

San José State University
English and Comparative Literature

Fall 2020 English 117A: American Film, Literature and Culture
Seeing “the Primitive” in 20th Century American Literature and Film

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| Instructor: | Faith Kirk, Ph.D. |
| Email: | faith.kirk@sjsu.edu |
| Office Hours: | Thursdays 10-11 am PST and by appointment |
| Office Hours Link: | https://sjsu.zoom.us/j/97227963754 |
| Class Time: | Fridays 9:30 am -12:15 pm |
| Class Zoom Link: | https://sjsu.zoom.us/j/94251263471?pwd=ZUQyYTFQMENmaWxOZUpUVnJJSNHEvUT09 Passcode: 507879 Meeting ID: 942 5126 3471 |
| Prerequisites: | Writing Skills Test (WST), completion of Core General Education, and completion of, or co-registration in, 100W. |
| GE/SJSU Studies Category: | Area S: “Self, Society, and Equality in the U.S.” <i>Note: Courses used to satisfy Areas R, S, and V, must be taken from three separate SJSU departments, or other distinct academic units.</i> |

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Throughout the 20th century, artists, writers, and scholars were fascinated with people and places that they considered “exotic,” “savage,” and outside the bounds of civilized society. Using similar practices, 20th century writers and filmmakers sought to observe and record so-called “primitive” bodies, behaviors, and ritual acts. For instance, a classical Hollywood film like *King Kong* was made for a different audience than a documentary like *Nanook of the North*, but both films capitalized on images of “real primitives” to captivate American viewers.

In this course, we will investigate the relationship between literary and cinematic representations of people who were considered “primitive” or “native” in 20th century U.S. culture. We will apply similar questions about visual observation and ideology to a wide range of texts, from popular fiction and travel writing to fiction and documentary films. As we watch and read, we will pay close attention to the ways so-called “primitive” peoples are represented and how those representational strategies change (or not) over time.

Over the course of the semester, you will be asked to actively think, read, and write about the ideologies at work in concepts like race, culture, gender, civilization, primitivism, and objectivism. Some of these concepts might now seem safely at a distance from our lives, but others are not. While some of the work of this class will be about reading and understanding the ideas of others, your other task will be to examine your own ideas, beliefs, values, and experiences.

OUR CLASS ATMOSPHERE

Our classroom is a learning environment where everyone's right to explore ideas needs to be respected. There is nothing wrong with disagreement and debate. In fact, saying that you disagree with someone and why you do is crucial for really doing the work of critically thinking.

What *is* wrong is being disrespectful to anyone in our class or actively suppressing a colleague's ability to think, collaborate, and write. We will be practicing how to engage with each other with mutual respect.

SCREENINGS

When you watch a film in a film studies class, on the other hand, your purpose is to subject it to analysis. That means that you will be watching the film with a pencil in hand, methodically recording the events of the film in what is called a "plot segmentation". You will submit these plot segmentations for course credit.

GE AREA S COURSE GOALS AND STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After successfully completing the course, students shall be able to:

- GE 1.** describe how identities (i.e. religious, gender, ethnic, racial, class, sexual orientation, disability, and/or age) are shaped by cultural and societal influences within contexts of equality and inequality;
- GE 2.** describe historical, social, political, and economic processes producing diversity, equality, and structured inequalities in the U.S.;
- GE 3.** describe social actions which have led to greater equality and social justice in the U.S. (i.e. religious, gender, ethnic, racial, class, sexual orientation, disability, and/or age).; and
- GE 4.** recognize and appreciate constructive interactions between people from different cultural, racial, and ethnic groups within the U.S.

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

English 117A serves four of the five learning objectives of the Department of English and Comparative Literature, by having students demonstrate the ability to

- E 1.** read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of "close reading" or close analysis in both the study of literature and the study of film;
- E 3.** write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and the nature of the subject;
- E 4.** develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively;
- E 5.** articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS & LEARNING OBJECTIVES

| ASSIGNMENT | GENERAL EDUCATION LEARNING OBJECTIVES | DEPARTMENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Weekly Canvas assignments | 1,2,3,4 | 1,3,4,5 |
| Film Notes | | 1 |
| Critical Analyses | 1,2,3,4 | 1,3,4,5 |
| Visual Analysis Project | 1,2,3,4 | 1,3,5 |
| Final Reflection | 1,2,3,4 | 1,3,5 |

COURSE TEXTS

BOOKS

Tarzan of the Apes, Edgar Rice Burroughs
Of Mules and Men, Zora Neale Hurston
A Small Place, Jamaica Kincaid
There There, Tommy Orange

ISBN: 0140184643
ISBN: 9780061350177
ISBN: 9780374527075
ISBN: 9780525436140

I have provided these ISBN numbers so that you have the opportunity to locate the edition that I am using (for the purposes of matching our pagination and sharing supplementary materials published within the text). However, **if you find other editions of these texts somewhere else for cheaper, feel free to get them!**

All other readings will be available to you as PDFs on Canvas.

