

## **Dark Westerns of the 1950s: Introduction and Syllabus- Art Eckstein**

What are “dark westerns”? Hollywood western films are one of the great original American contributions to world culture. But westerns are often described as the propaganda of imperialist and racist expansion: the “civilizing” of the vast “wilderness” by European- Americans. Indigenous people, and white outlaws, are vanquished by the forces of law and order, led by the stalwart cowboy or lawman.

In this view, the numerous post-World War II Hollywood westerns are examples of a broader conformist and self-confident American culture. Hollywood released about 50 westerns a year in this period, a quarter of total production. And by the late Fifties, westerns also made up seven of the ten most popular programs on television. They were an important American cultural artifact. And they still are: consider that the modern western “Yellowstone” was the most popular drama on television last season.

So—was the 1950s Hollywood western merely a participant in the distortion of the actual historical experience of the frontier—which was, bluntly, the accumulation of capital in the form of land expropriated from its indigenous people, and then redistributed (often by violence) among the white conquerors?

This course suggests a more complex view of westerns—and hence of 1950s American culture, too. We will do this by offering eight of the major “dark” or “psychological” westerns produced in this period. These westerns were expensive productions, with major directors and famous stars. But they were straightforward

about the violence of the frontier, about the ruthless greed for land and money, about the heavy human costs involved—about white racism. They questioned how “civilized” the town was that had replaced “the wilderness.” And they also questioned the image of the cowboy hero—a person who, in the end, is a stoic killer with a six-gun. They tended to worry that, as the British writer D. H. Lawrence said, “the essential American soul is hard, stoic, isolate, and a killer. It has never yet been melted.”

These “dark westerns” made a big impression on the young adolescents who saw them. Bill Clinton says so (“High Noon”), and so does Bob Dylan (“Red River”), and so does Steven Spielberg (“The Searchers”).

We’ll see all three of those films. Many of you might have seen them when you were young too. In fact, in some ways the works we’ll see are not only part of 1950s culture, but also provide some of the foundation for our own “Boomer” culture that followed. The course will give you a chance to re-view and reconsider some of these films, but now as mature adults.

These films did coexist with dozens of far more simplistic “white hat vs, black hat” westerns. But almost all these “dark” westerns made substantial profits. The profits enjoyed by these “dark” westerns in turn suggest that the American audience was already prepared in the 1950s to tolerate a darker view of its past. In fact, they were prepared to pay to see it. But not always—as we will see, one could also lose money by going too far.

In the course we will be looking at eight of these “dark westerns”.

Now, all these films are *highly entertaining!* We can ask why. True, they are often visually stunning, providing enormous visual pleasure (as Alfred Hitchcock said of westerns). And they often come with tremendous acting performances—from Henry Fonda, Jimmy Stewart, Gary Cooper, Katy Jurado—even John Wayne. But is that all that is going on? I'm sure you'll find the course a pleasure.

I will assign a “dark western” to watch each week. These are all easily available: free, or inexpensive to rent. All you have to do for the course is watch. But I'll provide each week a list of questions about the film, to help you focus your watching. And then every week we will have a zoom class. For the first forty minutes or so I'll lecture on some aspect of these films. Then, after a five minute break, we will get to the heart of the course: hearing from your comments, in a conversation.

There are no tests, no assigned readings, nothing like that. I will provide a list of optional readings for people, but they are strictly optional! The course is designed for illuminating entertainment.

Here are the films we will be watching:

1. Red River (1948; dir. Howard Hawks; starring John Wayne, Montgomery Clift, Joanne Dru) A celebration of the “making of the West” by the first cattle drive from Texas to Kansas, but also about fierce personal conflict between father and adopted son, and between an authoritarian and a democratic leader.

2. *Fort Apache* (1948; dir. John Ford, starring Henry Fonda, John Wayne and Shirley Temple). Racism and military incompetence.
3. *High Noon* (1952; dir. Fred Zinnemann, starring Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly) A heroic sheriff in a corrupt western town.
4. *The Naked Spur* (1953; dir. Anthony Mann, starring James Stewart, Janet Leigh, Robert Ryan). Greed, greed, greed.
5. *The Searchers* (1956, dir. John Ford, starring John Wayne and Jeffrey Hunter) John Wayne's greatest role, a disturbed and maniacal Indian-hater who cannot be accepted in society.
6. *One-Eyed Jacks* (1957-1961; dir. Marlon Brando; starring Marlon Brando, Karl Malden, and Pina Pellicer); vengeance as self destruction, with Oedipal overtones
7. *Gunman's Walk* (1958; dir. Phil Karlson; starring Van Heflin and Tab Hunter) Juvenile delinquency and racism on the range
8. *The Magnificent Seven* (1960; dir. John Sturges, starring Yul Brynner, Eli Wallach, Steve McQueen). American gunfighters intervene to save a village in Mexico from bandits. The culture of American interventionism in the Third World...Hello, Vietnam.

