

Session Two Lecture Notes: America the Violent

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21L.435/CMS.840 - At the Limit: Violence in Contemporary Representation

Things to Watch For – “Fargo” and “American History X”

1. Both of these films have peculiar TITLES, one marked by a placeholder for meaning (X, the variable, the open, the undetermined) and one that names a specific place. What do you make of those titles? What kind of conceptual work are they doing? If the title is a kind of shorthand theory or reading of the film, what is each title proposing we pay attention to?

2. What is each film’s relationship to TIME and HISTORY? Familial, national, local, mythological, generational, etc.? Both play with time: formal (non-linear) time; historical time (on a grand scale); the time of trauma (one that seems to slow down, or be experienced in stilled moments); generational time (father to son to brother). What is the relationship between time and violence?

3. What is “VIOLENCE” (or what plural forms of violence, perhaps on a continuum, exist) in “American History X”? What is the relationship between violence of thoughts (racism, hatred, contempt) and physical violence? Or sanctioned and unsanctioned violence in “Fargo”? Do the films frame violence as either comprehensible (with a cause, origin, explanation, logic) or as totally incomprehensible (what destroys causality, origin, explanation and logic)?

TODAY: **Week on America the Violent: about mythic national conceptions** (Americanness and violence); **generation** (in the sense of familial generations and also generation as in creation/perpetuation) and **regeneration** (as in to create anew or revitalize; but also reform); and versions of American history that are read through the lens of violence. So today, among other things, we’ll talk about how our texts offer their own versions of American History: American History X [blankness, placeholder], American History as a series of losses (job, curriculum); Slotkin’s History of the frontier; etc. We’ll broadly consider: Do our texts suggest there is something particularly American about violence? That it’s the nature of “America” (quotes: as an idea) to be violent? We won’t stop asking this question – next week: *American Psycho*.

Want to make just a few comments to serve as an overview for class today.

Slotkin, Introduction, from “Regeneration through Violence”

Slotkin’s work focuses on the myth of the frontier in American history and American mythic conceptions of itself as a national identity and conceptions of the national self in relation to violent acts, and the others against whom violence is done in the name of national expansion and actualization.

So, it’s a textual and historical reading of the *anxieties* of early American settlers, and the relationship of violence to those anxieties.

The mythic image (white, male, land-owning) Americans have of themselves; it's a largely negative definition (X is what it is because it is NOT Y – where Y is natives, women, slaves, etc.) Violence becomes a conceptual figure that moves around to different agents in Slotkin's argument: some figures "absorb" violence; others manifest violence; others justify it; many of the narratives he analyzes suggest a distinction between those who **aggress** and those who **avenge**. Of the three major categories of identity associated with violence—aggressor, victim, avenger—the avenger is particularly dangerous because he associates his violence with retribution, with a right to violence (with a justifiable violence).

[Meta-comment:

BINARIES: a lot of analyses of violence tend to hinge on **binaries/pairs/sets of**

oppositions /(aggressor and victim)/WATCH FOR THESE

- dangerously in collusion w/discourses of us/them

(p. 17: "the fatal opposition, the hostility between two worlds, two races, two realms of thought and feeling")]

→ What is his thesis? Get this on the table in preparation for our first question today.

THESIS: In America, **anything is possible, regeneration is always possible – but the means for that are the means of violence** (p. 5)

p. 4: founding fathers were those who "tore violently a national from the implacable and opulent wilderness"/mastered the land that might kill them; made it fertile (productive; put it to work; profited off it)

p. 5: rational man of foundational gov't vs. western man (irrational, destructive)
"myth of the frontier"

Frontier = where real Americans stand their ground; general, abstract, ideal

p. 4: two initial forms of violence (against nature) and against Indians (natives)

Slotkin/*Fargo*/land/myth

In Slotkin's study of the American myth, he discusses a few key factors that differentiated the formation of the American myth from the classic European myths. Two of these factors were (1) the **unfamiliar "New World" landscape** which set the original American myth as a tale of man vs. wilderness and (2) the fact that the American myth was born after the invention of the **printing press**, which then blurred the lines between myth and literature. This second factor allows the myth's creator to reference and manipulate already familiar literary devices and structures.

