

Lecture 13 - The Western

- I. Movies as consensus narrative
 - The Western genre as a space of discourse
- II. Historical and cultural background
 - The "real" west: 1860-1890
 - Popular culture before film
 - Intellectual culture: The Turner Thesis
- III. The Western as cultural myth
 - Founding story
 - Dichotomies
 - The divided hero: savior and savage

Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.

The Western

- Display: Reproduction of a poster for the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show
 - In the mid 70s, there was a film called *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* – disturbing
 - Chief Sitting Bull himself actually appeared in the original show, which mythologized and lied about the racist history of the West
- The Western offers us a particularly clarifying example of the larger operation that the movies played in American culture in the days when they were such a dominant form of narrative
 - The age of the dream factory, mass-producing movies, capitalist principles and art
 - Other examples of consensus narrative in their own day: Shakespeare's theater, Dickens's novels, Homer's epics
 - American film was less burdened by cultural expectations in the way that French, German, or Italian film
 - There are both positive and negative consequences of this
 - Consensus Narratives have three central defining features
 - Conservative – in both a political and an aesthetic sense
 - Consensus narratives could not completely attack the culture they emerge from
 - If they larger politics were too upfront revolutionary, then it couldn't address such a huge audience
 - Of course, it can still be subversive in its own way, but it must do so within a familiar context

- The artistic commitments of consensus art are in a large sense conservative as well
- Today, theater has the opportunity to be hugely revolutionary, because it's not a consensus narrative (and never has been in this country)
- Collaborative – movies are a hugely collaborative act
 - As the theater is, in a way that poems and novels don't have to be (though sometimes they can be)
 - The various dissonant views (actor, director, writer), need to be harmonized in some way.
 - As a result, there will always be some jagged edges where the various efforts don't perfectly harmonize.
 - We need to value and take place in partial excellence, because full excellence isn't always possible.
 - More importantly, movies collaborate with their culture
 - They all include myth, founding tales, ways of understanding themselves
 - Consensus narrative collaborates with an inherited range of myths and stories that are reoriented to adapt to the current medium
 - Genre itself is an inherently collaborative category – the meaning of any Western is partly based on every Western that has come before it.
 - This is a profound form of collaboration
 - An example: In Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, there's a great moment of a beautiful dirge: "Fear no more the heat of the sun... Golden lads and girls all must, as chimney sweepers come to dust": even the most privileged of us die.
 - In Shakespeare's era, dandelions were called "golden lads," and when they go to seed, their white ball is called a "chimney sweep"
 - Thus what Shakespeare says carries a greater, broader-acting effect
 - But the metaphor comes from the culture – it is in some sense still a collaborative event
- Accessible
 - The fact that Westerns were set in the past made them more accessible in a sense, because it made the story more comfortable, so that it could displace the conflicts of whites and blacks 100 years back, to the older conflict of whites and Native Americans.
 - Thus *The Searchers* becomes a complex meditation on racism, but it is able to do so because it occurs within such a comfortable genre

- The size of the movie screen seems appropriate to the epic quality of the Western, which is part of why the Western form was never as successful on TV as it was in film
- Historical and Cultural Backgrounds
 - Racist history
 - The irony of envisioning the cavalry bugle as a saving sound
 - This was the era of the transcontinental railroad
 - This was the era of range conflicts – ranchers and settlers fighting each other
 - Sometimes films were from the standpoint of the ranchers, sometimes the settlers.
 - Rarely, before the 1970s, was it ever on the side of the Native Americans.
 - *The Settlers* was a great shock, because it was sympathetic to the Native Americans
 - The West was also the story of the extermination of the buffalo
 - The era of the near genocide (certainly murder on a massive scale) of the Native Americans
 - The real story of the West is a lot uglier than the myth that we all grew up with
- Forms of American Westerns
 - TV: The Buffalo Bill Wild West show was a huge success
 - The real Annie Oakley, the real Chief Sitting Bull
 - The entertainment vision of the history had very little to do with the actuality of what really happened
 - Books: *The Virginian* – hugely popular.
 - Several movies were based on it
 - Powerful contribution to the mythology of the West
 - One of the great best-sellers of all time
 - The 50th edition was published within 15 years of when it first came out
 - Intellectual component of the wild west
 - An essay in the 1890s: Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”
 - It’s impossible to exaggerate the important effect that this essay had
 - It organized the entire culture of how American intellectuals thought about the West
 - The paper said that while we live in a society where the frontier is constantly receding, settlers’ ability to push ever west acted to eliminate divisions of race and class
 - Turner defined the central American intellectual myth about the West and European-Americans

- Now it is true that the existence of free land in the West created a kind of safety valve
- Turner said that the closing off of this frontier marked a very important point in American history
- This claim helped spawn all the stories and mythologizing of the American West

- The Western as a Cultural Myth
 - What do we mean when we call the Western a myth?
 - Westerns are not by one person, but by many
 - A story that is told over and over again, constantly repeated
 - The word mythology implies many strands to the myth, rather than just one story
 - The writing of Levi-Strauss
 - The founding myth – Westerns are always in part about establishing a society out of chaos, civilizing of savagery, etc.
 - Society and communal values versus the values of the individual – this is relevant to American society, because our culture values individual heroism so much, but it doesn't want to take this idea to the point of chaos
 - The dichotomy between East and West
 - The division between nature and culture
 - The Western dramatizes American values and American ambivalence
 - Genre as a category is a discourse space that provides a license to take up these dichotomies, contradictions, and controversies