exercises). Exams will include a mix of short identification questions and longer essay questions. Students will have 24 hours to complete exams. Sample exam to come.

*Final Grade thresholds:*

A+ = 98 - 100%  
A = 93 - 97%  
A- = 90 - 92%  
B+ = 88 - 89%  
B = 83 - 87%  
B- = 80 - 82%  
C+ = 78 - 79%  
C = 73 - 77%  
C- = 70 - 72%  
D+ = 68 - 69%  
D = 63 - 67%  
D- = 60 - 62%  
F = 0 - 59%

*Grading Rubric:*

Grading in the humanities is, by its nature, a subjective process, but it may help to have a reminder of what each grade represents. To receive an A, you must do work that you and I agree is exceptionally careful, insightful, thoughtful, and original. To receive an A, work must not only fulfill all of the stated requirements, but also be free of errors. This includes not only technical errors, like persistent typos or incorrectly formatted citations, but also stylistic errors, like infelicitous turns of phrase or jarring transitions from one portion of an essay to another. Most importantly, A-level work must be free of interpretative errors, like hastily reasoned conclusions or thinly supported truth claims. To receive an A+, you and I must agree that the work could not be improved, which is why I almost never award that grade. B work goes beyond what is merely required and demonstrates insight and critical thought, but lacks the depth and ingenuity that would warrant an A. Work that is exceptionally well argued, but that is carelessly executed, may also receive a B. Average work that meets all requirements, gets the “facts” right, but goes no further will receive a C. Substandard work--meaning work that is poorly reasoned and poorly executed--will receive a D. Unacceptable or incomplete work will receive a failing grade.

## **Grading Policies**

Exams cannot be accepted late. They are due 24 hours after having been made available.

Papers will be accepted late, but will drop by 1/3 of a letter grade immediately after the due date and time, and will drop by a further 1/3 letter grade for each subsequent 24-hour period. (After the 12th day, a paper that would have received an A+ becomes an F.)

A note on academic honesty: there are many forms of plagiarism, and all are serious. Any instances of plagiarism, or any other form of academic dishonesty, will result in a failing grade for the course, and will be reported to the university. If you have any questions at all, please come talk to me. Please also consult the very good guide produced by Bowdoin College:

<https://www.bowdoin.edu/dean-of-students/judicial-board/academic-honesty-and-plagiarism/index.html>

Here are some excerpts describing the most common forms of plagiarism:

### "Direct Plagiarism

Direct plagiarism is the word-for-word transcription of a section of someone else’s work, without attribution and without quotation marks. . . .

### "Self Plagiarism

Self-plagiarism occurs when a student submits his or her own previous work, or mixes parts of previous works, without permission from all professors involved. For example, it would be unacceptable to incorporate part of a term paper you wrote in high school into a paper assigned

in a college course. Self-plagiarism also applies to submitting the same piece of work for assignments in different classes without previous permission from both professors.

#### "Mosaic Plagiarism

Mosaic Plagiarism occurs when a student borrows phrases from a source without using quotation marks, or finds synonyms for the author's language while keeping to the same general structure and meaning of the original. Sometimes called "patch writing," this kind of paraphrasing, whether intentional or not, is academically dishonest and punishable – even if you footnote your source! . . .

#### "Accidental Plagiarism

Accidental plagiarism occurs when a person neglects to cite their sources, or misquotes their sources, or unintentionally paraphrases a source by using similar words, groups of words, and/or sentence structure without attribution. . . . Students must learn how to cite their sources and to take careful and accurate notes when doing research. . . . Lack of intent does not absolve the student of responsibility for plagiarism. Cases of accidental plagiarism are taken as seriously as any other plagiarism and are subject to the same range of consequences as other types of plagiarism."

Students should be aware that Canvas includes software that automatically scans for plagiarism. I use this software, and I have caught instances of plagiarism this way.

## **Contacting me**

Email is best for short questions. If you have a substantive question, please come to my office hours.

## **Schedule** (tentative)

### **Week 1, 3/29 - 4/2: *Stagecoach***

Films: *Great Train Robbery* (1903); *Stagecoach* (1939).

(begin reading for Week 2.)

### **Week 2, 4/5 - 4/7: *Fort Apache***

Film: *Fort Apache* (1948)

Reading: *Buffalo Bill, from Boyhood to Manhood* (1884);

David Anthony Tyeme Clark and Joane Nagel, "White Men, Red Masks: Appropriations of 'Indian' Manhood in Imagined Wests," *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West*, ed. by Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau (2001).

### **Week 3, 4/12 - 4/14: *High Noon***

Film: *High Noon* (1952)

Reading: Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (1902);  
Matthew Costello, "Rewriting High Noon: Transformations in American Popular Political Culture during the Cold War, 1952-1968," *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* (2005)

### **Week 4, 4/19 - 4/21: *The Searchers***

Film: *The Searchers* (1956)

Reading: Olive Oatman, *The Captivity of the Oatman Girls Among the Apache and Mohave Indians* (1857).

### **Week 5, 4/26 - 4/28: *Magnificent Seven***

Film: *Magnificent Seven* (1960)

No reading. Study for exam.

*Exam 1 available 4/28, noon, due: 4/29, noon*

### **Week 6, 5/3 - 5/5: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance***

Film: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)

Reading: Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918)

### **Week 7, 5/10 - 5/12: *A Fistful of Dollars***

Film: *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964)

Reading: Joaquin Murieta: *The Brigand Chief of California* (1932) excerpt and Johnston McCulley, *Mark of Zorro* (1919) (excerpt);  
Brian Klopotek, "I Guess Your Warrior Look Doesn't Work Every Time: Challenging Indian Masculinity in the Cinema," *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West*, ed. by Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau (2001).  
Alex M. Sargoza, "The Border in American and Mexican Cinema," *Aztlán* 21 (1992-96): 155-90.

## **Week 8, 5/17 - 5/19: *The Wild Bunch***

Film: *The Wild Bunch* (1969)

Reading: Larry McMurtry, *Horseman, Pass By* (1961) (first half).

## **Week 9, 5/24 - 5/26: *Little Big Man***

Film: *Little Big Man* (1970)

No reading. Work on paper.

*Paper due: 5/26.*

## **Week 10, 5/31 - 6/2: *No Country for Old Men***

Film: *No Country for Old Men* (2007).

Reading: McMurtry, *Horseman* (second half).

## **Finals Week:**

### **Final Exam**

*Available 8AM Tuesday, 6/7*

*Due 8AM Wednesday, 6/8*