



Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier during the filming of *The Defiant Ones*, 1958

HTS2085 Syllabus

Reel History: The American South on Film, 3 Credits

Fall 2026

Instructor Information

Instructor: Dr. Christopher Lawton

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General Course Information

Description

In this course, we will consider a series of films about the American South as a means of exploring both the history of the region and its ever-changing role in American popular culture.

Our goal will be to formally, thematically, and historically analyze the films we watch, considering the time and place in which each was made, the similarities and differences in how each approaches their shared subject matter, and the representational strategies employed by the writers/directors/actors. Doing so will allow us to examine history, dominant-but-shifting myths of the South, and how and why Americans have used the region's past as a way of trying to understand themselves and their present.

Course Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this course, students should be able to:

- Recognize cultural history as an interpretive account of the human past
- Recognize the ambiguity that history –and historical inquiry– requires.
- Describe past events from multiple perspectives.
- Speak and write fluently about selected narrative films and documentaries using tools of formal, thematic, and historical analysis.

Required Course Materials

All required readings are available through the “Texts” module in Canvas. Titles are listed below; please see the course calendar for additional details.

- (selections from) Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*
- (selections from) Heider, ed., *Images of the South: Constructing a Regional Culture on Film and Video*
- (selections from) Hulbert and Inscocoe, eds., *Writing History with Lightning: Cinematic Representations of Nineteenth-Century America*
- (selections from) Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film*
- (selections from) Inscocoe, *Movie-Made Appalachia: History, Hollywood, and the Highland South*
- (selections from) Landry, ed. *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*
- (selections from) Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*
- (selections from) Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*

Additional required readings will be assigned—and available through the “Texts” module in Canvas—once the class decides on the three themes we will explore this semester. We will approach each theme through three films, and each film will have a corresponding article or book chapter on the specific history addressed.

Grading Policy

Students can earn up to 280 points this semester. Final grades are based on the number of points earned divided by 280 [A: 90%+, B: 80-90%, C:70-80%, D:60-70%]. Points may be earned as follows.

- Theme #1 Response Paper: 50pts
- Theme #1 Discussion: 10pts

- Theme #2 Response Paper: 50pts
- Theme #2 Discussion: 10pts
- Theme #3 Response Paper: 50pts
- Theme #3 Discussion: 10pts
- Research Paper (Final Assessment): 75pts
- Final Discussion (Final Assessment): 10pts
- Attendance and Participation: 15pts

Description of Graded Components

Response papers

At the end of each thematic section, you will turn in a response essay (3-6 single-spaced pages) in which you evaluate that section's films and assigned articles or book chapters. Assigned texts will be posted in the "Texts" module in Canvas. Details will follow.

Final Research Paper (final assessment in place of a final exam))

Over the course of the semester, you will need to research and write a longer (5-8 single-spaced pages), more advanced, and more polished response to an additional 3-4 films on a theme of your choosing. This paper will require you read at least one academic history book or 3-4 academic history articles on your given topic and synthesize the work(s) into a thoughtful analysis of film and history. Please plan to meet with me by the midpoint of the semester to confirm your topic and have your text/articles approved. Details will follow.

Course Policies

Civility

We are going to watch, discuss, and research difficult topics this semester. It is completely normal to feel, among other things, angered, confused, disappointed, frustrated, or even just a bit lost in the face of some of this material. Perhaps the most successful way to get through it as a class is if we can please offer one another courtesy, patience, respect, and even a bit of grace, especially when someone offers a differing opinion or says something that comes out sounding sharp. If we can come together as a team, it will be much easier to make space for hard conversations and, when needed, ask for a moment to pause. I hope you will please join me in committing to fostering an atmosphere in our class that encourages and celebrates open dialogue and debate.

Technology in the Classroom

Because we will be watching the films together in class, you will need to please take notes on paper by hand. To be clear, this means laptops, tablets, phones, and other devices should be silenced and stored during class. (It follows, then, that you may not record our discussions or use AI to transcribe what is being said.) *Please see me if you have accommodations with Disability Services and need a modification of this policy.*

Attendance and/or Participation

Regular class attendance is required, will be checked daily, and will be necessary to succeed in this course. You must be here for the entire class period to be counted as having attended for that day. Everyone is allowed two no-questions-asked absences. More than two absences without approved written documentation will adversely affect your grade.

Academic Integrity

Georgia Tech aims to cultivate a community based on trust, academic integrity, and honor. Students are expected to act according to the highest ethical standards. Review [Georgia Tech's Honor Code](#) and the student [Code of Conduct](#).

Please keep in mind that we are bound by and agree to uphold the Georgia Tech Honor Code at all times. No exceptions. This means that all work you submit should be your own, written by you alone. You are prohibited from using AI in work that you submit, as those tools pull together the writings and research of others without credit or citation.

Any student suspected of cheating or plagiarism on an assignment will be reported to the Office of Student Integrity, who will investigate the incident and identify the appropriate penalty for violations.

Core IMPACTS

[Core IMPACTS](#) is the University System of Georgia's General Education curriculum.

This is a Core IMPACTS course that is part of the Social Sciences area

Core IMPACTS refers to the core curriculum, which provides students with essential knowledge in foundational academic areas. This course will help master course content, and support students' broad academic and career goals.

This course should direct students toward a broad Orienting Question:

- How do I understand human experiences and connections?

Completion of this course should enable students to meet the following Learning Outcome:

- Students will effectively analyze the complexity of human behavior, and how historical, economic, political, social, or geographic relationships develop, persist, or change.

Course content, activities and exercises in this course should help students develop the following Career-Ready Competencies:

- Intercultural Competence
- Perspective-Taking
- Persuasion

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you are a student with learning needs that require special accommodation, [contact the Office of Disability Services](#) (404-894-2563) as soon as possible to make an appointment to discuss your special needs and to obtain an accommodations letter. Please also e-mail me as soon as possible in order to set up a time to discuss your learning needs.

Student-Faculty Expectations Agreement

At Georgia Tech, we believe that it is important to strive for an atmosphere of mutual respect, acknowledgement, and responsibility between faculty members and the student body. [The Student-Faculty Expectations](#) articulate some basic expectations that you can have of me and that I have of you. In the end, simple respect for knowledge, hard work, and cordial interactions will help build the environment we seek. Therefore, I encourage you to remain committed to the ideals of Georgia Tech while in this class.