West of Everything
The American Frontier in Literature, Film, Painting, and Photography

Seminar, LV-Nr. 050643 (A+B), 4 CP
B.A. Anglistik/ Amerikanistik
Lecturer: PD Dr. Stefan L. Brandt
Room and time: GABF 04/413 (Süd), Thursdays 14-16

Short description:

“To go west, as far west as you can go, west of everything, is to die,” Jane Tompkins writes in her study of the American western. The affinity of the American West to death is not only a result of the cultural history of dispossession and violence that has marked the exploration (or, as one might argue, annexation) of the continent by European settlers. It is also connected to the tremendous urge within the American imagination to reach one’s limits, as Turner has maintained in his famous ‘frontier thesis.’ To go west means to transcend given boundaries and to look for new realms of self-realization and fulfillment. The ‘West’ invokes a whole array of attributes related to the fields of gender (the ‘West’ as a place of masculinization), social theory (the ‘West’ as the epitome of civilization), and national identity (the ‘West’ as a stimulus of cultural belonging). It can stand for all sorts of concepts and promises—progress, adventure, manifest destiny, and individualism, just to mention a few. In other words, the West functions not so much as a ‘real’ territory—marked by the Indian wars and an everyday endeavor to survive in the frontier regions—but rather as an imagined region. A special course reader will encompass works on (and by) renowned writers of the American West (Bret Harte, Hamlin Garland, Mark Twain, and Owen Wister), painters (George Caleb Bingham, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederic Remington) as well as figures of the popular mythology (Theodore Roosevelt, Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Buffalo Bill).

Course requirements and grading:

If you are taking this course as a Seminar, you have to a.) participate regularly and lively; b.) be part of an expert session (and develop a 1-page handout to be distributed in class); c.) write a final paper ca. 10 pages. Grading: Competent participation in class discussions 1/3; expert session 1/3; final paper 1/3.

If you are taking the course as an Übung, you have to a.) participate regularly and lively; b.) be part of an expert session (and develop a 1-page handout to be distributed in class). Grading: Competent participation in class discussions 1/2; expert session 1/2.

Note: In any case, poor attendance or class participation will negatively affect your final grade.

Deadline for Final Papers: Monday, March 15, 2010. Note: There is no (!) extension of this deadline.

Syllabus:


29. Oct. The Romance of the West in American Painting
Main texts:
J.F. McDermott, George Caleb Bingham: River Portraitist (1959) (on George Caleb Bingham).

05. Nov. Exploring the Unknown Land – The Lewis/Clark Expedition
Main text (required):
Additional example (optional):

Main text (required):
John Fiske, “Manifest Destiny” (1885)
Additional text:
John O’Sullivan, “A Divine Destiny for America” (1839).
Additional text (optional):
19. Nov. The ‘Wicked West’: Prostitutes, Gamblers, and Thieves  
Main example (required): Bret Harte, “The Outcasts of Poker Flat” (1869).

Main text (required): Frank Norris, “The Frontier Gone At Last” (1902).  

03. Dec. Romanticizing the ‘Old West’: The Art of Frederic Remington  

10. Dec. “If you want to call me that ... smile!” Heroic Vision and the Cult of Masculinity  
Main example (required): *The Virginian* (dir. Stuart Gilmore, 1946); based on Owen Wister’s novel *The Virginian* (1902).  
Additional text (optional): Mark Twain, excerpts from: *Roughing It* (1872).

17. Dec. The West as a Founding Myth: Daniel Boone  
Main example (required): S.E. White, ch. 1& 2 from *Daniel Boone: Wilderness Scout* (1917).  

07. Jan. The ‘Old West’ as Performance: Buffalo Bill’s Wild West  


21. Jan. Deconstructing the West  


04. Feb. Parodies of the Wild West  

Texts are available online at Blackboard! Make sure you have registered at Blackboard to be able to download these materials.

For films, please go to the ‘Mediathek’, GB 03/33 (Nord). The ‘Mediathek’ is open Tue, 11-14, Wed, 12-16, Thur, 12-16. Important note: Films can be checked out only over night (!) or over the weekend. Make sure you return the film the next possible weekday at 12!