With this in mind, what are the effects of these factors in the film "Fargo"? The film is set significantly in North Dakota, the quintessential American wilderness, and yet nature is neither the antagonist nor a causal force in the film's violence. "Fargo" also uses **classic cinematic/literary devices such as an unexplained MacGuffin** (Jerry's need for money which causes him to kidnap his own wife), a Hitchcockian briefcase full of money (left irrelevant and untouched at the film's end), and contains a bathroom scene that feels oddly reminiscent to "The Shining". If Slotkin argues that these factors define the American myth, then does it seem intentional that the

Coen Brothers use the same factors for an **arguably opposite goal; to confuse and distort any sort of classic mythopoetic narrative?**

[so, it uses myth form to distort and confuse mythic narrative...]

1st, let's establish what mythic features they exploit:

Fargo -- Title – why?

4 min of screen time (only the first meeting to give them the car) takes place in Fargo, North Dakota; rest in Minneapolis or Brainerd or en route, so it's not a geographic designation but an idea (an abstraction about America)

Paul Bunyan – see him (light; dark; end of the film)/Brainerd, home of P. Bunyan
myth of the American west

giant (with Babe, the blue ox); ax (felling and opening space; killing)

mythic figure of American masculinity (pioneer, agrarian America: clearing the wilderness, preparing it for settlement; part of the myth includes making lakes for Babe to drink or forming Grand Canyon when dragging ax behind him)

now: civilization in decline (this time has passed)

but depending on the light, benign pioneer looks like monster w/ an ax

Gaear likened to Marlboro man (big w/ little companion; ax) – but instead of creation, destruction; instead of grand mythic, small and pathetic
doubles/twins (twin cities; Carl and Gaear)

Slotkin

p. 18, tales: native Americans vs. interlopers; dark races vs. light

land: harsh vs. fertile

Defining sense of self through negative (not-native; not-black) (p. 22, simplicity of opposition between Indian and settler/white and black/us and them)

Two senses of generation: bringing forth (something new)/being formed; being produced or made (regeneration: remaking of the self, the people, the nation)/but also, and of course related, is generation, body of people born at the same period: act of procreating (passing things down from generation to generation) – legacy or inheritance of violence/ask about relation between older and younger men (the father to the son; but also the elder figures with the young boy who shoots Danny in the end)

“the sons of these emigrants strove to justify their title to the land they took for their own” (p. 18)

→ formal conventions: narratives of discovery, captivity, sermons, colonization and anticolonization tracts

→ LAND/Harshness/Elements – SNOW

Snow

static/tv – obstruction (→ *Fargo* ch. 11 – tv/snow)

(can't get a clear picture)

snowball (escalation out of your control)

“snow job” = (1940s) -- a deceptive story that tries to hide the truth; a strong effort to make someone believe something by saying things that are not true or sincere

relate to the form of kidnapping

(ransom: convince someone that you will do something that you by definition haven't done yet; if you do it, no grounds for ransom, but the threat's believability is the bargaining power of the exchange)

→ what will thaw or be (re)born in the spring (land; her baby; the buried money)

*** So harshness of the land and the mythic work of the film itself as story seem related here... as though the harshness of the land were the metaphor for the story, instead of the story being the metaphor for the land!**

"I just don't understand it," says Marge of the incomprehensible bloodshed near the end of *Fargo*. How do we deal with things we don't understand? Is humor or a more "traditional" emotional response (horror, grief, anger, etc.) more effective at understanding some of the intricacies of violence and violent acts? Is either a more appropriate or legitimate way to cope with violence?

***Fargo* Epigraph – not true; feint**

-what's at stake in the film pretending to be real?

the film itself is a tall tale (pretends to be true)

aesthetics of the film in collusion w/ this (location shots, natural light, unobtrusive camera)

humor and seriousness:

issue of “respect for the dead”

Who has this?! (i.e. Marge: almost pukes, morning sickness; not disgust or moral revulsion at the corpse)

→ SHOW ch. 9 – Marge/bodies/vomit

Black humor – laughter (sound; distortion of face; anxiety)

Form of a polemic/didactic

American History X is “about” violence/both **didactic** and argumentative (**obviousness** to it; in some ways, is a melodrama)...

***Obviousness* to *American History X*— Forms; **Polemic** (argument against a position)/**polemos: anger**); didactic (overly/highly instructive)... what's the effect? How does its message or stance or position relate to violence (make it easier to disregard it/what are we being instructed in?)**

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