FILMS

[*King Kong*](#) (Merian Cooper & Ernest Schoedsack, 1933)
[*Black Panther*](#) (Ryan Coogler, 2018)
[*N!ai, The Story of a !Kung Woman*](#) (John Marshall, 1980)
[*Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen*](#) (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1983)

I have provided links to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) entries for each of these films so that you can be sure that you are watching the correct version. Some of these films are available to stream for free via the MLK library or on Youtube (although often with many ads). You can also rent or buy them through Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, or another streaming service. I will be providing access information and links for every film that I ask you to watch this semester.

All other shorts or video clips will be available to you on Canvas.

GRADE BREAKDOWN & ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS

| ASSIGNMENT(S) | PERCENTAGE OF FINAL GRADE |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Weekly Canvas Assignments & Discussions | 25 percent |
| Film Notes | 15 percent |
| Two short Critical Analyzes | 25 percent |
| Visual Analysis Project | 20 percent |
| Final Reflection | 15 percent |

Canvas Assignments & Discussions (25 percent)

Each week, you will have the opportunity to engage with the texts you are reading and watching before you come to class. These Canvas assignments are designed to give you credit for doing that work as you move through the course.

Film Notes (15 percent)

Each time you watch in film in class, you will create what is called a “plot segmentation”* of the film. A plot segmentation is a method of taking notes that film scholars use to methodically record the events of the film in the order that they occur along with other observations about visual aspects like costumes, staging, lighting, shot composition, editing, or special effects, or audio aspects, like music, sound effects, volume, and tone.

In other words, every time you notice something about what you are watching and hearing, you should write it down!

**Please note: I have included a sample plot segmentation at the end of this syllabus for your reference.*

Critical Analyzes (25 percent)

You will be asked to write two 500-word Critical Analysis papers this semester and to submit them on Canvas. These brief analyzes are opportunities to make connections between the concepts we have discussed and the texts we have watched and read in class.

You will receive a prompt with more specific instructions and requirements before the first analysis essay is due and we will discuss the expectations more fully in class.

Visual Analysis Project (20 percent)

For this project, you will select a sequence from one of the films that we have watched in class and storyboard an alternate version of that sequence that would create a significantly different effect for viewers. You will need to include a one-page cover sheet with your storyboard describing the original sequence, the choices you made to strategically re-envision that sequence, and why you made those

choices. You should cite at least one secondary source in that cover sheet (both in the text and in a works cited entry at the end) that has informed your decisions.

We will discuss this assignment in much more detail in the last half of the semester and you will have class time to workshop your storyboard before you submit it.

Final Reflection (15 percent)

Instead of a traditional final exam, you will have the opportunity to reflect about what you have learned this semester, how you might apply that information in other areas of your academic and work life, and what you would like to learn next.

This reflection will be due to Canvas *during* our scheduled final exam time. *That means that we will not meet in person during our scheduled final exam time.* We will discuss the reflection in more detail closer to the due date.

Late Work Policy

Because I understand that life happens, I will accept late work up to 10 days past the deadline, but I will deduct 5% (or 1 point for assignments that are out of 10) for each day that the work is late (including weekends). **If you have an exceptional circumstance that prevents you from submitting work for a period of time, please let me know. I am happy to work with you and support you in your efforts to do the work and pass the course.**

HOW YOUR WORK WILL BE ASSESSED & EVALUATED

Assessment

My teaching philosophy is that assessment should always be an **explicit and transparent** process. This means that:

1. You should always know the expectations for assignments ahead of time.
2. It should be clear to you why you received the numerical grade that you did.
3. You are invited to talk about your grades with me at any time, no questions asked or appointments needed.

With this teaching philosophy in mind, here is the assessment process I have designed for our course:

1. **You will see a rubric for each assignment in our course ahead of time** so you can plan how to meet the expectations for each task.
2. **You will receive a grade and a completed rubric for each task that you submit. For your two Critical Analysis papers and your Visual Analysis Project, you will receive a grade, a completed rubric, and written feedback.**
3. **I will be holding weekly office hours on this semester on Zoom.** Feel free to join me there, whether you have made an appointment or not, to discuss grades privately. You can also ask me questions after class and via email.

Evaluation

The following statement has been adopted by the Department of English for inclusion in all syllabi:

In English Department Courses, instructors will comment on and grade the quality of student writing as well as the quality of ideas being conveyed. All student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs.

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined in the SJSU Catalog ("The Grading System"). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A = excellent; B = above average; C = average; D = below average; F = failure.

In written assignments for English 117A, this scale is based on the following criteria:

A [90-92=A-, 93-96=A, 97-100=A+] = Excellent: The "A" essay is articulate and well developed with fluid transitions and a clear and persuasive use of evidence, which is drawn from the literary text itself, lecture materials (when appropriate), and research materials. An "A" essay contains a fresh insight that teaches the reader something new about the subject matter.

B [80-82=B-, 83-86=B, 87-89=B+] Above average: The "B" essay demonstrates a good understanding of its subject, a clear and persuasive use of evidence, a certain level of ease of expression, and solid organization. However, it usually lacks the level of originality and creativity that characterizes the insight found in an "A" essay.

C [70-72=C-, 73-76=C, 77-79=C+] = Average: The "C" essay makes a good attempt at all the assignment's requirements. It has a reasonable understanding of its subject matter but its ideas are frequently simplistic or over-generalized. The writing style is also more bland and repetitive than the style shown by "A" and "B" essays and it often contains flaws in grammar, punctuation, spelling and/or word choice. It may also use textual evidence out of context.

D [60-62=D-, 63-66=D, 67-69=D+] = Below average: The "D" essay is poorly organized and generally unclear. It has inappropriate or inadequate examples, is noticeably superficial or simplistic, and/or contains some serious mechanical and grammatical problems. A "D" essay may also reveal some misunderstanding of the assignment requirements.

F [59 or below]= Failure: An "F" essay has not addressed the requirements of the assignment and is unacceptable work in terms of both form and content.

ENGAGE ACTIVELY IN OUR LEARNING COMMUNITY

Active engagement in this class is necessary. I want to know what you think. I want other students to know what you think. We will discuss as a group how we prefer our synchronous Zoom sessions to work, but you should also consider online discussions an important way to engage with your learning community.

YOUR RESOURCES

Office Hours

Join me at the link below for my Zoom office hours every Thursday from 10:00 am – 11:00 am PST or by appointment. I have enabled a Waiting Room for this weekly meeting space so you will have privacy to discuss any issues you are experiencing or questions you have about the course.

<https://sjsu.zoom.us/j/97227963754>

[SJSU Cares COVID-19 Resources](#)

SJSU Cares is here to provide assistance when you need it most. We provide resources and services for SJSU students facing an unforeseen financial crisis. If you're having trouble paying for food, housing or other bills, face homelessness, food insecurity, etc.

We've assembled some [off-campus self-help resources \[PDF\] \(Links to an external site.\)](#) to assist with basic needs in a time where some SJSU students might be looking for additional support.

[Academic Technology Services \(IRC\)](#)

STUDENTS: due to the emergency situation, temporary changes have been made to the standard 2-day booking rule allowing for longer checkouts for all equipment essential for distance learning on a first-come-first-served basis.

RETURNS will be due back per the notice you receive from staff during the booking process. Keep in mind that your designated return date is subject to change depending on the development of the shelter at home order.

[SJSU Writing Center](#)

The San José State University Writing Center offers a variety of online resources to help students become better writers, and all of our services are free for SJSU students. Our mission is to enhance the writing skills of SJSU students so they can communicate clearly in any setting (informal, academic, or professional). We accomplish this goal through creating original writing resources, offering workshops, and conducting one-on-one and small-group tutoring sessions. To make an appointment or to refer to the numerous online resources offered through the Writing Center, visit the Writing Center website at <http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter>.

[Peer Connections](#)

Peer Connections is your online, campus-wide resource for mentoring (time management, note taking, study skills, getting involved, etc.), tutoring (undergraduate writing, lower division Math, Science, History, Humanities, etc.), supplemental instruction (review and study sessions for select courses), and learning assistants in classes across campus. Make appointments to meet with a tutor or mentor by visiting [Spartan Connect. \(Links to an external site.\)](#) For more information on services, online workshops, and a step-by-step guide to making an appointment, please visit the website at [https://peerconnections.sjsu.edu/ \(Links to an external site.\)](https://peerconnections.sjsu.edu/).

Sample Plot Segmentation

THE WIZARD OF OZ: PLOT SEGMENTATION

C. Credits

1. Kansas

- a. Dorothy is at home, worried about Miss Gulch's threat to Toto.
- b. Running away, Dorothy meets Professor Marvel, who induces her to return home.
- c. A tornado lifts the house, with Dorothy and Toto, into the sky.

2. Munchkin City

- a. Dorothy meets Glinda, and the Munchkins celebrate the death of the Wicked Witch of the East.
- b. The Wicked Witch of the West threatens Dorothy over the Ruby Slippers.
- c. Glinda sends Dorothy to seek the Wizard's help.

3. The Yellow Brick Road

- a. Dorothy meets the Scarecrow.
- b. Dorothy meets the Tin Man.
- c. Dorothy meets the Cowardly Lion.

4. The Emerald City

- a. The Witch creates a poppy field near the city, but Glinda rescues the travelers.
- b. The group is welcomed by the city's citizens.
- c. As they wait to see the Wizard, the Lion sings of being king.
- d. The terrifying Wizard agrees to help the group if they obtain the Wicked Witch's broomstick.

5. The Witch's castle and nearby woods

- a. In the woods, flying monkeys carry off Dorothy and Toto.
- b. The Witch realizes that she must kill Dorothy to get the ruby slippers.
- c. The Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion sneak into the Castle; in the ensuing chase, Dorothy kills the Witch.

6. The Emerald City

- a. Although revealed as a humbug, the Wizard grants the wishes of the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion.
- b. Dorothy fails to leave with the Wizard's hot-air balloon but is transported home by the ruby slippers.

7. Kansas—Dorothy describes Oz to her family and friends

E. End credits